



## Aquinas on Wisdom

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### Abstract

The topic of wisdom attracted much less attention in modern thought than in ancient and medieval times. However, there has been a renewal of interest in it in recent psychology and philosophy, and a variety of questions has emerged from this current work. Aquinas has a detailed and elaborate account of the wisdom which pervades his *oeuvre*. This paper explores that and seeks to answer some of these contemporary questions from Aquinas's perspective.

### Keywords

Wisdom, Metametaphysics, Metaphysics, Practical Wisdom, *Sacra Doctrina*, *Donum*, Well-being, Pluralism

### 1. Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>1</sup> noted that philosophers who otherwise have little enough in common (whether analytic, continental, or pragmatic) are united in rejecting the kind of framework within which Aquinas worked. They reject first principles, finality, and all the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic lore which pervades his work. In response, MacIntyre suggests a kind of inner or immanent exploration of their positions, showing how the rejected views can be shown to be reasonable, indeed perhaps inevitable, and crucially showing how Aquinas's views can open up possibilities of philosophical conversation and debate in the contemporary scene.<sup>2</sup> Whether this is viable or not, it does highlight how intellectually countercultural Aquinas's views are. Detailed scholarly analyses of his work tend to speak to those already

<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, 'First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues', in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays Vol.1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Op cit.p. 178.

committed to the framework and add to their understanding of it, which is a valuable task. But it doesn't help a wider intellectual conversation of the kind envisaged by MacIntyre. And Aquinas in his own writing is curious about the views of a wide range of thinkers, hospitable to their insights, and attempts to find the truth in Greek, Jewish, and Islamic thinkers. Engaging in dialogue with thinkers from different traditions seemed natural to him. Therefore, it seems a pressing contemporary need, and one that is congruent with Aquinas's own practice, to relate his views to thinkers coming from very different intellectual traditions.

The topic of wisdom is pervasive throughout his *oeuvre*, from the very earliest texts (the Inaugural Lecture) to the latest (the Aristotelian commentaries on the *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*). He discusses it as an epistemological ideal, a prerequisite of the good life, an intellectual virtue, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a name for the second person of the Trinity. How can a coherent property have so many different meanings? How do they relate to each other? This is a fascinating question in itself and a challenge for Aquinas exegetes. However, in the wider intellectual culture there has been a renewed interest in the topic of wisdom in the past twenty years or so, both by psychologists and philosophers. While some lines of exploration are open to Aristotelian styles of thought and treat it on the lines of an Aristotelian virtue, others reject this approach and follow Hume in seeking to eradicate any metaphysical dimension to wisdom. John Kekes in his recent book on *Wisdom*<sup>3</sup> describes what he calls a humanistic conception, opposed to the classical conception held by Plato, Aristotle, and recent virtue theorists (incidentally Aquinas doesn't feature at all).

In this paper I shall begin with a brief survey of recent work on wisdom, as a way of identifying key questions which arise in current discussion (section 2). Then, after some discussion of textual contextualization (section 3) and presenting the crucial virtue theoretical framework (section 4), I shall work through the central elements in Aquinas's understanding of wisdom, 5-Metaphysical Wisdom, 6-Practical Wisdom, 7-Theological Wisdom, 8-Wisdom as Gift, ultimately returning to those key questions and seeing how Aquinas's complex account might shed light on them (section 9).

## 2. Puzzles about Wisdom

The word 'philosophy', as is well known, is etymologically connected to 'wisdom'. Wisdom was a major topic in ancient thought. Plato, Aristotle, and Hellenistic schools had much to say about it.<sup>4</sup> Technical

<sup>3</sup> John Kekes, *Wisdom: A Humanistic Conception*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See John Cooper *Pursuits of Wisdom*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

discussions in logic, epistemology, and metaphysics were subordinated to the overall goal of achieving wisdom. This centrality continued through the medieval period, through the renaissance and into the early modern period.<sup>5</sup> But slowly the topic lost its role and by mid-twentieth century few philosophers engaged with it. The place where it might most likely be treated – epistemology (as a kind of knowledge) – was conspicuously devoid of discussion. A typically astringent comment from Quine captures well the mood:

Inspirational and edifying writing is admirable, but the place for it is the novel, the poem, the sermon or the literary essay. Philosophers in the professional sense have no peculiar fitness for it. Neither do they have any peculiar fitness for putting society on an even keel, though we should all do what we can. What just might fill these crying needs is wisdom: *sophia* yes, *philosophia* not necessarily.<sup>6</sup>

It would be an interesting project to chart the history of this change and identify the factors in play. But whatever the reason, the contrast between the place of wisdom in the tradition and in mainstream late 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical practice is startling. It was, of course discussed in other fields, for example Von Rad's seminal work on wisdom in Israel.<sup>7</sup> But one might speculate that the perceived connection of the concept of wisdom to religious tradition may well have been a factor in its disappearance in an increasingly secular philosophical world.

Yet the topic received renewed attention in psychology. As the field of psychology of ageing emerged as a distinct area of research, psychologists looked to wisdom as a quality which older people allegedly possessed. Hence conceptual analyses of the property and efforts to measure it were developed. The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm was developed by Paul Baltes (1939-2006) at the Max Plank Institute for Human Development in Berlin, stemming from research in life span developmental psychology.<sup>8</sup> Psychologists had studied the nature of thinking exhibited in the second half of life, and wisdom emerged as a prime example of advanced knowledge exhibited by adults (with the caveat that it is a rare phenomenon). Work of theorists such as Erik Erikson<sup>9</sup> postulated that wisdom could be understood as a distinctive goal for the final stage of life. The work of Baltes' team sought to unite a variety of different approaches into a single framework which could

<sup>5</sup> See James D. Collins *The Lure of Wisdom* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> W.V. Quine, *Theories and Things*, (Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1986) p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, (London: SCM Press, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> See Baltes W. and Smith J. 'Towards a Psychology of Wisdom and its Ontogenesis', in R.J. Sternberg *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins and Development*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, (New York: Norton, 1963).

generate empirical inquiry. Critics of the Berlin paradigm note that wisdom is construed as a form of knowledge and not strongly correlated with any individual person, raising the question about the nature of wisdom. Is the primary reality the abstract knowledge or its instantiation in any given individual person? A different, influential approach is Robert Sternberg's Balance Theory of Wisdom.<sup>10</sup> In this, wisdom is viewed as an outgrowth of practical intelligence and hence a form of knowing how rather than knowing that. It is a basic element in the relationship between an individual and various situational contexts they inhabit. Hence wisdom inheres primarily in the relation between a person and situation, not simply in the person him or herself. There are balances to be had in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests, and between these and the contexts in which they hold. What is being sought in these balances is the common good. Now psychology is not in a position to determine what exactly is the common good, and it may well vary from culture to culture. Indeed, as with the Berlin Paradigm a respect for pluralism seems part of Sternberg's conception of wisdom – it is flexible rather than prescriptive. Sternberg has an interest in distinguishing wisdom from closely related notions such as intelligence or creativity. Wisdom involves a kind of metacognition, an awareness of one's way of operating, as distinct from merely operating efficiently, as with intelligence. A wise person seeks to understand the processes by which we operate and evaluates them. A wise person is comfortable with ambiguity, hence a wise person can be comfortable with challenges which would distress the less wise.

Philosophers at the start of the new millennium began to engage once again with the topic. Nicholas Maxwell had long argued for the importance of wisdom, its superiority to scientific knowledge and the need for its deployment in civil society.<sup>11</sup> The growth of virtue epistemology led to a re-engagement with the epistemological framework of Aristotle and Aquinas, and analyses of wisdom informed by that approach emerged, for example the work of Linda Zagzebski<sup>12</sup> and Jason Baehr.<sup>13</sup> Yet analyses significantly different to the neo-Aristotelian also emerged. Sharon Ryan developed a detailed analytic analysis of wisdom,<sup>14</sup> where she argues that a person S at time t is wise if at time t:

<sup>10</sup> See R. Sternberg 'Why People Often Prefer Wise Guys to Guys Who Are Wise: An Augmented Balance Theory of the Production and Reception of Wisdom', in R. Sternberg and J. Gluck, *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution for Science and the Humanities* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn, (London, Pentire Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> *Virtues of the Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> See for example 'Two Types of Wisdom', *Acta Analytica* 27 (2): 81-97, (2012).

<sup>14</sup> See for example 'Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality', *Acta Analytica*, 27(2) 99-112 (2012).

- (i) S has a wide variety of justified beliefs in valuable subjects and on how to live rationally.
- (ii) S has few unjustified beliefs
- (iii) S is deeply committed to
  - (a) Acquiring wider and deeper rational beliefs
  - (b) Living rationally

The view presented by Ryan has the virtues of analytic precision and being argumentatively well defended. Yet these very analytic virtues can also be viewed as being too abstract and decontextualized to be genuinely informative; they are too formal and require more filling in. The demand for a deeper or more embedded theory might require further background work on the nature of virtue, the nature of justification, how historical and social context is taken on board.

Valerie Tiberius departs from classical, Aristotelian accounts of wisdom to present what she calls a Reflective Wisdom account.<sup>15</sup> This account is naturalistic (thinking about the human as an organism, and seeing what is good for it), inspired by Hume's philosophy, and open to input from empirical psychology. Her account is first-person-centred. So rather than attempting to articulate a theory of the good life, or to decide between alternative accounts of well-being (for example objective list theories, or subjective accounts such as Informed Desire or Authentic Happiness account), she focusses on the question of how to live one's life in a situation where we don't quite know what the goal is. Hence, her view of wisdom is process-based, it deals with the question of how to conduct the journey of life, rather than prescribing a clearly defined goal. Finally, John Kekes recently published his humanistic account of wisdom, which is trenchantly critical of what he see as the illusions of an Aristotelian or classical account of wisdom and seeks a model which operates in conditions of unclarity, contingency, and frequent ill-luck.<sup>16</sup>

What has emerged in the last few decades is a renewed interest in an important topic which had long been ignored in the philosophical literature. What then might Aquinas contribute to this discussion? Perhaps identifying some issues of contemporary debate will help the engagement with Aquinas.

An important question is the role of metaphysics or background knowledge of reality in wisdom. Tiberius and Kekes, in different ways, deliberately craft their accounts to deal with uncertainty or doubt about metaphysical knowledge. But other theorists such as Stephen Grimm and Denis Whitcomb think that deep knowledge about fundamental

<sup>15</sup> Valerie Tiberius, *The Reflective Life: Living Within Our Limits*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> John Kekes, *Wisdom: A Humanistic Conception*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

realities has to be part of the content of wisdom.<sup>17</sup> Exploration of the possible basis of such metaphysical knowledge (metametaphysics) is a recently thriving field; so getting a sense of where Aquinas stands on the grounds of metaphysical knowledge and how this relates to wisdom would be important. Related to this is a discussion of the connection of theoretical to practical wisdom. Sometimes wisdom might be thought of as primarily about living well, and can this be detached from more speculative concerns? Is goodness essentially connected to wisdom? Many theorists think so, but recent discussions have come up with thought experiments about Mephistopheles, who is replete with knowledge of the nature of reality and how to live well, but who is evil. How much pluralism is possible in thinking about wisdom? Aristotle thinks that there is an objective structure to the good life for humans, based on the kind of creatures we are. Yet Isaiah Berlin famously argued for conflicting values as an inescapable phenomenon in human life.<sup>18</sup> Is this kind of issue one which could be resolved by empirical inquiry – were one to survey humankind and discover, as a matter of fact, that Aristotle or Berlin accurately described the human condition, would this be decisive? So how much empirical input is required for an adequate account of wisdom? A final question is the role of affect in wisdom – how do cognition and feeling interact, is emotion something to be controlled or suppressed by the wise person or is there a more positive role for it? So while exploring Aquinas's texts we can be mindful of how they might help us answer

- What is the role of metaphysics or background theory?
- What is the relationship of theoretical wisdom to practical wisdom?
- Is goodness essential to wisdom?
- What degree of pluralism is possible in accounts of wisdom?
- What is the role of empirical input in an account of wisdom?
- What is the relationship of cognition to affect in wisdom?

### 3. Aquinas on Wisdom: A Survey of Texts

The recent work on wisdom just surveyed has been psychological and philosophical. Aquinas's texts are primarily theological. So, does this not pose a methodological problem? As shall be seen below, his core understanding of wisdom comes from Christian theology and therefore seems distinct from, if not incommensurable with, secular explorations of the topic. This looks as though it raises the thorny exegetical

<sup>17</sup> Stephen R. Grimm, 'Wisdom', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93 (1) (2015); Dennis Whitcomb, 'Wisdom' in S. Bernecker and D. Pritchard, *Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, London: Routledge 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).

question of the relation of philosophy to theology in Aquinas's work. There has been quite a lot of recent polemic on this topic. Some trenchantly argue against any philosophical interpretation of Aquinas, holding such a reading is historically inaccurate and false to his basic intentions, for example Mark Jordan's detailed work.<sup>19</sup> Such an approach is a reaction to a certain kind of historically naïve and rationalistic neo-scholasticism popular in the early and mid-twentieth century. Others defend a strong philosophical interpretation of Aquinas, for example Ralph McInerney who affirms, 'Thomas added much to our understanding of these matters [metaphysics], but what he added to is found in Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics* and the presuppositions on which it depends'.<sup>20</sup>

In this paper I propose to put to one side this question (although I have discussed it elsewhere).<sup>21</sup> The goal is to present Aquinas's views on wisdom, without labelling them as either philosophical or theological, and to see whether any of the ideas contained therein are useful to the contemporary debate on wisdom. It may well be that some of the specifically theological ideas can be of use to philosophy – for example the discussion of wisdom as a gift, which seems relevant to the widespread intuition that unlearned people may possess wisdom. That theological views can have impact in philosophy is not a novel thought. Gilson defended the view that the specifically religious notion of *creatio ex nihilo* led to the development of a distinctive account of existence, quite different to that of Greek philosophy which had no such notion of creation.<sup>22</sup> So Aquinas's explicitly Christological views on wisdom may help illuminate some of the puzzles about the topic.

Aquinas discusses wisdom throughout his entire *oeuvre*, and this section shall highlight certain key sources in his work for his developed view, starting with the Inaugural Lecture of 1256.<sup>23</sup> On becoming a master of theology at the University of Paris in the spring of that year, Aquinas participated in a series of formal disputations and delivered a brief inaugural lecture (the *principium*). As his text he took Ps. 103:13

<sup>19</sup> Mark Jordan, *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas After His Readers*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Ralph McInerney, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers*, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), p. ix.

<sup>21</sup> See 'Philosophical Theology and Analytical Philosophy in Aquinas' in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykof (eds.), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Hence Gilson can say 'Why should we refuse to admit a priori that Christianity might have been able to change the course of the history of philosophy by opening up to human reason, by the mediation of faith, perspective as yet undreamt of'. *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> In S. Tugwell (ed.) *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 355-360.



‘Watering the earth from things above, the earth will be filled from the fruit of your works’. He delivers a meditation on the role of a master of theology and it is centrally concerned with the topic of wisdom, beginning with quotations from Dionysius the Areopagite and Augustine. He notes that the wisdom of God is mediated by teachers. A wider debate had taken place on the role of secondary causes in relation to God: do earthly things have genuine causal powers relative to God’s power, and a more specific question within this was whether humans can genuinely teach or whether only God can teach? Aquinas argues that human teaching is genuinely efficacious in transmitting wisdom.<sup>24</sup> He notes the three tasks of a university master – preaching, teaching, and disputing – and these are concerned with transmitting wisdom. Some aspects of wisdom can be discerned dimly by everyone, some only through the subtle reasoning of the intellectually gifted, and some transcend human reason altogether and are taught in revelation. The goal of this wisdom is eternal life. So within this opening lecture the themes that wisdom derives from the fundamental metaphysical source of reality, that it is connected to the goal and purpose of life, that a mix of philosophical and revealed sources help in attaining it, and that we access it partially and incrementally are adumbrated.

The *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, written as a requirement for becoming a master of theology [1252–56], uses the same imagery as the inaugural lecture, although using a different scriptural text. ‘I, wisdom, have poured out rivers. I, like a brook out of a river of mighty water: I, like a channel of a river, and like an aqueduct, came out of paradise. I said: “I will water my garden of plants and I will water abundantly the fruits of my meadow”’ [Eccles 24.40].<sup>25</sup> Aquinas, in citing this text, with the image of wisdom as a vast river while the biblical author refers to himself as a lesser tributary – picks up again the idea of secondary causation. However, immediately after this, Aquinas noting diverse views about wisdom, singles out I Corinthians 1.24 which holds that ‘Christ, the power of God and wisdom of God, has become for us God-given wisdom’. And four features of this wisdom are highlighted. In its source wisdom is ultimately found in the Trinity, in the processions which exist eternally, but which were hidden from the wise and only made manifest in revelation. Wisdom is operational through creation, making all things. Wisdom is restorative in drawing things back to its source and providing means to do so. Finally, wisdom is perfect in being the end and purpose of all. This is the famous *exitus-reditus* structure associated with the plan of the *Summa Theologiae*, here articulated using wisdom as the key unifying idea.

<sup>24</sup> *De Veritate*, 11.1.

<sup>25</sup> *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, Books 1–2, P. Mandonnet (ed.) (Paris Letheilleux, 1929), prologue.



The *Summa Contra Gentiles* [1260-1265] begins with a discussion of the role of the wise person.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on Aristotle, Aquinas notes that a wise person orders things rightly and governs them well. The proximate goals of some disciplines, such as pharmacy, ship-building, or training war horses are governed by wider disciplines such as medicine, sea navigation, or warfare. The general end and good of all things is the chief occupation of wisdom taken simpliciter. This is the investigation of the first principles of the being of all things. The twofold task of the wise person is to mediate and expand on this truth and to refute error in relation to it. This role (of the wise person) is the most perfect, as one already shares in true happiness in its pursuit, sublime as it helps unite one to God in friendship, profitable as it brings one to immortality, and delightful as there is not bitterness and pain involved, but gladness and joy. On this picture wisdom includes metaphysical exploration of the fundamental principles of reality, in some sense those principles themselves, theological investigations of that same basic reality, and it is associated with benefits, such as happiness, immortality, and joy.

The *Summa Theologiae* discusses wisdom in a variety of different places.<sup>27</sup> There is an initial discussion of the nature of theology, where the question is raised whether *sacra doctrina* is a kind of wisdom.<sup>28</sup> Objections to this include the view that wisdom proves the principles of other sciences, and that wisdom is also a gift of the Holy Spirit – *sacra doctrina* falls under neither of these descriptions, hence is not wisdom. Against that, Aquinas affirms that theology is a wisdom above all human wisdom – it treats the highest cause not just as it is known philosophically, but also as it is known through revelation. In discussing the Trinity, wisdom is mentioned as a property specific to the son.<sup>29</sup> In the treatment of the intellectual virtues, wisdom is distinguished from knowledge and rational intuition.<sup>30</sup> Practical wisdom is discussed as a key virtue which governs the other moral virtues.<sup>31</sup> And wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit is discussed within the treatise on Charity.<sup>32</sup>

Finally there are the Aristotelian commentaries, composed late in Aquinas's career.<sup>33</sup> They are often taken as an indication of the importance he gave to Aristotle, since as a master in the theology faculty he

<sup>26</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* Books I-II, Vol.11 Latin/English Edition of the Works of St Thomas Aquinas, Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, 2018 (Shapcote translation).

<sup>27</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Vols 13-20 Latin/English Edition of the Works of St Thomas Aquinas, Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, 2012 (Shapcote translation).

<sup>28</sup> ST I.1.6.

<sup>29</sup> ST I.32.1.ad1.

<sup>30</sup> ST I-II.57.2.

<sup>31</sup> ST II-II.47.

<sup>32</sup> ST II-II.45.

<sup>33</sup> *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, John P. Rowan (trans.), (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1995); *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, C.I.Litzinger (trans.), (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1993).

was not required to compose philosophical commentaries. There is a detailed discussion of wisdom in the commentary on the *Metaphysics*, presenting it as the goal of metaphysical knowledge. There is also commentary on the intellectual virtue of wisdom and on practical wisdom (*prudentia*) in the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

So we see across his texts that Aquinas treats wisdom as metaphysical knowledge treating the fundamental principles of being, theological knowledge of the Christian faith, practical wisdom about how to live well, a property of the Trinity, and a gift of the Holy Spirit. How might these be systematized or shown to relate to each other? Understanding his virtue-theoretical framework can help with this.

#### 4. A Virtue-Theoretic Framework

Aquinas adopts a general Aristotelian metaphysical framework. There are controversies about the ways in which he develops beyond Aristotle and how he weaves in Neoplatonic features, but many of the terms of art he uses are recognisably Aristotelian. With ‘being’ having the widest possible extension as a term, Aquinas distinguishes kinds of being and principles of being. The paradigm instance of being is the individual concrete substance, for example Amber, this dog. Above her exist (in some sense) universals, genera, species, below her exist properties, elements, parts, and Amber can be analysed using matter and form, potency and act, essence, and existence. Hence a general map of reality is offered where issues such as identity and change can be understood – e.g., what kind of being is Amber, what kinds of change can she undergo while still remaining that kind of being?

One of the key understandings of wisdom for Aquinas is that it is a virtue. So what is a virtue, in this general scheme of things? Of the ten categories which divide being, substance is the primary one. Quality, the third category, is a modification of substance and a disposition is a further subdivision of quality. There are four kinds of qualities, and disposition is in the first kind, along with the notion of a ‘state’ since both of these pertain to the nature of the subject.<sup>34</sup> Aquinas engages in some detailed exegetical debate on the interpretation of Aristotle (with Simplicius and Averroes). Some qualities, such a shape, can be artificial or natural, intrinsic or acquired, and so seem to jump across the kinds of quality distinguished, leading to debate on the exact nature of the kinds of quality. Aquinas notes that a quality is basically a modification of a subject. Dispositions and states concern the nature of the subject. Whether it is a good or bad state depends on how it relates to the nature of the subject, whether it accords with or conflicts with that

<sup>34</sup> ST I-II.49.2.

nature. The further complexity that a disposition adds to that of a state is through the notion of potentiality. A disposition is a potentiality that exists between a capacity and the action associated with that capacity, for example, generosity. A generous person is freely disposed to acts of generosity; it comes easily to them. However, it can be prudently restrained, for example, if a judgement is made that an act of generosity might harm the recipient. A *habit* of giving things away is closer to a compulsion that is hard to arrest. Natural things which act in only one way do not have such a capacity, since it involves free choice. Neither does a perfect being such as God, who has no potentiality. However, humans can act in a variety of ways, and to acquire a disposition is to develop an ease with acting freely in a particular way. Dispositions are more grounded in the subject than states are. A state may change easily (e.g., health), whereas a disposition is harder to lose (knowledge of science). Aquinas explains this difference by virtue of mutable and immutable causes. The knowledge exhibited in science is universal and stable, whereas health is derived from mutable physical conditions.

Aquinas defines a virtue as ‘a good quality of the mind by which we live rightly, of which no-one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us’.<sup>35</sup> This is quite different to a standard Aristotelian view which sees virtue as a good disposition which perfects actions. However, Aquinas thinks virtue is an analogical notion with a variety of kinds, some of which are closer to the first definition (which is ultimately from Augustine, via Peter Lombard), some closer to Aristotle. Virtues exist in the powers of the soul. Some pertain purely to intellect – scientific knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Mere possession of these virtues doesn’t make the bearer good (there can be very clever evil people). Others pertain to the will, such as practical wisdom, courage, temperance, and fortitude, which do make the bearer overall a good person. Practical wisdom is a hybrid virtue, between intellect and will, and governs the use of the others. All of these virtues follow the Aristotelian model of being means between extremes. However, there are also theological virtues – faith, hope and charity, whose object is God and of which there cannot be an excess; therefore they don’t conform to the idea of the mean. Aristotelian moral and intellectual virtues are also acquired by habitation, training, and effort, whereas Aquinas also allows for infused virtues, which are given by God. In the same vein he allows for gifts – and wisdom can be understood as a gift (specially connected to charity).

From the survey of texts in the previous section, we see Aquinas thinks that wisdom is a feature of God (a name appropriately given to the second person of the Trinity) and the means by which God orders, creates and governs the universe. Hence wisdom is part of the basic

<sup>35</sup> ST I-II.55.1.

metaphysical framework of reality, as a feature of God. Wisdom is also an intellectual virtue, where it manifests as metaphysical knowledge of fundamental features of reality (which Aquinas characterizes as helping us approach the likeness of God). Wisdom is also a moral virtue where it appears as practical wisdom which governs moral action. It also appears as a gift of the Holy Spirit and so can be instantiated in ways which differ from intellectual and moral virtues. A pervasive feature of Aquinas's treatment of wisdom is how it brings together metaphysics, revelation, knowledge, action, and emotion. It integrates different aspects of reality just as it integrates different features within any given person.

### 5. Wisdom as Metaphysics: *Sapientia*

The feature of wisdom which dominates Aquinas's thinking about it is its architectonic quality. It has a ruling and ordering function.<sup>36</sup> In the examples of individual intellectual pursuits, he notes how equestrian skills are subsumed under military skills, pharmaceutical under medical, and so forth. He thinks there is a discipline which judges over all others in terms of principles and procedures, a master-intellectual discipline. This investigates the most fundamental structures of reality absolutely considered, not under any particular aspect but in the most fundamental and general way. It is the study of being in itself. In the discussion of intellectual virtues,<sup>37</sup> Aquinas follows Aristotle in distinguishing rational intuition (*intellectus*) from scientific knowledge (*scientia*) and wisdom (*sapientia*). Rational intuition is the means by which the mind grasps self-evident truths or first principles – it is non-discursive. Scientific knowledge draws on rational intuition and forms discursive knowledge of specific areas of inquiry. Wisdom is akin to scientific knowledge in being discursive, but it is focussed on the fundamental structure of reality – ‘There are various habits of the sciences, whereas there is but one wisdom’.<sup>38</sup> Recently Rik Van Nieuwenhove has convincingly argued that, for Aquinas, wisdom ultimately culminates in a form of non-discursive contemplation, which anticipates the form of cognition of postmortem existence, highlighting Neoplatonic influences.<sup>39</sup> However, for the most part, wisdom as an intellectual virtue is discursive, judges the principles and deductions of the others sciences, and is identical with metaphysics.

<sup>36</sup> ST I.1.6; SCG I.1.

<sup>37</sup> ST II-II.57.

<sup>38</sup> ST I-II 57.2.

<sup>39</sup> Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 40ff.

Following Aristotle Aquinas thinks there are specific features of this kind of knowledge.<sup>40</sup> Considering the general linguistic usage about wisdom, a person is considered wise who knows a lot of things, knows difficult things, who is more certain in that knowledge than other people, who can give basic explanations and can teach. Furthermore, wisdom seems to be associated with knowledge for its own sake, and is the most superior kind of knowledge. So Aquinas sums up these views saying ‘the wise man is described as one who knows all, even difficult matters with certitude and through their cause; who seeks this knowledge for its own sake and who directs others and induces them to act’.<sup>41</sup>

Aquinas defends these general Aristotelian views. The person who grasps the most universal truths in a sense knows all things. And such universal truths are farthest removed from sense and hence hardest to know. Universal truths are also purer, simpler, and have less contingent or contextual factors associated with them; hence they are known more certainly. Grasp of such truths allows one to explain a wider range of phenomena. The objects of this most general kind of knowledge are most intelligible in themselves. And as such they are most desirable, as the ultimate end of all things. This connects to Aquinas’s views on contemplation, the exercise of the highest power available to humans focussed on the highest object attainable by that power. So it does seem that there is an ethical dimension to the kind of knowledge involved here - as Aquinas put it in SCG, it brings one close to God and is a source of deep happiness.<sup>42</sup> Yet as an intellectual virtue, wisdom perfects the intellect and not the will. Therefore, unlike practical wisdom, it doesn’t ensure that its possessor is actually good (just as there can be evil people exhibiting high levels of knowledge).

To what extent this general characterization of metaphysics is at odds with current views will be discussed below. But let’s continue with Aquinas’s account of it. This kind of wisdom is hard to achieve. It is attainable only by a few people adequately trained and suitably intellectually endowed, only after a long and arduous process, and it is open to error and mistaken views.<sup>43</sup> So the kind of knowledge yielded by metaphysical inquiry is also that which is revealed through religious revelation – which is regarded as more epistemically secure, being God’s direct teaching. So Aquinas is committed to the view that there is agreement between the philosophical approach of metaphysics and the theological approach which uses revelation. He clearly distinguishes their methodologies, thinking that arguments from authority are weak in philosophy, but appropriate in theology (since the authority is so epistemologically secure).

<sup>40</sup> In Met 1.L.2 #36-51.

<sup>41</sup> In Met1.L.2 #43.

<sup>42</sup> SCG1.2.

<sup>43</sup> ST1.1.

Aquinas inherits his views about metaphysics from the tradition in which he was immersed. Aristotle and Augustine, Dionysius the Areopagite, Boethius, Avicenna, and Averroes all make significant contributions to his understanding of it as a discipline. The situation MacIntyre described, where this framework is now generally regarded as antique (indeed ‘neoscholastic’ is a contemporary term of abuse) arose primarily through the rise of science and skepticism about the possibility of this kind of enterprise. The kind of philosophy of nature on which Aristotle grounded his metaphysics, discussing change and identity, and introducing potentiality and actuality, matter and form as technical terms is well out of step with contemporary scientific practice. So the path to metaphysics through physics, which seemed obvious to Aquinas, seems less fruitful nowadays given the fate of Aristotle’s physics.<sup>44</sup>

A different path into metaphysics, favoured by 20<sup>th</sup> century conceptual analysts, is reflection on the nature of language, where the subject-predicate form of sentences naturally leads to a substance-accident kind of metaphysics.<sup>45</sup> However, developments in modern logic have led to a different kind of analysis of sentences to the traditional Aristotelian logic, where function and argument replaces subject-predicate structure. And greater awareness of the diversity of grammatical structure where natural languages may not exhibit subject-predicate structure make this less secure as a path into metaphysics. Reflection on the possible bases of metaphysical inquiry has become a flourishing field of debate – metametaphysics.<sup>46</sup> There are those who defend neo-Aristotelian approaches to metaphysics in the face of severe challenge from naturalists who think its distance from contemporary scientific practice is a major intellectual flaw. A useful project for Aquinas scholars would be to see to what extent Aquinas’s framework can be defended in the face of such objections.

A suggestion I want to make here in discussing wisdom is that a feature of metaphysics construed as wisdom is its integration with a wider range of other areas of inquiry – including the ethical and theological. While concerned with truth and argumentative rigour, it is also sensitive to connections to other aspects of human experience. These can be dismissed as mere anthropology, sociology or fantasy by hardline naturalists who want to say that only physical science reveals the deep

<sup>44</sup> Feser’s defence of this metaphysics in the face of naturalistic challenges is welcome and fruitful, but pushing against a broad consensus. See *Aristotle’s Revenge: The Metaphysical Foundations of Physical and Biological Science*, (Neuenkirchen: Editiones Scholasticae, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> For an exploration of this approach related to Aquinas see Herbert McCabe ‘Categories’ in A.Kenny (ed.) *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (London: Macmillan, 1969).

<sup>46</sup> See Tuomas Tahko, *An Introduction to Metametaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

structure of reality. But if there's a conception of inquiry pursued by beings who have multiple facets, it might be that these are relevant to the kind of metaphysical framework adopted. That certain things are valued more than others brings epistemic values into the picture (think of Quineans and their taste for desert landscapes). And what significance and weight one puts on different goals will, it seems, shape the kind of inquiry. One of the features of wisdom is its integrated nature, it doesn't make sense to abstract from values, goals and ends in an artificial way. So even though metaphysics is an abstract, dispassionate intellectual discipline, it finds its place in a human existence which is characterized by passion, desire, values, goals, and aims. To view it as if it were not, seems mistaken. Aquinas is sensitive to the fact that intellectual inquiry takes place in the context of a fuller human life, and that life is governed by the virtue of practical wisdom (*prudentia*). While he thinks that the goal of speculative wisdom is to apprehend necessary truth, the decision to exercise that human capacity is governed by practical wisdom, 'an act of the theoretic reason, inasmuch as it is voluntary, falls under deliberation and choice as regards its exercise, and consequently falls under the guidance of prudence'.<sup>47</sup>

## 6. Practical Wisdom: *Prudentia*

The virtue Aquinas calls *prudentia* is better translated as practical wisdom or good sense<sup>48</sup> than the English term 'prudence', which has connotations of narrowness or constraint. It is key to flourishing and living well, and the node where rationality, desire and affect come together. One commentator puts it well 'Prudence...guides the agent to living a self-directed life that seeks integration'.<sup>49</sup>

Aquinas distinguishes between the theoretical and practical intellects. These aren't actually different faculties, but are different ways in which the intellect functions. Theoretical intellect deals with necessary features of reality and seeks truth, the practical intellect with contingent features and seeks good action.<sup>50</sup> Three intellectual virtues govern the use of theoretical intellect – Rational Intuition (*Intellectus*), Scientific Knowledge (*Scientia*) and Wisdom (*Sapientia*), while two govern the use of the practical, Practical Wisdom (*Prudentia*) and Productive Skill (*Arts*). In human affairs there are multiple contingent

<sup>47</sup> II-II.47.2.ad2.

<sup>48</sup> See Herbert McCabe, 'Aquinas on Good Sense' in *God Still Matters*, (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> James F. Keenan 'The Virtue of Prudence' in S. Pope, (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 259.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Zagzebski has an interesting critique of this bifurcation in *Virtues of the Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 211ff.



elements involved in any action. The kind of reasoning which governs the application of general moral norms to specific situations and contexts is guided by practical wisdom (*prudentia*); it is right reasoning about things to be done (*recta ratio agibilium*).<sup>51</sup> It is not wisdom pure and simple (which views things from the God's-eye view), but wisdom about human affairs (which is a more limited perspective).<sup>52</sup>

Practical wisdom therefore is seated in the intellect (putting it technically, the intellect is the subject of *prudentia*), but unlike the other intellectual virtues it also counts as a moral virtue, since its possession actually makes the bearer good. To live well is to act well and in acting well, it is not merely what one does that matters, but how one does it. Right choice is essential and this involves considering ends and means. Therefore counsel and choice are vital elements in living well, and it is these that practical wisdom guides. Aquinas thinks that ultimate moral ends are given through a capacity akin to rational intuition (similar to the grasp of basic logical principles, for example, 'Good is to be done and evil avoided'). Such a grasp of moral first principles, analogous to *intellectus*, is called *synderesis*.<sup>53</sup> This latter term is a technical term of medieval Latin usage, not found in Aristotle, but used to supply the grounding of moral first principles in a form of necessary self-evidence.<sup>54</sup> What practical wisdom does is to take these general ends and apply them in specific contexts – which involves knowledge of particular circumstances and contingencies, and which requires deliberation and choice among alternatives. Aquinas has a sophisticated account of human action, where intellect and will interact closely with each other. Correct appetite is an integral requirement of correct action, and practical wisdom helps ensure that appetites are appropriate. So practical wisdom governs both the operation of the practical intellect and also orders the other virtues (courage, justice, temperance) in training the appetites to allow an integrated life.

A recurring important distinction for Aquinas is that between the material and the formal. The material object of an act is the very thing done – say kicking a football. The formal object is the reason why – one might kick a ball to win a match, hit someone in anger, play with a dog, etc. Prudence brings right reason to actions and so supplies the formal dimension to action – it is what makes actions and habits good or bad. There are appetites and inclinations which need to be trained and fostered under right reason to result in good living. As with theoretical wisdom, *sapientia*, one can see the architectonic or ordering dimension of practical wisdom. Considered as part of a human life, the

<sup>51</sup> ST II-II.57.4.

<sup>52</sup> ST II-II.47.2.

<sup>53</sup> ST I.79.12; II-II.47.6.ad1.

<sup>54</sup> For an illuminating discussion see Thomas Deman, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin, Somme Theologique, 2ae2ae q.47-56 La Prudence*, (Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2006) pp. 430-436.

speculative pursuits of contemplation, truth-telling, or studying are governed by practical wisdom. There may be contexts in which devoting oneself to theoretical contemplation is inappropriate. One can think of situations in which baldly telling the truth may not be the best path. There is a disordered kind of interest in things which chases after several things at once to no purpose (the vice of curiosity), as distinct from careful disciplined intellectual labour. In all of these practical wisdom determines the right thing to do. And the very account of practical wisdom, articulated as it is using the machinery of powers, virtues, material and formal aspect, draws on speculative results of theoretical wisdom. But crucially one doesn't collapse into the other; theoretical and practical wisdom retain distinct structures, goals and modes of operation despite their intimate connections.

### 7. Theological Wisdom: *Sacra Doctrina*

For Aquinas, the word *theologia* refers to any talk about God, whether it comes from philosophers or theologians (Aristotle uses the term in his *Metaphysics*<sup>55</sup>). The phrase *sacra doctrina* is reserved for properly theological talk about God, based on revelation. This is different from the talk about God which occurs in philosophy.<sup>56</sup> *Sacra doctrina* can have a broad meaning in terms of Christian teaching generally or more specifically refer to the academic discipline of systematic theology. In terms of the hierarchical architectonic structure associated with wisdom, *sacra doctrina* is the highest intellectual discipline. Given that *sapientia* judges the principles and inferences amongst all the human sciences, the epistemological standing of *sacra doctrina* is superior to metaphysical wisdom. The latter is liable to error and confusion. The principles of *sacra doctrina* are directly given by God; they are part of God's own knowledge. Aquinas uses the notion of a subalternated science in explaining this. Just as the principles of music draw on the more fundamental principles of mathematics, the principles of *sacra doctrina* come from the highest source. *Sacra doctrina* construed as a scientific discipline may use lower disciplines – such as philosophy – in its articulation.

The truth of faith is contained in Sacred Scripture, but diffusely, in diverse ways and sometimes darkly. The result is that to draw out the truth of faith from Scriptures requires a prolonged study and a practice not within the capacities of all those who need to know the truths of faith; many of them taken up with other cares, cannot find leisure for study.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> *Metaphysics* 6.1 1026a19, In Met 6 L.1 #1166-1168.

<sup>56</sup> ST 1.1.ad2.

<sup>57</sup> ST II-II 1.9 ad 1 (T.C.O'Brien translation, Blackfriars edition Vol.31).

Aquinas has a positive attitude to philosophy, but never wavers in his belief that *sacra doctrina* is more fundamental and more secure than philosophy is. The methodological distinction in which *sacra doctrina* draws on scripture (and absorbs its authority) while philosophy draws on human reasoning alone, explains the superiority of *sacra doctrina*, from Aquinas's perspective.

One might wonder why Aquinas is so certain of the standing of scripture. One possible way of explaining this standing is to appeal to signs and wonders, holy lives, and miracles which support the standing of scripture. While there is some mention of this,<sup>58</sup> it doesn't seem the main drive behind Aquinas's view. He has a startlingly realist attitude to God, understood through scripture and hence known as Trinitarian and Incarnational, rather than as a bare philosophical theism. The theological virtue of faith, which is freely received, lies at the basis of his approach to scripture. Whether or not to believe the tenets of faith is a free choice, not forced on one by deductive reasons. The attractiveness of the belief appeals to the heart. Reason can show that these beliefs are not irrational and remove objections to them but doesn't set out to prove them. If the material object of faith is God, the formal object is also God – the reason one believes is because it is proposed by God.<sup>59</sup> So scripture is grasped as direct contact by God. Aquinas thinks of the biblical authors as secondary causes with God as the primary cause behind them. This means their literary, historical, stylistic skills, and temperamental quirks are all incorporated into divine revelation.<sup>60</sup> Aquinas believed in the literal historicity of scripture (the historical reality of Adam and Eve, the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus) in a way that seems at odds with contemporary historical critical methods.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, he did have sophisticated views about the interpretation of scripture, and it may be that Plantinga's arguments about the differing preconceptions of philologically oriented scripture scholars on the one hand and theologians on the other are relevant to defending his account of *sacra doctrina*.<sup>62</sup>

*Sacra doctrina* is not merely a speculative disinterested discipline. Its purpose is to foster '*humanam salutem*', variously translated as human well-being or human salvation.<sup>63</sup> The purpose and destiny of human existence, on Aquinas's account, is for an end beyond the grasp of human reason. This is a contemplative grasp of divine reality,

<sup>58</sup> ST II-II.2.1.ad1.

<sup>59</sup> ST II-II.1.1.

<sup>60</sup> ST II-II.171.

<sup>61</sup> See the discussion by Brian Davies in his *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp355-356.

<sup>62</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 374ff.

<sup>63</sup> ST I.1.1.

already obscurely adumbrated in grasp of divine truths in this life. Since *sacra doctrina* as an academic discipline is restricted to few people, what of the general run of society, how might they acquire such wisdom? And indeed since academics are not particularly known for their highly virtuous lives, how might we think about the relationship between advanced intellectual scholarship and living well? It seems plausible that one could be highly learned and yet be wicked. And it also seems that unlearned people may exhibit high levels of wisdom or insight. Aquinas's discussion of wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit has light to shed on this.

### 8. Wisdom as Gift: *Donum*

Wisdom as metaphysics relies on well-honed intellectual skills, partly due to natural abilities, partly through training. Practical wisdom relies on life experience and the appropriate training of the appetites. Wisdom as theology requires intellectual skill, like metaphysics, but also the inclination of the will to accept scripture. A further complication of Aquinas's account of faith is the distinction between living and dead faith, or formed and unformed faith. The demons believe in the subject matter of faith, but revile it. However, if charity is interwoven with faith it becomes a living faith. This explains the difference between, for example, a theologian who cleverly discusses dogma but exhibits many personal defects and someone like Aquinas who is intellectually gifted but also genuinely infused with love of God and neighbour. His engagement with the truths of faith is transformative, it rises above the level of mere information to something which impacts his well-being (*salus*).

In a question devoted to the Trinity, Aquinas discusses an alleged etymology of *sapientia*, where it is supposed that wisdom is '*sapida scientia*' or sweet knowledge.<sup>64</sup> This points to a kind of experiential dimension to wisdom. However, Aquinas elsewhere notes that this etymology only works in Latin and not in Greek or other languages.<sup>65</sup> So it doesn't seem a full endorsement of this view. Nevertheless in his discussion of the gift of wisdom, he introduces notions such as connaturality or inclination which point to a not purely cognitive aspect of wisdom.

Aquinas's discussion of the virtues is housed in a discussion of gifts, beatitudes, and fruits, or as Stump put it 'set in a web of medieval lore'.<sup>66</sup> Andrew Pinsent has recently drawn attention to this neglected aspect of Aquinas's work and has sought to rehabilitate

<sup>64</sup> ST I.43.5 ad 2.

<sup>65</sup> ST II-II.45.2.ad1.

<sup>66</sup> Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas*, (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 339.

it, plausibly linking it to recent work in psychology, on joint attention and the idea of second-person knowledge (Buber's I-thou).<sup>67</sup> The claim is that the person who receives a gift is rendered capable of doing things they wouldn't be capable of otherwise. The phenomenon of joint attention is one where two people have shared attention of an object, with one influencing the other – like young children imitating adults. The virtue of love (*caritas*) has an associated gift of wisdom. With this gift people make correct judgements, but from a kind of affinity, sympathy or 'connaturality', rather than on the basis of deductions and reasoning. The claim is that the gift allows one to share God's perspective and, in the same manner as joint attention, act correspondingly.<sup>68</sup>

Aquinas clearly distinguishes between wisdom which is the product of habituation and toil and wisdom which comes as a gift.<sup>69</sup> The latter allows one to judge correctly, because one is involved in a kind of union with God. This gives him a way of explaining why it is that some unlearned people may exhibit sure-footed insight and judgement, while learned people may not. The fact that they are in a state of connaturality or closeness to God gives them a capacity to discern and to act well. Unlike metaphysical wisdom, this kind of wisdom is intimately connected to goodness. One would not be in a position to avail of the connaturality with God were one engaged in evil. So wisdom as a gift has an internal connection to goodness, insofar as God is the ground and source of goodness.

## 9. Answers to Puzzles

From the foregoing we can see that Aquinas holds that wisdom is an analogous notion, with a variety of linked meanings. A core aspect of all is that it involves a correct grasp of the nature of reality and supplies means of judgement for action. In one respect, as an attribute of the second person of the Trinity, it is built into the deep fabric of reality and is believed to be involved in the very creation of the world. As an intellectual virtue it involves knowledge of the fundamental structures of reality. As a moral virtue it governs actions conducive of living well and in harmony with the deep nature of reality. As revealed theology it is involved in grasping truths which are beyond human comprehension, uniting rational powers with a receptivity to divine self-communication. As a gift of the Holy Spirit it manifests a deep connection to the divine and a capacity to see and judge not based

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts*, (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> ST II-II.45.3.

<sup>69</sup> ST II-II.45.1ad2.

on acquired intellectual skills, but on relationship to God. So what can such a thoroughly theological picture of wisdom contribute to the questions raised by recent investigations into the topic?

(a) What is the role of metaphysics or background theory to accounts of wisdom?

Aquinas would think the idea of offering a conceptual analysis of wisdom, separated from one's deep conceptual commitments to a picture of the world, as incomprehensible. The very terms in which one advances the analysis are theory-laden. Trying to make sense of wisdom as a disposition and noting the different kinds of dispositions there are, articulating the ontological status of dispositions and where they find themselves in the scheme of things, are all presupposed in the inquiry. Therefore, wisdom is construed as a 'thick' term, it cannot be given a merely functional or formal characterisation, but involves one's deep commitments to the nature of reality and the nature of well-being. Of course, if one doesn't share Aquinas's religious views, then his views on *sacra doctrina* and gift will be difficult to accept. But the point here is more general – to make any attempt at articulating an account of wisdom will require one to be upfront about metaphysical commitment; it is an integral part of what wisdom is.

(b) What is the relation of theoretical to practical wisdom?

Aquinas distinguishes these clearly. The goal of theoretical wisdom is truth; the goal of practical wisdom is well-being or goodness. The former deals in necessary structures and deductive reasoning. The latter with contingent elements, probabilities, and uncertainty. Yet there are clear and close links between the realms. The very nature of well-being and goodness is metaphysically-laden. Aquinas thinks the good for any entity is keyed to the kind of thing it is – which is explicated through metaphysical analysis. Practical wisdom is grasped as a virtue which unites intellect and appetite, which governs the other virtues and which presupposes education, a correct social context. So theoretical considerations inform all aspects of practical deliberation. Yet the activity of metaphysical speculation, as a human activity, is governed by considerations from practical wisdom. For example, it is not good to devote time and effort to philosophical contemplation while one's children starve. And the pursuit of intellectual inquiry is itself assisted by habits of attention, focus, discipline, and temperance, habits fostered by practical wisdom. So while analytically distinct, practical and theoretical wisdom inform and support each other, to the extent that attempting to make sense of one without the other would be impossible.

(c) Is Goodness essential to Wisdom?

Here is a clear instance where prior metaphysical commitments determine the answer to the question. For Aquinas wisdom is

world-invoking. It involves a true grasp of the fundamental nature of reality. On Aquinas's metaphysical picture, being and goodness are transcendentals; they agree in extension but differ in intension. 'The nature of good follows being in so far as being is in some way perfect; for thus it is desirable'.<sup>70</sup> Being, considered under the aspect of desire, is goodness. So as wisdom delves into the nature of being, at the same time it necessarily engages with goodness. However, the mere intellectual contemplation of being and goodness doesn't make the possessor good, as there can be evil metaphysicians. However, practical wisdom necessarily involves its possessor being good. To possess practical wisdom is to enact it, it is an integration of intellect, emotion, appetite, and action. Merely to know the right thing to do and not do it is not to possess practical wisdom. With *sacra doctrina*, it seems there can be evil theologians, if the faith they engage with is not informed by charity. They can have information about salvation but not be truly engaged by it. If their faith is informed by charity, then the practice of theological wisdom brings them closer to God, and so they are similar to those who have the gift of wisdom. Aquinas is explicit that evil and sin would destroy the union with God required for the existence of such a gift.<sup>71</sup>

Aquinas distinguishes between genuine prudence, which is directed to a good end and false prudence which is a kind of cunning 'there is cleverness [*deinotica*], i.e. natural diligence which may be directed to both good and evil; or cunning (*astutia*) which is directed only to evil and which we have stated above to be false prudence or prudence of the flesh'.<sup>72</sup> So all forms of wisdom engage with goodness, while practical wisdom and the gift of wisdom ensure the possessor is good.

#### (d) What Degree of Pluralism is Possible in Accounts of Wisdom?

Recent treatments of wisdom which value pluralism and indeed relativism (e.g., Sternberg and Baltes)<sup>73</sup>, work on the assumption that genuine metaphysical knowledge of reality is not possible. In the absence of a governing metaphysical picture, diversity of viewpoint has to be entertained. And intuitively we think of exemplars of wisdom such as Socrates, the Buddha, or Lao Tzu as all being wise despite holding metaphysical views at odds with each other. Aquinas, holding to the truth of his metaphysical and theological beliefs, approaches this question in a different way. He obviously rejects an 'anything goes' relativism. Yet his practice has always been to seek out the truth in any position he encounters and to hold in respect and incorporate the views of pagans (Aristotle), Jews (Maimonides), and Muslims (Avicenna). Coupled to this is his profound sense of the mystery of

<sup>70</sup> ST 1.16.4.

<sup>71</sup> ST II-II.45.4.

<sup>72</sup> ST II-II.47.13.ad3.

<sup>73</sup> See note 8 above.



God, that our knowledge of God in this life is akin to that of a bat blinking before the sun.<sup>74</sup> The views we articulate are partial and incomplete. Philosophical and theological investigations stake out a space, give us the grammar of divinity, rule out mistaken paths, but aren't exhaustive. Since Aquinas thinks of wisdom in terms of degrees, an account can be better or worse, and a person's grasp can be more or less secure. Hence diverse views can be accommodated as holding to partial grasp of truth. As with the other questions posed here we see the significance of the role of metaphysics for Aquinas in dealing with this issue.

(e) What is the role of empirical input in an account of wisdom?

Social science, including psychology, places emphasis on empirical evidence. So, psychological accounts of wisdom draw on qualitative research, questionnaires, surveys, assembling the views of appropriately representative groups of people. Philosophical accounts may be closer or further from such empirical research. The work of Tiberius explicitly draws on psychology, and she explicitly links her approach with an anti-Aristotelian naturalistic approach to philosophy. This is suspicious of *a priori* reasoning and reckons empirical findings to be more epistemologically secure than speculation. Aquinas also draws on folk conceptions of wisdom, but these are mediated via scripture. So he takes seriously views expressed in Psalms, Proverbs, Sirach, Wisdom, etc. and seeks to harmonize them with his approach. Yet the core of his treatment of wisdom is articulated in an *a priori* metaphysical framework, committed to the possibility of discovering through reflection deep truths about the nature of reality which are relevant to well-being and living well. So for Aquinas, metaphysical reflection, while not dismissing folk views, has much greater likelihood of getting to the truth than they are. He finds surprising support in this regard in recent work. John Kekes, who articulates an overall position very strongly opposed to that of Aquinas, nevertheless has little time for the alleged superiority of empirical work in this field.

[No] scientists, jurists or historians would dream of answering difficult questions in their field by asking randomly selected people, for instance, about what is the ultimate constituent of matter, or justifiable homicide, or whether there has been progress through the ages. People who know take it for granted that difficult questions have difficult answers and that randomly selected people lack the knowledge even to understand the difficulties involved in the questions, let alone give reasonable answers to them. But psychologists assume that randomly selected people can

<sup>74</sup> ST 1.12.1.

tell us what wisdom is. In nothing I have read is this assumption stated or justified.<sup>75</sup>

I think Aquinas would agree with this methodological assessment, however else he might differ with Kekes.

(f) What is the relationship of cognition to affect in wisdom?

While affect does not play a significant role in metaphysical wisdom, it does in the other forms. Practical wisdom requires a training of the appetites and an emotional appropriateness in action. Someone who restrains themselves with difficulty from performing bad acts is merely continent but not actually virtuous. To possess *prudentia* genuinely is to act well with ease. To possess the kind of faith informed by charity which makes for genuine *sacra doctrina* requires an appropriate disposition of the heart, not simply intellectual cleverness. And the qualities of connaturality and sympathy for divine things associated with wisdom as a gift, while granting cognitive powers of judging correctly, are rooted in a union with God which is affective. Hence wisdom in its more important manifestations is associated with appropriate affective dispositions, for Aquinas. This contrasts interestingly with Wittgenstein's aphorism about wisdom from 1946... 'wisdom is all cold: and that you can no more use it for setting your life to rights than you can forge iron when it is cold'.<sup>76</sup> This may well be true of *sapientia*, but not of the other forms.

## 10. Conclusion

Wisdom is a topic which interests a broad range of scholars across different disciplines. We have seen that Aquinas has a complex and integrated account of its nature which brings together metaphysical, ethical, theological, and spiritual insight. The spine which holds the variegated elements together is the metaphysical framework he adapted from Aristotle and used to articulate his own picture of wisdom. It is interesting to see how crucial that metaphysical structure is to the integration of all the different facets of wisdom. To return to the discussion of metametaphysics of section 4 of this paper, one might not be persuaded by the linguistic or historical considerations sometimes brought forward to support the use of Aquinas's framework. However, it may be that the coherence and integrative power of that framework in unifying and rendering intelligible such a complex phenomenon as wisdom

<sup>75</sup> John Kekes, *Wisdom: A Humanistic Conception*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 50.

<sup>76</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Peter Winch (trans.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 53e.

points to the conceptual and systematic value of such a framework and offers a different kind of justification to the more familiar type.

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