

Resolving the Inconsistencies in Aquinas's Truth Theory

Julie Lund

Although Thomas Aquinas does not explicitly formulate a truth theory, it is possible to extract one from his discussion of truth in the *Summa Theologiae*. However, his discussion contains contradictory elements of correspondence theory, Pre-Socratic relativism, and Christian platitudes such as “God is Truth.” To complicate the picture further, there are two different kinds of truth: human truth and divine truth. Yet this dichotomous nature of truth, properly understood, is actually the key to resolving the contradictions in his theory. In this paper I will discuss human truth and divine truth and how they interrelate. I will argue that an understanding of the respective roles of human truth and divine truth allows one to see that the two different aspects of Aquinas’s theory work for their limited ranges of application and together create a cohesive whole that preserves our common notion of truth and the eternal nature of truth.¹

Question 16 of the *Summa Theologiae*, “On Truth,” provides ample evidence of a type of correspondence theory in Aquinas’s thought. Generally, a correspondence theory of truth asserts that “for a proposition to be true is for it to correspond with the facts.”² That Aquinas believed in a type of correspondence theory is evidenced by at least two passages: “truth is in the mind as conformed to the thing understood,”³ and “truth is defined as conformity between intellect and thing.”⁴ The conformity Aquinas speaks of is not the conformity suggested by a Tarskian T-sentence, which indicates that a statement is true if and only if the facts it describes actually exist in the world. For example, “‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white.”⁵ Aquinas’s idea of conformity is not simply correspondence between a statement and the states of affairs in the world. Rather, “the thing [itself] corresponds to the form of the thing which [the mind] apprehends.”⁶ For example, an apple is true because it corresponds to our concept of “apple.” Thus, truth is correspondence between an object and the form of the object in the mind.

The correspondence theory of truth, including the one espoused by Aquinas, naturally leads to relativism, in the sense that truth is relative to a knower. If truth depends on the relation of mind to object and on the mind judging that relation, then it depends on the mind and cannot exist without it. Article Six of Question 16 shows that Aquinas believes such truths as “this paper is white” do not exist independently of a mind. In response to the question, “Is there one only truth by which all things are true?”⁷ Aquinas answers “no,” for “there are many truths in many created intellects.”⁸ Therefore the type of truth that exists in the intellect admits of relativism. Yet Aquinas sees danger in relativism: if truth is different for each knower, as Protagoras holds, the purpose of philosophy is defeated. Aquinas turns to God to check this relativism and preserve the eternal nature of truth. Although the true statement “This paper is white” cannot exist outside our intellects, its truth is not ultimately dependent on our individual intellects, but on God’s intellect. Aquinas declares, “The truth whereby all things are true is in a certain sense one” because everything is ultimately true in relation to the divine intellect, which is one.⁹

In addition to correspondence and relativism, Aquinas’s truth theory also contains elements of theology. Question 16, Article Five asks, “Is God truth?”¹⁰ The three objections assert that God is not truth and Aquinas counters these assertions with John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”¹¹ Using this scripture as a starting point for his argument, Aquinas goes on to demonstrate that God is truth. To have truth in the mind is to apprehend something as it is, and truth in the thing is being conformable to the mind.¹² God’s being goes beyond mere conformability to his intellect, for his being is his act of

knowing. Since God is his own being and his own act of knowing, truth not only resides in God, but “he is the supreme and original truth.”¹³

The combination of correspondence theory, relativism, and theology is confusing without a proper understanding of the different kinds of truth. When Aquinas refers to truth he does not always refer to the same truth. The major distinction he makes is between human truth and divine truth, though these are closely related.¹⁴ Human truth is many, finite, and changeable, while divine truth is one, eternal, and unchangeable. In the reply to Article 1 of question 16, he divides human truth into intellectual truth and truth in things, the latter being divided into man-made things and natural things. Aquinas ascribes truth to things themselves (both man-made and natural), propositions or statements about things, and God. The truth of all of these depends on some sort of correspondence. For example, Aquinas would attribute truth to both a building and God. A true building is one that conforms to our concept of a building, while God is true because his being corresponds perfectly to his intellect, since his being is equivalent to his knowing. The difference is the truth of the building can change because it is relative to man, but the truth of God cannot change.

Human truth is defined as conformity between an object and the concept in man’s intellect, and is thus dependent on man. It includes both truth in the human intellect and truth in things. Since human truth is dependent on man, it is neither eternal nor unchangeable, since human beings possess neither characteristic. When Aquinas speaks of conformity of mind to thing, he is using correspondence theory to illustrate the nature of human truth. This makes even the truth of things relative to our intellects, because things are not true but in virtue of their relation to man’s intellect. Aquinas sees this relativism as a further demonstration of the finitude of man as compared with the majesty of God. Although we are created in God’s image and share with him the ability to create truth, we can never create eternal, unchangeable truth. Human truth, because it is relative, is changeable.

Properly speaking, truth is only in the intellect. However, Aquinas grants that things also possess a type of truth. Truth is “secondarily in things, by virtue of a relation to intellect as to their origin.”¹⁵ Things are true because they possess an essential relation to the mind, either human or divine. A relation is essential if the thing depends on the mind for its existence, while a relation is incidental if the thing can be known by the mind, but it still exists without the mind’s knowledge of it. “Thus we might say that a house has an essential relation to the architect’s mind but an incidental one to a mind on which it does not depend.”¹⁶ Man-made things are dependent on human minds and natural things are dependent on the divine mind. A thing is said to be true because its existence depends on either the divine mind or the human mind.

All natural things, like trees and mountains and rocks, are true because they “bear a likeness to the types in the divine mind.”¹⁷ Aquinas gives the example of a stone being true when it has the qualities that stones should have, according to God’s conception of a stone. So perhaps a grain of sand is not a true stone because God’s conception of stone includes being at least big enough to hurt when hurled from a slingshot at your face. But this does not mean the grain of sand is essentially false. Although the grain of sand is not a true stone, it is a true grain of sand, because it has the qualities God thinks are essential to a grain of sand. For example, the essence of a grain of sand might include causing pain when it gets in your eye. The conformability to this essence becomes obvious if you put the grain of sand in your eye. The truth of natural things ultimately depends on the divine intellect and not the human intellect because natural things were created by God, not man. Natural things still bear an incidental relation to man’s intellect for man can know natural things, but man’s knowledge of the thing is not necessary to the thing’s existence. Thus a stone miles beneath the earth’s surface that no human has ever thought of is still true because it bears a relation to the divine mind. The truth of natural things is not relative to humans but to God.

It is easier for man to judge the truth of man-made things, since their existence depends on our minds. For example, we might define a sock as an article of clothing one wears on one's feet, which seems to leave out wind socks. Our definition is contingent because a sock is a man-made object. We can judge that a wind sock is not a true sock, according to our definition and conception of a sock. The truth of man-made objects is dependent on our conception, which makes this truth relative. People in different cultures and ages have different uses for similar objects, and so have different truth conditions for them. For example, an American would say a black ankle sock was a true sock, but perhaps someone from a different country, where everyone only wears red, knee-high socks, would disagree. The truth of man-made objects is relative and changeable.

This mutability also applies to language, which Aquinas considers to be a man-made object. His brief discussion of the truth of language could easily fit into contemporary truth/language debates. Aquinas speaks of the truth of propositions in two ways. The first way a proposition is true is in the same sense any other thing is true, by fulfilling what is determined for it by the divine intellect. For propositions, this means it must be grammatical, well-formed, and thus meaningful. "Asdiuo noiuet nviso ewsn" is not a true proposition in this sense. Thus, Aquinas says, any well-formed, grammatical combination of words is true, even if it fails to represent a conformity between human intellect and thing.¹⁸ The second way a proposition is true is if it does in fact indicate a conformity between intellect and thing. Aquinas illustrates this distinction with the following example:

When Socrates is seated the proposition "Socrates is seated" is true with the truth that belongs to things, as a formula of words with meaning; and also with truth that belongs to meaning, as indicating a true opinion. When Socrates rises, its truth in the first sense remains, but its truth in the second sense changes.¹⁹

Thus a well-formed, grammatical statement is always true in the first sense, even if it does not conform to reality. But in the second sense, in reference to its *meaning*, the truth of a statement changes when it no longer conforms to reality.

Most contemporary discussions on truth are centered on the truth of propositions. Either they claim that propositions are eternally true or they claim that "propositions about creatures are not eternally true, but begin to be true when things come to be and lose their truth when things perish."²⁰ Frege claimed that propositions are eternally true when supplemented by a time-indication. A sentence like 'this tree is covered with green leaves' uttered in June does not become false in November. Rather, it is eternally true that the tree is covered with green leaves in that particular month of June.²¹ Aquinas disagrees with this. In Question 16, Article 8, Aquinas explains that the truth of a statement *does* change when the relation between intellect and object changes. This relation can change if either the intellect changes or the object changes. A person can change his opinion about something that remains the same, or an object can change while the opinion someone holds of it remains the same. This is seen in the above example of Socrates standing up, which makes the formerly true statement, "Socrates is seated," false. Either a change in opinion or a change in the object can cause shifts from truth to falsity because the mind and the object no longer conform.

But what about statements we call eternally true, such as tautologies or arithmetic truths? It seems like "2+2=4" bears an incidental relation to the human intellect, since it is true whether we think it is or not. This would mean its truth is not relative to our mind and thus has independent existence. Aquinas addresses this issue in Article Seven of Question 16, "Is Created Truth Eternal?" Tautological statements possess truth because they are well-formed and grammatical. But they also possess truth because they indicate truth in our intellect by bearing a relation to our minds. "Hence, if no intellect were eternal, no truth would be eternal. But since the divine intellect alone is eternal, truth has eternity

in it alone.”²² Our mind can have the thought of a “necessarily true” statement, but since our minds are not eternal, neither is the true statement, relative to us. Necessarily true statements exist independently of us, but not of God. Their eternal truth comes from their relation to God’s intellect.

Once Aquinas shows that propositions can change, it follows that the truth of theories, such as the Ptolemaic system, can also change. During the time that the Ptolemaic system was generally accepted, it would have been said to be true in relation to our minds, since it was a man-made theory. It bore an essential relation to the human mind. However, it would not have possessed divine truth, since it could not have conformed to an idea in God’s intellect. This is because God would have then possessed a false idea, which is impossible. But now it is not even true in relation to our minds because our minds no longer conform to that idea. This is a more satisfactory explanation than the one offered by James, which states that Ptolemy’s system was and *is*, even now, “relatively true, or true within those borders of experience.”²³ It seems wrong to call it true in any sense at this time, when we know that it is false. It is more intuitive to say that it possessed human truth and not divine truth before, and possesses neither now. Since God can never be mistaken, the truth of his mind is unchangeable, which means there is an immutable truth.

Immutable truth is necessary to philosophy. Philosophers draw from past philosophers. They accept, reject, or modify past arguments according to their strengths and weaknesses. We often speak of philosophers in terms of their contributions to philosophy, which implies that philosophy is a timeless pursuit in which all can participate regardless of the time or place in which they personally exist. This is possible because philosophers, for the most part, believe themselves to be engaged in the search for truth, a universal truth that transcends the constraints of time. With few exceptions, philosophers from the Pre-Socratics to Descartes and Leibniz adhered to this idea. However, recent deflationists claim that there is nothing interesting to say about truth in general. Simmons and Blackburn point out that “if there is nothing to say about truth in general, this may seem to imply that there is nothing to say about the relationship between mind and world in general. And if that topic is denied us, then much of philosophy seems to disappear with it.”²⁴ Unlike the recent deflationary theorists, Thomas Aquinas affirms that one *can* say something about truth: that it does in fact exist, and moreover exists eternally. He calls this truth divine truth.²⁵

Aquinas “refers the whole eternity of truth to the divine mind.”²⁶ This precludes the independent eternal truth of necessary propositions, which seems odd, but this issue was addressed above. Aquinas teaches that there is only one eternal truth, the truth of God’s intellect. Maurer outlines Aquinas’s argument for one eternal truth:

This follows from the fact that truth is being, and the conformity of mind to being. Hence anything is related to truth as it is related to being...Now only the divine being and the mind are eternal. The conclusion is inevitable: only the divine truth is eternal; and since there is only one divine mind, there is only one eternal truth.²⁷

So, divine truth is one, eternal, and immutable. Also, “it is at once the origin and goal of human truth.”²⁸ It is what humans aim at in their pursuit of truth.

How can divine truth be both the origin and goal of human truth? God cannot be the origin of human truth in the sense of him creating human truth, for human truth is created by men. Nevertheless, human truth would not exist without God, since he created humans, the objects they encounter and to which they relate, and the manner of that relation as correspondence. And divine truth is the standard of judgment that determines the truth of the relations between the object and the mind. As stated before,

objects are true in virtue of their relation to the divine mind, and so are also true if their relation to a human mind is faithful to the divine truth. So, divine truth is the origin of human truth. It is also its goal, in a certain sense. We cannot ever achieve or fully know divine truth, but we seek to have the greatest possible understanding of it so that we may better judge human truth. We do not know if we are relating to the world correctly unless we know how God relates to the world, which is the divine truth. Thus, divine truth is both the origin and goal of human truth.

There are both weaknesses and strengths of Aquinas's theory. It seems odd to be speaking of Aquinas's theory of truth in the midst of the generally accepted deflationary theories. Aquinas believes it is not only worthwhile to discuss truth, but that it is actually possible to define it. His theory may seem a bit antiquated, but it has strength. Most importantly, Aquinas preserves eternal truth by equating it with God. This is comforting to those who believe that God is not dead. Further, it preserves the very object of philosophical pursuit. Along with this, Aquinas defines truth in a way that is natural for us to think about it. One does not objectively compare statements and thoughts to facts to see if they correspond. For example, if someone says to us, "snow is white," we do not look out the window to assess the facts and see if they correspond to the statement. The truth of the idea is immediately present to us because we think of snow as being white. Aquinas also allows for the falsity that we experience when our judgments or the things we judge change. We are never naturally tempted to think that "Socrates is seated" and "Socrates is standing" can both be true at the same time, or that "The geocentric theory is true" and "The heliocentric theory is true" can both be true, since they are contradictory.

However, there are also weaknesses in Aquinas's argument. Those who believe God does not exist will not accept the concept of divine truth. Once divine truth is eliminated, one is left with a basic correspondence theory and the accompanying problems, such as relativity, mutability, and the notorious problem of *how* an idea corresponds to an object. Also, it seems imprecise to call so many different types of truth by the same name. Aquinas's only justification for doing this is that we do the same thing by calling different things true, and so it conforms to the way we naturally speak of truth. By working with so many different types of truth, it seems he fails to capture the essence of truth. But in fact, he succeeds in capturing truth's essence better than most philosophers, for he recognizes that truth's essence is not limited to just the truth of propositions or just to God as truth, or just to the truth of existent things. He encompasses all of these aspects of truth in his theory.

Nevertheless, this broad discussion of truth leads to lack of clarity in his argument, another weakness. Sometimes Aquinas seems like a traditional correspondence theorist, like when he says, "Truth is defined as conformity between intellect and thing."²⁹ Other times he seems like a Heideggerian, such as when he says, "You find truth in the mind when it apprehends the thing as it is, and *truth in the thing when it possesses being conformable to the mind.*"³⁰ This does not suggest traditional correspondence, but rather Heidegger's idea of truth as uncovering, as appropriated from Pre-Platonic philosophy. Confusion also arises because Aquinas says the truth of things can change because their truth is dependent on our apprehension of it, which varies from person to person. Then he says the truth of things cannot change because their truth is dependent on its relation to the divine intellect, which is unchangeable and all-knowing. This lack of clarity is understandable, though. Aquinas's truth theory would naturally be unclear, since he never explicitly sets it forth as a theory of truth. One must formulate his theory of truth based on his discussion of truth, which is not systematic by our standards.

Aquinas's theory of truth could be described with the motto "Divide and conquer." He divides truth into human truth and divine truth and addresses them separately. He uses correspondence theory to explain human truth, both in our intellect and in things. This makes human truth many, finite, and changeable. But divine truth compensates for these "failings" because it is one, infinite, and unchangeable. The correspondence theory seems intuitive and it describes how we normally think of truth and how we use

it in our lives. At the same time, Aquinas's use of theology maintains the other aspect of truth that we normally think of: its eternal, immutable nature. Aquinas offers a truth theory that encompasses the best of both worlds to offer a complete picture of truth.

Notes

1. The "common notion" of truth spoken of here is the idea that true thoughts and statements are those that correspond to the facts.
2. Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons, *Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 1.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Volume 4: Knowledge in God (Great Britain: Eyre and Scottiswood Limited, 1964) 77.
4. Aquinas 81.
5. All correspondence theories state that true statements correspond with the facts, but Alfred Tarski is responsible for devising the T-sentence formulation to express this correspondence.
6. Aquinas 81.
7. Aquinas 89.
8. Aquinas 91.
9. Aquinas 91.
10. Aquinas 87.
11. Aquinas 87.
12. Though we normally ascribe truth to statements and propositions, Aquinas does assert that truth also resides in things.
13. Aquinas 89.
14. Aquinas 89.
15. Aquinas 81.
16. Aquinas 77.
17. Aquinas 77.
18. Aquinas 99.
19. Aquinas 99.
20. Armand Maurer, C.S.B., *St. Thomas and Historicity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1979)

25.

21. Gottlob Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry," trans. A.M. and Marcelle Quinton. Reprinted in *Truth*, Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 103.

22. Aquinas 93.

23. William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," printed in *Truth*, Blackburn and Simmons, 63.

24. Blackburn and Simmons 3.

25. Maurer 21-24.

26. qtd. in Maurer 25.

27. Maurer 26.

28. Maurer 36.

29. Aquinas 81.

30. Aquinas 89, italics added.