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## **Aquinas on Philosophy as Prudent Desire, Pursuit, and Job of the Wise Man and Culture: To Understand First Principles and Causes of the Whole Truth about Everything**

When, toward the start of his *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, St. Thomas Aquinas begins his report of how Aristotle had started talking about the history of the origin of the concept of philosophy, science, among the Ancient Greeks and other Mediterranean cultures prior to them, he had described this as an individual and community team enterprise: a prudent, organizational act of an organizational whole. The people involved in starting this organization shared a common, *prudent* chief aim: to escape from the damaging effects they had commonly recognized brute-animal ignorance causes<sup>1</sup>.

They could not have proceeded in this way had they not shared a common concept and understanding of human beings as a unique species of animal: ‘a rational animal’. In addition, to talk somewhat like a student of Georg Hegel (b.1770; d.1831), they had thought of themselves as conceiving of philosophy, science, as ‘a world-historical concept’.

‘Strictly speaking’, they had not conceived of themselves as: (1) an organizational community engaged in some sort of cultural revolution; (2) Europeans; or (3) Westerners. They could not have done so because, ‘strictly speaking’, none of these concepts had precisely existed during their time.

When philosophy had first started to arise among ancient Greeks colonists in Asia-Minor (near modern-day Turkey, in Miletus and Ionia) around the 7th and 6th centuries, B.C., the Ancient Greeks had conceived of the world as they knew it to consist in lands surrounding the Aegean Sea. This became the later-

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. J.P. Rowan, Vol. 1, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., Inc., 1961), Lect. 3, nns. 55-68.



known ‘Mediterranean’ (‘Middle Land’) geographical region: the ‘Middle of the Roman Empire’ as the Romans later conceived of it.

To the peoples living in the lands surrounding the Aegean Sea during the time of the start of Ancient Greek philosophy, the concept of ‘the World’ consisted of: (1) ‘lands to the East’ (Asia); (2) ‘lands to the South’ (Libya); and (3) ‘lands to the West and North’ (the geographical region that later became called ‘Europe’).

Etymologically, the word ‘Europe’ is derived from ‘Europa’—the name of a Phoenician (modern Lebanon) princess who was the mother of King Minos of Crete, whom the god Zeus had abducted as a wife. In addition, the Ancient Greeks had referred to ‘Euros’ as their northernmost province of Thrace and to the river that flowed through it. Before the term ‘Europe’ became used to refer to a continent (around the ninth century, A.D.), it was often used to refer to Thrace.

During the ninth-century Carolingian Renaissance, the term ‘Europe’ started to designate ‘the area of cultural and political influence and continent’ controlled in the ‘Western Roman Empire’ by the Roman Catholic Church (the modern West) as distinct from ‘the areas of political and cultural influence and geographical regions of the ‘Eastern Roman Empire’, mainly influenced by Eastern Orthodox Catholic Churches and Islam.

I indicate the above facts about the increasingly precise historical development in understanding ideas like ‘Europe’, ‘the West’, and ‘the World’ to drive home more deeply into the consciousness of my readers the fact that when we first start to conceive of any new subject, or substance, and its activities, we always do so ‘conflatedly’—using all our psychological knowing and emotional faculties united in numerically one act of sense-understanding.

We first sense a new subject, or substance, and all qualities ‘generically’ with our intellect and intellectualize them with all our internal and external sense faculties before we sense and intellectualize about them specifically and individually. Recall that a child first senses something moving toward him or her before conceiving and sensing this being as ‘Mommy’ or ‘Daddy’.

Analogously considered, the way in which the Ancients living around the Aegean Sea first conceived of themselves as ‘community wonderers’ mirrors the way they first conceived of philosophy, science, as an act of wondering practiced by a world-wide community—not as an act of Westerners, or Europeans, or any regional culture.

They first wondered about themselves as ‘wonderers’ in general, using easier, uncomplicated psychological acts of imagination, memory, and vivid sense experience—Myth, rhapsodies about the gods sung by wandering, inspired, Rock-star, sons of gods: Great Mythological Poets like Homer and Hesiod, and other ‘rappers’, like Orpheus and Musaios, who had preceded them.

After discussing the way Aristotle had depicted the psychological evolution of the Ancient Greeks physicists who had first wondered about the causes

of motion and action on Earth and in the heavens, St. Thomas starts to comment about Aristotle's observation that, as someone who wonders, 'in a way' (that is, 'analogously'), a philosopher resembles Ancient theological poets in being a 'Philomuthos'<sup>2</sup>. Most remarkable to me about Aristotle's depiction of philosophers in this way is how radically different and positive it is about them in contrast to the highly negative opinion that Socrates and Aristotle's beloved teacher, Plato, had held of them.

For example, recall that, along with corrupt 'sophists', among the chief accusers of Socrates in Plato's dialogue the *Apology* were Ancient theological poets, who had claimed to be 'inspired sons of the gods'. In addition, Plato had considered these Ancient poets to be 'essentially liars', who, among other mendacious acts, had depicted gods to be evil wife- and child-beaters, and cannibals.

For instance, fearing that Zeus would unseat him as King of the gods, the Titan leader Cronos ate all five of Zeus' children (Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon). Previous to this Cronos had deposed and castrated his father Uranos.

Fearing that his own children would depose him, Cronos started to eat all of them. Luckily for him, Cronos' youngest son, Zeus, was saved from such a dire fate by his mother, Rhea. She gave birth to Zeus in secret and hid him in a cave in Crete. Then, she shrewdly pretended to give Zeus to Cronos by presenting her husband a rock wrapped in swaddling clothes—which Cronos immediately ate.

Zeus, in turn, was 'no mister nice guy'. Among other dastardly deeds, he crippled his wife Hera's son Hephaistos by tossing him off Mount Olympus for trying to protect Hera from Zeus's unwanted advances.

Socrates was so appalled by such 'ungodly' behavior that, in Plato's dialogue the *Euthyphro*, Socrates reacts with incredulity toward Euthyphro when Euthyphro (who claims to have a masterful knowledge of 'piety' and of the most wonderfully pious acts of the gods) holds the Ancient Greek gods to be exemplars of holiness. No wonder should exist why Plato had entitled this dialogue *Euthyphro*. In Greek, the word 'pious' ('*hosion*') means 'holiness'. Euthyphro is 'His Holiness'. More loosely, Euthyphro is 'Mr. Know-it-all', 'Wisdom personified'<sup>3</sup>.

Socrates' opinion of the depiction of the Ancient Greek gods was so false and disgusting that, in Book 10 of Plato's *Republic*, Plato reports Socrates had said the poets could not be allowed to teach the youth or guardians in his Ideal

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Lect. 3, nns. 55-68; see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, in: *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. Mc Keon, (New York: Random House, 1968), 982b11-983a23.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. L. Cooper, in: *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. (with an introduction and prefatory notes) E. Hamilton, H. Cairns, Bollingen Series 71, (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Distributed by Pantheon Books, 1966), 2A-5C.

City<sup>4</sup>. In addition, in Plato's dialogues, the gods: (1) exist below the Form of the Good; (2) have to look up to it; and (3) do not interfere in human affairs except to protect us from evils. In addition, Plato's conception of a 'form' is a depersonification of a Greek god as a cause existing in matter that causes a material body to move.

Note should also be made that Aristotle continued Plato's removal of the gods: (1) from the Earth and (2) as potential subjects of religious veneration and worship. Aristotle's Unmoved Mover and Intelligences that move heavenly bodies do not know we exist and care nothing about us.

Following the natural order of learning—which proceeds from sense knowledge of the easiest and clearest things to know to those that are more difficult and obscure—like Aristotle, Aquinas's attitude toward the Ancient theologizing poets was more kind and positive. As he recognized, these early researchers had little choice but to attempt to get at truth of things 'to the best of their ability'.

Being unable to read or write, they had to pursue their investigation of truth and proximate causes of the behavior of substances chiefly by means of the use of vivid imagination, strong memories, and song. While these first practitioners of mythologically wondering about causes were initially called *sophoi* ('wise men', in Greek), St. Thomas knew that, later, Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570-495 B.C.) coined the term 'philosophy' chiefly to designate the pursuit of wisdom for the simple love of being wise, and for no practical or productive purpose<sup>5</sup>.

Aquinas reports that Aristotle made the same point about philosophy being a pursuit of wisdom by referring to the fact that the habit of philosophizing only started to be sought after many practical and productive arts had been discovered and 'arts of leisure' ('contemplative', 'speculative', or 'liberal' arts) had been discovered. Then, St. Thomas states, "for the first time", human beings started to pursue "this kind of prudence" (that is, 'a new species of prudence'—'speculative, observational, or contemplative, prudence!'): wisdom—prudence (uncommon common sense) sought for its own sake, for itself alone, and not for any other aim<sup>6</sup>.

At this point, because the historical information was largely not available to him, St. Thomas could not mention the important fact that development of the 'arts of leisure', the 'liberal arts', had first started in Egypt centuries before the Ancient Greeks had begun to practice the liberal art of geometry (*geometria*/'earth management', in Greek). As long ago as 3000 B.C., the Egyptians had used geometry for building, agricultural, and sailing purposes.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. P. Shorey, in: *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. (with an introduction and prefatory notes) E. Hamilton, H. Cairns, Bk. 10, 377A-583C.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Lect. 3, n. 56.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Lect. 3, n. 57.

In his *Histories*, Herodotus reports that development of geometry as part of an influential school ('place of leisure'/'scola', in Latin) began when the Pharaoh, King Sestoris, "divided the land of the Nile Delta into large squares of equal size and gave one square to each family". At the time, "the math for determining the surface area did not yet exist, and the tax collectors were not able to calculate the unequal and odd shapes of farmland submitted for tax returns. According to Herodotus, this is how geometry was invented: to help King Sestoris evaluate the tax returns of his farmers"<sup>7</sup>.

After commenting about Aristotle's observations that: (1) as someone who wonders, a philosopher resembles an Ancient theological poet in having the quality of being a 'Myth-lover' ('Philomuthos', in Greek); and (2) Pythagoras was the first of the Ancients to designate this science 'philosophy'—instead of 'wisdom' ('sophia', in Greek) as the other Ancients before him had done—(*Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Lect. 3, nns. 55-57), St. Thomas meditates on four additional qualities this science possesses and adds to the behavioral psychology of a true philosopher: (1) causing real human freedom; (2) causing the greatest species of human wealth and greatest of human goods—liberation from all forms of slavery and an elevation of individual human nature to a divine-like state of liberty; (3) adding to the human intellect the most divine and honorable subjects to know and the psychological means to know them—God-like, contemplative understanding; and (4) being the most divine and honorable of all sciences and ways of human understanding<sup>8</sup>.

St. Thomas maintains that 'real freedom' is the first quality the science of philosophy adds to the behavioral psychology of a true philosopher because a person who is really free is a person who does not exist or work for someone else. He or she exists and works for himself or herself. For example, he says, 'slaves' do not exist or work for themselves. They exist for their 'masters' because they work for 'masters' and give to their 'masters' whatever their work produces<sup>9</sup>.

In contrast, the second quality the science of philosophy adds to the behavioral psychology of a true philosopher is 'to enable him or her exist for himself or herself'. Really free people are 'entrepreneurs'. They work for themselves and receive for themselves whatever profit their work provides.

Free men and women are 'enterprising, self-providers'. Like such people, the science of philosophy (wisdom) works for no other science. Among all human sciences, only philosophy works for itself. Wisdom is free and makes free those who possess it!

Only 'contemplative sciences'—those that pursue knowledge for its own sake, and not for any practical or productive work beyond themselves—are

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, in: fourstringfarm.com: *Filing Taxes in Ancient Egypt*, in: *Heritage Farming*, April 15, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Lect 3, nns. 57-68.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 57.

‘better than useful arts’ (such as arts of manufacturing). In addition, among these sciences, the science that has as its chief subject of investigation the qualitatively most universal and widely and deeply influential of all causes (the chief cause of the existence and preservation of the entire, finite universe and all causes that exist within this universe) is the highest, best, and most perfect science: First Philosophy, Metaphysics, Wisdom. Only this science exists perfectly and completely for itself<sup>10</sup>!

Given this second quality, St. Thomas maintains that the science of philosophy must give to the behavioral psychology and ‘soul’ of its possessor its third quality: being, by nature, totally incapable of thinking and behaving like a slave. The true philosopher is psychologically disposed to understand that being a philosopher is really better as a chief aim in life than becoming economically wealthy and every other qualitatively lesser good.

At the same time, the true philosopher is no fool. He or she understands that, in and of itself, the habit of philosophizing ‘bakes no cakes and builds no bridges’. While the science of Metaphysics might be the qualitatively highest science, and ‘properly speaking’, identical with science in its most perfect species, ‘properly understood’ *all true philosophy is a species of situational prudence*.

It has its own *officium*/office/duty related to its use. Metaphysical addiction can make a person just as much a slave and a fool as can any other human addiction. To be properly exercised ‘freely’, for it to be more than useful, its possessor must know its limits of right use—must use the habit of Metaphysics prudently; must understand when, where, and how to use it.

Because the science of philosophy has as its chief subject, aim, final cause, understanding causes and principles of the existence and behavior of everything, St. Thomas maintains that the chief subject, aim and final cause of philosophy must include understanding God. Having this included as part of its chief subject must make philosophy ‘the most divine and honorable science’.

Indeed, Aquinas argues that the science of philosophy is the most honorable science precisely because its subject of study includes the most divine subject of wonder: ‘God and matters related to God’. Since philosophers wonder about causes and first principles, they must wonder about God.

Consequently, the science of philosophy must be about God alone or, at a minimum, about God as the qualitatively best, highest, most perfect, universal, and influential of all causes: the chief cause of the existence and preservation of the entire, finite universe, and all the finite causes that exist within it.

While some sciences are more necessary than this science for use in practical and productive life, none is more honorable and excellent than this one considered simply as a science because, more than any other science, it is in no way servile. It is the only human science sought for its own sake and not as tool, or means, to acquire anything beyond its own good.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., n. 58.

Having the nature it does, St. Thomas proceeds to demonstrate that, as a habit of investigation initially caused by a desire to understand first principles and causes of everything, the habit of philosophy comes to rest, is perfectly realized, when it arrives at the ‘contrary opposite’ of the initial cause of its wondering—understanding the first principles and causes of everything<sup>11</sup>.

According to Aquinas, every species of motion exists as the in-between part of a starting point and end point of a contrary-opposite relation. Motion is not arbitrary or chaotic. It is always a sequential, orderly, progression from one point (beginning, contrary opposite) to another point (ending, contrary opposite)—like takeoff and landing of an airplane.

Scientific, philosophical, investigation is a species of progressive movement toward understanding—like the in-between flight of the airplane ‘from’ takeoff ‘to’ landing. Once the plane lands, the flight is over. Once the chief aim (final cause/chief purpose) of the wonder is realized/understood, the investigation (in-between motion) is over.

According to St. Thomas, the flight of philosophy from an initial habit of wondering about the causes and principles of all things started with Ancient theological poets and pagan priests wondering about less important matters close at hand and easily understandable to them. From these, ‘slow by slow’, it gradually progressed to wonder about more hidden causes.

Because they are initially extremely unfamiliar to us, when they first confront us psychologically, we have no memory of such hidden causes. Consequently, we must first perceive them as entirely alien, strange, foreign.

They first appear to us as if they happen mysteriously, by chance. As a result, St. Thomas says that we human beings wonder most of all when things happen in some unexpected way that we cannot anticipate. We initially attribute such happenings to chance, mysteries—events, perhaps, even having no cause.

Aquinas adds that we tend to wonder especially about activities that appear to us to have no ‘determined, or definite’, cause. When the Ancients were first not able to recognize the cause of ‘any’ action at all, they wondered about all actions as totally alien, as if they were undetermined, chance occurrences. They first wondered in this way even about changes, movements, close at hand that are relatively easy to understand by anyone who has some familiarity (memory, experience) with such behavior.

That is, the most primitive of Ancient wonderers had first wondered about relatively easily understandable physical behavior and movements in the same way as more advanced Ancient astronomers had wondered about the causes of Lunar and Solar eclipses and Ancient geometers had wondered about whether the diagonal of a square could be commensurate with one of its sides.

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<sup>11</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, trans. with an introduction and notes A.C. Pegis, (Notre Dame Ind., USA, and London, UK: University of Notre Dame Press), Bk. 1, Ch. 1.

Once they understood the causes of these phenomena, they ceased to wonder about them. Continuing to do so would have been the act of a fool.

One final point readers of this article should note about the brilliance of St. Thomas Aquinas is that, by the time he had completed Lesson 3 of his *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* (maybe two dozen pages), he had already laid the foundation rationally to justify the later claim he will make that philosophy as Aristotle had understood it was ‘a preamble’ to the existence of the qualitatively higher Divine Science of Revealed Theology (‘God-talk’)—the science in which God talks (reveals knowledge) ‘about Himself and matters related to God’ And he had been able to do so precisely because ‘every science, division of philosophy, essentially studies some subject and matters related to it’!

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### Summary

This article defends the thesis that, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, when the Ancient Greeks and other Mediterranean cultures prior to them had first started to philosophize, engage in science, they had done so as parts of an individual and community team enterprise. They were convinced that all human beings have *a moral duty as rational animals* to philosophize—*prudentially to wonder about the most universal causes about everything*. Considering themselves essentially to be a ‘world-community of prudential wonderers’, they first conceived of philosophy, science, to be a psychological act of prudential wondering practiced by a world-wide community of people. In starting this organization, this world community shared a common, *prudent* chief aim: to help free the entire known-world from the damaging effects they had commonly recognized brute-animal ignorance causes. They were convinced that an imprudent people can never become philosophical or scientific. St. Thomas maintains that their natural desire to satisfy their wonder about the chief subject, aim, efficient and final cause of the existence, behavior, and truth of everything must have included understanding God. Having this included as part of its chief subject and aim caused them to understand the job of every philosopher chiefly to be what philosophy is for anyone who understands its proper nature: to bring into existence First Philosophy, Metaphysics’—‘the most divine and honorable science’!

**Keywords:** St. Thomas Aquinas, Philosophy, Wisdom, Culture, First Principles and Causes, Truth.

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