

THE IMPORTANCE OF ST. THOMAS' USE OF THE NATURAL SCIENCE OF ARISTOTLE TO EXPLAIN CHRISTOLOGY

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To begin to show the importance of Saint Thomas' use of the natural science of Aristotle in his explanation of Christology, it is necessary to first describe the development of the natural science of Aristotle. This, then, shows Aristotle's attempt to unify all knowledge in a universal, unifying science, the First Science or Theology. In trying to make natural science a unifying science, Aristotle demonstrates that this First Science must be broader and shows that science is limited to a material reality and depends on some greater immaterial reality. Aristotle's demonstration of the necessary existence of a spiritual First Cause of all reality and the possibility of a valid metaphysics of both material and spiritual being shows how Saint Thomas uses Aristotle's metaphysical understanding of spiritual existence to explain Christology.



The natural science of Aristotle departs from the foundations of everyday experience for all other knowledge. In attempting to reconcile the materialistic and spiritualistic views, Aristotle explains that we receive knowledge through our naked senses, without any instruments. Ultimately we test what we see through the microscope, the telescope, etc. so that we can trust what we see through our aided eye what had been seen with our naked eye. This also applies to controlled experiments: there must be a link between the ordinary knowledge of the senses and the remote thing that science explores. Aristotle emphasized that we must ask about the foundations of science, that we must consider the foundations of any field of knowledge.¹ In today's university culture and the frequent use of the internet, this illuminates the minds of students who experience extreme fragmentation of knowledge. To ask what each particular science tells us about physical reality is helpful.

Aristotle moves us to reflect on our ordinary experience: how to describe the things we see every day and deal with everyday, the things that must ultimately be the test of all of our knowledge. He also taught that we have to ask four basic questions to go from the general to the species of things. Furthermore, Aristotle emphasized his foundational reflections on the changing character of the world. He was most concerned to deal with the changing, dynamic character of the world because that is what we first know. In this way, we remain close to reality, and come close to God who made that reality, who made it as it is, not how we think it is. Aristotle pointed out that after asking the four basic questions, the fact that the world changes means that it is not self-explanatory. Change has to go back to some fundamental prime mover that is the cause of change, but that it does not itself change.²

Furthermore, "Aristotle argued that knowledge cannot be reduced to a single master idea, since in fact there are many sciences and arts each with its own autonomy of principles, method, and value. Nor can it be reduced to natural science, although natural science is the first science in the epistemological order, since all our knowledge depends on sense observation because natural science demonstrates its own limits by proving that the material world has a first Immaterial Cause and that the abstract intelligence of the scientist itself cannot be merely the work of the material brain. Hence we need a First (in the sense of epistemologically ultimate, but inclusive of the other special sciences that presupposes) Science or Theology (because it studies both material and spiritual realities as related to the God, their First Cause)."³ It is not the business of natural science to understand what the essence of God is. His real existence is the business of science. Natural science answers the first question about God: Does God exist? There is a First Cause of the whole universe which is not the universe, not material, but the Cause.⁴

God is absolutely one and Creator of all things. God is the First Cause of all things. In God, essence and existence are identical since He is self-sufficient in himself, He depends on nothing else. His existence is His very essence. Therefore, He created the world by a free act, not because it needs the world, but in order to share its own wonder and power with the world.

As previously explained by Father Ashley, the proof of the existence of God belongs to the foundations of natural science. Aristotle taught that when science arrives at the discovery that it cannot go further in its explanations than certain fundamental material forces that cannot act on their own but which require an immaterial First Cause.

In line with Aristotle's notion of the First Cause, Saint Thomas of Aquinas in his Summa Theologiae derived five ways by which God is proved from Aristotle's 8th book, titled Physics, particularly the proof of God from motion. The proof that there must be a God because the world is a changing world and all change requires a First Cause that does not change. The world changes because it is material and as a dynamic, changing world, it is not self-explanatory. God in creating the world, causes the world to change and develop.⁵

As Father Ashley taught, the culmination of all the endeavors of the natural sciences is the understanding of the human person. We learn to be human by contemplating Jesus Christ. Aristotle's demonstration of the necessary existence of a spiritual First Cause of all reality helps to understand the Incarnation. Through the Incarnation, we discover that the one God is the Trinity.⁶ God is at work in the world bringing something about. He has brought this material world to the production of human life. God is reflected in the universe He has made. God has not simply revealed Himself through creation, for His ultimate revelation of Himself is through Jesus Christ, the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh.⁷ "While reason can never demonstrate the truth of the mystery of the Incarnation to faith alone, it is the task of theology to prove that it is not absurd, that is, that it is not contradictory. This requires a critical, metaphysical understanding of spiritual existence. In the foundations of natural science, Aristotle showed the necessary existence of a spiritual First Cause of all reality and hence the possibility of a valid metaphysics of both material and spiritual being."⁸ This is what influenced the Christological explanation of Saint Thomas.

According to Saint Thomas of Aquinas, for this necessary First Cause, "In God, essence and existence are identical. God is the "I am," the one who necessarily exists. In Creation, all created things have a distinction between essence and existence because their nature does not make it necessary that they exist. In the created order, there is a distinction between essence and existence."⁹

So as for the Incarnation of Jesus, it follows that God the Son, Jesus Christ, "has taken on a human nature, an essence, but since that human nature or essence is distinct from His existence, His Divine Existence takes the place of what in us would be a human existence. Jesus has only one existence, but two natures." This is no contradiction because in created things there is a distinction between essence and existence, but this distinction does not apply to God. In Christ, there is one person because person names that which exists, but with two natures - a divine nature and a human nature. Jesus is not a human person but a divine person, person in the sense of identity, of unity of a human being. Person is not the same thing as nature. Therefore, Jesus is not a human person, yet He is entirely a human being like us in every respect as regards His nature, but not as regards His existence, His ultimate reality which is Divine. When we look at Jesus we are not looking at a human being and a divine being loosely connected with each other, but one single person, having a human and a divine nature.¹⁰ Furthermore, "it is literally true that God suffers as we suffer, although He suffers not in His divine nature, but in His human nature."¹¹

To end with a more particular look at the Holy Trinity which helps to understand God the Son, Fr. Ashley shows that "The Father who is the source of all things, gives Himself totally to the Son. With the Father, the giving is total. He gives his entire being as God to the Son. There is nothing that the Father has that is not given to the Son. The Son receives all that he is, his total being, from the Father. Hence, the Father and the Son have one single divinity, one single being."¹² The person is the existence which is one with the nature or essence in God but really distinct from it in man.

¹ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 5: Science and Religion: Kant, Newton, Einstein." 2000. International Catholic University.

² Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 5: Science and Religion: Kant, Newton, Einstein." 2000. International Catholic University.

³ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Notes from Lecture 9: History: Hegel, Thucydides." 2000. International Catholic University.

⁴ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 5: Science and Religion: Kant, Newton, Einstein." 2000. International Catholic University.

⁵ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 10: Creation." 2000. International Catholic University.

⁶ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 6: The Human Person: Descartes, Heidegger." 2000. International Catholic University.

⁷ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 10: Creation." 2000. International Catholic University.

⁸ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Notes from Lecture 11: Incarnation." 2000. International Catholic University.

⁹ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 11: Incarnation." 2000. International Catholic University.

¹⁰ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 11: Incarnation." 2000. International Catholic University.

¹¹ Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Notes from Lecture 11: Incarnation." 2000. International Catholic University.

¹² Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 12: The Church." 2000. International Catholic University

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