

Truth in Aquinas

*John Milbank and Catherine
Pickstock*



London and New York

Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	xi
1	Truth and correspondence	1
2	Truth and vision	17
3	Truth and touch	52
4	Truth and language	76
	<i>Notes</i>	96
	<i>Bibliography</i>	119
	<i>Index</i>	126

1

Truth and correspondence

I

How should one respond to the death of realism, the death of the idea that thoughts in our minds can represent to us the way things actually are in the world? For such a death is widely proclaimed by contemporary philosophers.

In summary, they argue that since we only have access to the world via knowledge, it is impossible to check knowledge against the world in order to see if it corresponds with it. This is a powerful and perhaps unanswerable contention, and yet if we accept it, it seems to follow that there can be no such thing as truth at all.

In what follows, however, we wish to argue that one need not accept these essentially secular conclusions. Rather, we want to suggest that a reconsideration of Aquinas can help us to meet the problems arising from the seeming insupportability of a correspondence theory of truth. This might appear to be an inquiry doomed from the outset, since Aquinas is himself a proponent of just such a theory. However, we will try to show why he is not quite the correspondence theorist he is sometimes taken to be, but rather something much more interesting: a theological theorist of truth who challenges in advance the assumptions of modern epistemologists at a level they do not even imagine.

First, however, let us see what sorts of difficulties arise if one rejects correspondence altogether. Bruce Marshall has argued that one need not fear suspicion of correspondence, for, first of all, the death of realism need not mean an out-and-out embrace of anti-realism, and, secondly, theology introduces a specifically Christological mode of correspondence according to which, Christ the God-man is true in his imitation of the life of the eternal Trinity.¹ In the first case, according to Marshall, there is in fact an alternative to anti-realism which does not make appeal to correspondence. Marshall furnishes us with a variety of reasons why, for the purposes of one's day-to-day existence, one should turn to a 'disquotational' theory of truth, which is not anti-realist, although it involves no notion of correspondence, as espoused by Alfred Tarski and later Donald Davidson. This, he claims, is the best available philosophical—though not theological—account of what truth is.² Why is it such a good theory of truth? The main reason, supposedly, is that it is not really a theory of truth, properly speaking, since for disquotationalism, truth reduces to being, or to 'what is the case', and so avoids any ill-conceived comparisons of being and thought altogether. So, when one says 'It is true that one is in Oxford', one might as well dispense with the 'It is true that' and simply say 'one is in Oxford'. Since there is here no freight of correspondence between truth and reality, this theory has no need of recourse to realism. Instead it is ontologically neutral. This means, as Marshall argues, that for all practical and linguistic purposes, the world simply 'is' as it presents itself to us, or as we pragmatically take it to be.³

Having established this, Marshall nonetheless argues, in the second place, that there *is* an instance when correspondence must re-surface. For the Christian, he says, what one most seeks is to imitate Christ, who ‘is’ the Truth.⁴ So, here, invoking Aquinas’s account of the incarnate Christ’s embodiment of eternal truth and our participation in this by imitation of Christ, Marshall allows for a mirroring of thought and reality in a realm quite remote from the busy commerce of everyday where disquotationalism exerts its minimalist rule.

Now, there are various reasons why one might wish to be critical of Marshall’s defence of the Tarski-Davidson theory of truth. Put briefly, one might suggest the following. First, the ‘disquotational’ theory of truth does not necessarily point us beyond what is conventionally taken to be true, and fails to offer any reasons why it might or might not be justified to make a particular assertion; and so, after all, one might say (despite Davidson’s disclaimers, which appeal implicitly to a scientific naturalism ungrounded by his own primary philosophy), that this seems tantamount to a return to relativism.

It is true that Davidson, and Marshall in his wake, seek to evade a pure deflation of truth, and also relativism, through an espousal of ‘holism’ as to meaning. The possibility of mutual understanding is held to require the assumption that all basic human concepts are identical in all cultures and all cohere with each other. However, this disputable claim is itself compatible with a kind of naturalistic apriorism; ‘truth’ here may be merely the bias of the human species. As John McDowell and Hilary Putnam point out, it seems that, for Davidson, sensory information from the world cannot impinge as ‘meaningful’ within the conceptual space of human beliefs and cogitations. Davidson only establishes an emphatic realism when he affirms that the external world determines through material causality the workings of our brain, which he takes as equivalent to mental events in terms of a matching of neural effects to instances of thought, item by item. Despite this matching, Davidson obscurely allows no complete reduction of the psychic to the neural. He remains, therefore, with an unsustainable dualism which must collapse either into a thoroughgoing physicalism, which would hand the determination of truth entirely over to natural science, or else into a species-relativism in such a way that the one ‘coherence’ we are locked into, perhaps discloses nothing whatsoever concerning the world and is itself radically inexplicable.

Secondly, Marshall fails to mention that this purely secular account of truth runs into a number of aporias or contradictions. Indeed, the most obvious of these is that ‘disquotationalism’ does not negotiate the one most crucial instance where one really cannot get rid of the word ‘true’, namely, in the sentence presumably very close to disquotationalist hearts: ‘It is true that all instances of the word true are redundant’.⁵ One might think that one could also reduce this sentence to ‘all instances of the word “true” are redundant’. However, this is not the case, because in this meta-statement, whether formulated in the version explicitly including the word ‘true’ or not, one is saying that the world is such that one can only approach it pragmatically or conventionally or phenomenally, and if that claim is made, then this is tantamount to asserting that treating the world in this way in fact corresponds to the way the world is. Even though such a correspondence is unverifiable, it is still *assumed*, in such a way that one does indeed treat the world and knowledge as two different realms, and then claims that knowledge matches the world when knowledge is taken as conventional or pragmatic.

'Truth' here, therefore, cannot be disquoted and is not redundant, because one has made a meta-assertion about the relation of knowing to being, and that is precisely the domain in which the notion of truth retains an indispensable operativity.

To put this another way: one cannot avoid this meta-assertion of truth to undergird disquotationalism, because otherwise there is no alternative way of ruling out the strong realist idea that one can have insight into what truly is the case for the depth of things according to their essential reality. Indeed, not only is such a view a plausible alternative to a conventionalist or pragmatist one; one could even argue that to reject it is counter-intuitive. For if one insists that truth is simply the way things appear to us to be, thus denying any correspondence between our mind and the way things are in themselves, then things must really be lying to us, because the way things appear to us must be concealing the way things are in themselves, or else concealing an underlying emptiness which is the real truth of things. In the latter case, if one were to say 'There is nothing', one would in fact be corresponding to reality.

The problem, then, is that if one asserts that one cannot get beyond the succession of the way things appear to us to be, then what is it that makes that state of affairs itself appear to us to be the case? One must here make appeal to a meta-phenomenon which would be the horizon of disclosure for all specific phenomena, but it is at this point that something like a correspondence theory of truth reappears at the heart of the very theory which claims to have done away with correspondence.⁶

In the third place, what is perhaps more worrying about Marshall's argument, is that he finds his exaltation of Tarski and Davidson upon a partially unsatisfactory construal of Aquinas's theory of truth. As we shall see, if Marshall had espoused more wholeheartedly Aquinas's concept of truth, there would be no need for him to promote a dualism between the secular realm, where the redundancy of truth can reign unchallenged, and the theological realm, where correspondence is possible through Christ.⁷ For it will be shown that Aquinas's fundamental theory of truth is as theological as it is philosophical, and is only a correspondence theory in a sense which depends entirely upon the metaphysical notion of participation in the divine Being. Hence, while, indeed, Aquinas thinks that the way to fulfil truth for fallen man is by imitation of the God-man (as will be discussed in Chapter Three), more generally he supposes that any truth whatsoever is a participation in the eternally uttered Logos. Now, Marshall does observe that Christological truth can inform all our apprehension of the world, so that we see it as created and participating in God and come to realize that, theologically speaking, to be in the truth is 'to correspond' to God in whom we participate. However, he underestimates the extent to which Aquinas's more mundanely philosophical account of human knowing of material things through correspondence as such involves participation, since it is predicated on a view of the world as created. In this way, it is not simply Aristotle's account. Thus just to the same measure that Marshall espouses a dualistic account of truth and insinuates a gap between Aquinas's general theory of truth and his Christology, so also his theological view of truth is overweighted to Christology and does not sufficiently begin with the doctrine of Creation.

We will now therefore try to show that Marshall to a degree misconstrues Aquinas's theory of truth as correspondence. One problem, from an historical point of view, is that he attributes a post-Fregean approach to Aquinas. (While one can perhaps see the beginnings of something anticipating Frege in the later Middle Ages, this is more to be

allied with anti-Thomistic developments.)⁸ Marshall claims that Aquinas has two theories of truth, the first being a thoroughgoing Aristotelian correspondence of mind to reality, and the second, a grammatical or semantic theory in which truth is borne and brought about by sentences, and no ‘metaphysics of knowledge’ is necessarily assumed.⁹

One might perhaps concede momentarily that Aquinas attends to the question of whether something is true by attending to what it means, and this could be seen as a semantic approach. But for Aquinas, grammar is grounded in ontology, because the criterion for making sense, or deciding which word can be conjoined with which other words and in what way, is what *belongs together* or *could belong together* in ontological reality, either in things outside the mind, or in the mind’s mode of understanding those things.¹⁰ In the latter case, this criterion is logical as well as ontological only in the very ‘unmodern’ sense that there is a logical way of being, a way of things existing in the mind, which for Aquinas is as real as their extramental, material existence. By contrast, to separate Aquinas’s semantic interest from his metaphysics of knowledge is to treat the former in terms of post-Bolzanian and post-Fregean logical ‘realities’ rather than ontological actualities (one might say here that it is to approach Aquinas as if he were Duns Scotus or even William of Ockham).¹¹

For Marshall, this second, ‘semantic’ approach to truth in Aquinas allows one to assimilate his approach to modern disquotationalist theories, while shifting his affirmation of correspondence into a more purely fideistic register, for which the consequences of doctrine appear unanticipated by philosophy. By contrast, Marshall considers that earlier modern rationalist and empiricist philosophies have directly inherited Aquinas’s first approach to truth, which emphatically affirms correspondence, even if they weaken the metaphysical ground for this approach by abandoning the Aristotelian idea of a literal migration of form from embodied thing to the understanding mind. (Marshall himself, unlike the present authors, considers this Aristotelian notion to be unsustainable.) But this assertion misses the point that modern theories of correspondence are grounded in epistemology rather than ontology, and that it is variants of a ‘semantic’ approach in the late Middle Ages (wrongly attributed to Aquinas by Marshall) which mediated this shift. Today such approaches may indeed have discovered that ‘correspondence’ is non-sustainable within a merely epistemological purview, but initially they encouraged the quest for a truth prior to, or independent of, being.

By regarding Aquinas’s notion of correspondence as in continuity with modern notions, Marshall appears to over-assimilate Aquinas’s philosophical account of human knowing to recent correspondence theories which falsely imagine a raw aconceptual apprehension of the world as a basis upon which the comparison that correspondence appears to require between knowing and being can be founded.¹² This supposedly raw aconceptual apprehension is then ‘compared’ with an equally raw purely semantic internal grasp of meaning. However, for Aquinas, the real is identified in the meaningful, just as the semantic is identified in the ontological. Thus, as we shall see, correspondence or adequation for Aquinas is not a matter of mirroring things in the world or passively registering them on an epistemological level, in a way that leaves the things themselves untouched. Rather, adequating is an event which realizes or fulfils the being of things known, just as much as it fulfils truth in the knower’s mind. Correspondence here is a kind of real relation or occult sympathy—a proportion or harmony or *convenientia*—between being and knowledge, which can be assumed or even intuited, but not surveyed

by a measuring gaze. For Aquinas, crucially, being is analogically like knowing and knowing like being. This is what makes Aquinas's theory of truth—unlike modern theories—an ontological rather than epistemological one. Indeed, the conformity or proportion which pertains between knowing and the known introduces an aesthetic dimension to knowledge utterly alien to most modern considerations.¹³ And, in addition, truth for Aquinas has a teleological and a practical dimension, as well as a theoretical one—that is to say, the truth of a thing is taken as that thing fulfilling the way it ought to be, being the way it must be in order to be true.¹⁴ These two dimensions of truth, as the way a thing is and the way it ought to be, come together, because for Aquinas they coincide in the Mind of God. So whereas for modern correspondence theories and some other theories such as coherence theory and diagonalization, one first has a theory of truth and then might or might not apply it to theology, for Aquinas, truth is theological without remainder.¹⁵

After examining exactly in what sense Aquinas is a correspondence theorist, one therefore discovers a defence of a realist theory of truth of a very extreme kind (for here one's mind corresponds to the ways things are at the very deepest level), against claims that truth reduces to whatever is the case according to convention or pragmatic motivation or phenomenal appearances. It follows that if Aquinas is to help us overcome the problems of correspondence, three things must be attended to: first, the idea that one can only have correspondence at all if one has God; secondly, the consequently entailed notion that a correspondence theory of truth is equally to be seen as a coherence theory of truth—that is, a theory of truth in which things are seen as true if they cohere or hold together—since here the ultimate true being of things is their supreme intelligibility in the divine Mind; and, thirdly, the implication that neither correspondence nor coherence applies in quite the way one might think according to secular canons.

II

This difference between Aquinas's and later correspondence theories of truth is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the first article of *De Veritate* which opens with a consideration of the relation of truth to being.¹⁶ Such a starting-point would make no sense at all for contemporary theories of truth which would tend to start epistemologically with a question such as 'How do we know a thing?' From the very outset, then, Aquinas shows us that he does not intend to *refer* truth to being, as if it were at a kind of static speculative epistemological remove from being. Rather, he is asking about truth as a *mode of existence*. This is not, however, to suggest that truth is a particular *kind* of being, but rather that it is convertible with Being as such in the entirety of both terms.¹⁷ Such a view is, of course, fundamental to the mediaeval tradition of Aristotelianized neoplatonic convertibility of the transcendentals which assumes that Being, which is the focal transcendental, beyond all hierarchical qualifications, is equally close to every level of the metaphysical hierarchy; equally close, that is, to genus, species, substance and accident—an accident, for example, may be less self-standing than a substance, but it just as much exists as does a substance.¹⁸ So when one says that Truth is convertible with Being, one is saying that Truth is also a transcendental; that Truth, like Being, shatters the usual hierarchy of categorical priorities in such a way that the

humblest creature equally shines with the one light of Truth as the most exalted, and is just as essentially disclosive of it.

However, if Truth is convertible with Being in this way, why do we need to *add* Truth to Being? Why do we give them different names? There are several reasons for this, all relating to the way we see things from our perspective of situatedness and diversity.¹⁹ Because of our finite modus of understanding, we see Being under different aspects. Under one of these aspects of Being (that described by the term ‘Being’ itself), the things we see seem to us to be discrete and to reside in themselves. For Being’s equal proximity to everything, whether genus or species and so forth, seems to indicate a maieutic or private closeness of Being to each thing, and hence of that thing to itself, so that under this aspect, all things appear to remain in quietude, distinct from one another and in some sense rather self-absorbed.²⁰

But this distinctness-of-things is not phenomenologically exhaustive, for one does not tend to experience things as existing only in an esoteric or hidden way. Things, according to our modus, also appear to *relate* to one another. This appearance of relating is twofold. First of all, beings relate to each other by moving outwards from themselves towards one another and towards their ends. This aspect is especially realized in Life, and concerns the Good (or teleological ends) of those things.²¹ Secondly, there is an aspect by which things are *inside* each other, or are assimilated to one another. This is the formal immanence of other things in oneself that constitutes Knowledge, and is, like the orientation to the Good, a relationship of *convenientia*, of fitting and appropriate belonging-together, or of analogy.²² Every being is in this way related to knowledge, but some beings only insofar as they are known and not as themselves knowing. Just as outer relation is especially realized in living creatures, so inner relation is most realized in the living creatures who can understand. Now, for Aquinas, one must refer these three Augustinian determinations of Being—Being, Life and Knowledge—to one another, for together they form a circle. As a being, a thing remains in itself; as living, it opens itself through the operations of life towards others; and as known or knowing it returns from others to itself.²³

In these three stages or aspects of our modus, we see the interpenetrations of Being and Truth. But, more mysteriously still, one might say that this circle traces the mediations of a further transcendental, namely, Beauty, which seems to bestow itself obliquely on each of these three stations. Beauty, because it is to do with harmony, fittingness and proportion, including that between being and knowing, is at once invisible and hyper-visible for Aquinas; it is oblique and yet omnipresent. But how does Beauty mediate? First of all, insofar as Being is something which resides in itself by a kind of integrity, Beauty is apparent as the measure of that integrity;²⁴ secondly, insofar as Beauty is involved in the manifestation of things in their integrity, without which there could be no visibility, it is fundamental to knowledge; and thirdly, insofar as Beauty is linked with desire (Beauty being defined by Thomas as that which pleases the sight), it is crucial to the outgoings or ecstases of the will and the Good. This role of Beauty, although little explicitly averred to by Aquinas, is actually essential to grasping the character of his theory of understanding. For when he speaks of a *proportio* between Being, knowledge and willing (of the Good), and not mathematical *proportionalitas* which would denote a measurable visible ratio, it is clear that Aquinas alludes to the ineffable harmony between the transcendentals, whereby in the finite world they coincide

and yet are distinguished.²⁵ Thus Beauty shows Goodness through itself and the Good leads to the True, yet we could never look at these relations as at a measurable distance. And this sense of something immanently disclosed through something else in an unmeasurable way, but in a fashion experienced as harmonious, is precisely something *aesthetic*. Every judgement of truth for Aquinas is an aesthetic judgement.

This aesthetic circling of mediations and analogical outgoings and returns which links everything together, is an aspect of Being which exists *in the Soul* (and supremely in the divine Soul).²⁶ This does not mean that the Soul arrives in the manner of an afterthought, as it were, once the private closeness of Being to distinct things has been established. For these aspects of Being do not unfold successively. It is rather the case that distinct things simply would not *be* without the Soul's knowing of them. Therefore Soul, as a further refraction of Being, does not primarily mirror phenomena, but is itself a primordial mode of Being. So, assimilation or adequation here, though obviously including crucial elements of a realist concept of truth, has an idealist dimension as well, which suggests that this is by no means an ordinary kind of correspondence. Being is not prior to knowing, so if Being measures knowledge, knowledge equally measures Being. One might call this 'ideal realism'. For, indeed, because Truth and Being are convertible, one with another, there is a continuity between the way things are in the external material world and the way things are in our mind.

But this 'continuity' is not to be taken lightly. It is not for Aquinas a continuity in the sense of a mirroring or reflecting, of our thoughts simply being 'true to the facts'. Rather, there is a sort of parallel or analogy between the way things are in material or separated angelic substance and the way things are in our minds. It involves a real relation, whereby our thought occasions a teleological realization of the formality of things, and, in doing so, is itself *brought to fruition*. This realization of things is manifold and complicated (we will say more about this later), but for now let us note that it pertains to the way in which the *thinking* of things actually brings them to their telos. This happens, because, for Aquinas, truth is less properly in things than in mind—it is usually, as it were, a dormant power until it comes to be known, at which point the power of its truth is awakened.²⁷

This awakening suggests to us a further way in which Aquinas's concept of truth differs from later models. For whereas the latter might be inclined to treat of being as a mere inclusive genus of that which is simply 'there', with indifference as to quality and perfection, and which one's mind can know or represent, for Aquinas, knowledge is just as much a mode of being as the existence of material or otherwise self-standing substance. Indeed, Aquinas speaks elsewhere of *esse intelligibile*—of thought as intentional existence—building upon Augustine's idea of thought as a 'higher kind of life'.²⁸ Intellection, then, is not an indifferent speculation; it is rather a beautiful ratio which is instantiated between things and the mind which leaves neither things nor mind unchanged. This means that one must think of knowing-a-thing as an act of generosity, or salvific compensation for the exclusivity and discreteness of things.²⁹ Indeed, as we have already seen, in intellection, the Soul mediates things: 'The Soul is in a manner all things' as Aristotle declared in the *De Anima*.³⁰ It is a *corrective or remedy*, according to Aquinas in *De Veritate*, for the isolation of substantive beings.³¹ If, for example, one were to know a willow tree overhanging the Cherwell, our knowing of it would be just as much an event in the life of the form 'tree' as the tree in its willowness and in its

growing. An idea of a tree, therefore, is not in any way a mere representation or fictional figment, as it later became for Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.³² Its truth is not, as modern realism assumes, ever tested by a speculative comparison with the thing itself. Indeed, the very notion of a 'thing itself' is radically otherwise, for it is only 'itself' in its being conformed to the intellect of the knower, in its being ordered to a beautiful ratio or proportion. The thing-itself is only itself by being assimilated to the knower, and by its form entering into the mind of the knower.³³ Truth is not 'tested' in any way, but sounds itself or shines outwards in beauty.

So far, we have seen that, for Aquinas, truth is neither epistemological nor primarily a property of statements. We have seen more positively that it is convertible with Being, that it is a mode of existence and that it is related to a particular aspect of Being, which, according to our modus, is received as a kind of analogical or beautiful assimilation between things. If it is convertible with Being and is a manner of assimilation between things, it seems that truth is *disappointingly elusive*, and a realist might feel dissatisfied not to know exactly where truth is to be found. Where, indeed, are we to find truth? For Aquinas the place of truth is manifold and hierarchical, and one finds it gradually by means of an ascending scale. One might begin by saying that truth is a property of things, that a thing is true if it fulfils itself and holds itself together according to its character and goal.³⁴ Thus, one can say 'This is true rain' if it is raining very hard. A philosopher might scowl at such a usage and say that it is a sloppy metaphorical instance of the word 'true'; but for Aquinas, this would be an entirely proper use, as it would here refer to the most ideal rain, that is, rain fulfilling its operations of life, realizing its 'second act' of relations to others and to its telos, by which in exceeding itself apparently accidentally (inasmuch as it might otherwise remain in its substance just up in the clouds), it actually becomes *more* itself super-substantially. Indeed, a thing is deemed 'less true' if it is impeded in some way from its ordinary operations, whether by poison or sickness.³⁵

But what is happening when a thing is fulfilling its telos? A thing is fulfilling its telos when it is *copying God in its own manner*, and tending to existence as knowledge in the divine Mind: so a tree copies God by being true to its treeness, rain by being rainy, and so on.³⁶ If a thing is truest when it is teleologically directed, and that means when a thing is copying God, this would suggest, as Aquinas indeed affirms, that truth is primarily in the Mind of God and only secondarily in things as copying the Mind of God. Any suggestion, therefore, that Aquinas's realist theory of truth is a simple correspondence of mind to thing is here qualified by this subordination of all things to the divine intellect.

In addition, one can note as an aside, that whilst it is the case that some variants of correspondence theory might claim an unmediated aconceptual apprehension of things, Aquinas seems to suggest that when one knows a thing, one does not know that thing as it is by itself, but only insofar as one meaningfully grasps it as imitating God. How very odd this seems, for one would normally regard imitation as a secondary and therefore less authentic operation of life, but here it becomes the highest form of authenticity attainable for material things.³⁷ However, the placing of imitation ahead of autonomy suggests that, for Aquinas, borrowing is the highest authenticity which can be attained. One must copy in order to be, and one continues only as a copy, never in one's own right.³⁸

But if all things are subordinated to the divine intellect in this way, does this mean likewise that Aquinas's concept of truth is after all an idealist theory which has no essential recourse to an encounter with the way things actually are? Certainly there is an

idealist *aspect* here; however, the very referral to the divine intellect reveals a concept of understanding not as the unfolding of *a priori* truths, but as an orientation towards the ideal as embodied in actuality. Why? Because, as Aquinas explains, truth is in the Mind of God in the same way that an idea resides in the mind of a craftsman.³⁹ Hence, truth as an idea expresses divine desire—and this is desire for the Good, which brings into our discussion a further transcendental (besides Being and Truth). Like Truth, the Good also concerns Being in its relational aspect. But whereas Truth discloses the relations between things to the intellect—all their combinations and separations—the Good discloses their relations to desire (we have already seen how this disclosure is made manifest by beauty which shows us the relations between things as desirable). Such a suggestion that *desire* is disclosive of the real, that desire just as much as knowledge corresponds to Being, suggests an additional way in which Thomist *adequatio* differs from modern correspondence theories, since these would be unable to encompass, and indeed would regard as outlandish, any notion that we register the way things *are* in terms of the way they *ought* to be.

Let us pause a moment to assess the foregoing conclusions about the nature and whereabouts of truth.

First of all, we have seen that truth *in God and in the world* is, on the one hand, an ideal although actual reality, because it expresses desire for the Good; and, on the other hand, it is real because it is convertible with Being. But as concerned with the coherence and beauty of being which realizes desire, as well as concerned with being in its fundamental psychic—which means relationally co-inhering—aspect, truth is present primarily in the act of intellect.

Secondly, we have seen that truth is also *a property of all finite modes of being* insofar as they participate in God. These modes include both individual material substances (such as a stone, a tree, a cricket bat) and also intellectual existences (such as human and angelic minds). This means that truth is in individual material substances and intellectual existences, not in the sense that one might point to them and say that they ‘are the case’, as for modern theories, but because they imitate God in their appointed modes and aim for their appointed ends. And in performing their various tasks, they analogically show us something of God.

We have seen, in the third place, *that truth is in the human intellect*. It is there in two ways: first, following Augustine, by means of divine illumination,⁴⁰ and, secondly, following Aristotle, by receiving forms as species from individual material substances.

III

It is this *third* aspect of truth’s being in the human intellect which returns us to what we have described as the ‘aesthetic moment’ in Aquinas’s theory of knowledge. For when the human intellect receives into itself the species of the material substances it knows, it does not know them in the manner of an arraignment of inert facts. Rather, it must always *judge* or *discern* whether they are true to themselves.⁴¹ This means that even corresponding to finite objects is really only a corresponding to the Mind of God. In the first place, the mind must judge whether, for example, a tree is being true to itself, according to the mind’s divine inner light of illumination. By doing this, the mind

discerns or grasps an analogical proportion of things to God, and finds here a manifestation of the invisible in the visible. Thus, what it finds here is beauty which ‘pleases’ the sight, and delights the judgement.⁴² Here again, as with the ethical dimension of truth, one finds something very strange to the modern mind; for where the latter thinks of knowledge as an abasement of subjectivity before the inertly objective, Aquinas sustains, in knowing, a delicate balance between the objective and the subjective. If one requires a beautiful appearance in order to manifest the truth, then while it is indeed the objective that is registered, this registration is only made by the subjectively informed power of rightly desiring sight and judgement. There is, indeed, a certain ‘what’ which pleases, but this ‘what’ is only acknowledged as ‘pleasing’. Likewise, the invisible really does shine through the visible, and yet this is only apparent for a subtle power of discernment; it is obviously not present in the manner of a ‘fact’.

In the second place, one asks, what is it that we are knowing when we discern the treeness of a tree? For to know such a thing is not to know an isolatable fact or proposition; it seems more to be the knowing of a kind of manner or operation of life. But in knowing the treeness of a tree, we are knowing a great deal more besides. Since the tree only transmits treeness—indeed, only exists at all—as imitating the divine, what we receive in truth is a participation in the divine. To put this another way, in knowing a tree, we are catching it on its way back to God.⁴³ One could even say, given the foregoing, that for Aquinas, as he indeed affirms, knowledge is God’s perpetual return to Himself. This is not a movement in the sense of a discursive passage from known to unknown, but a kind of encircling, a movement out of Himself and returning to Himself, always already completed from the beginning of eternity. For God, in knowing His own essence, also knows other things in which He sees a likeness of Himself, since He grasps Himself as participable, and so He here returns to His essence.⁴⁴

To say that things are only really true in God would suggest that Aquinas is in this instance modifying Aristotle in the direction of Augustine and neoplatonism. However, Aquinas combines Aristotle with neoplatonism in an entirely new way. Following Aristotle, he sees even the human soul as fundamentally an animal soul, or a ‘form of forms’ which holds together a living material organism. He regards intellect as merely a *power* of the soul, rather than its essence.⁴⁵ It would seem then that in the most daring fashion, Aquinas sees the power of the mind as in some way ‘accidental’ to us, in the manner of an ‘oxymoronic’ proper accident (a category deployed by Aquinas and not Aristotle). Such a proper accident is an example of the second act of operation already referred to, which is beyond the first act of subsistence. Here again a seemingly semi-accidental second act can rise ontologically above the first act and even come to define a thing’s essence beyond its essence, in a super-essential way. Hence the human animal need not ‘think’, but only when it does so is it human, and the more it exercises intellect the more it is human.⁴⁶

And yet this suggestion that intellection is as it were a borrowed power might seem to downgrade the mind. But, if anything, the reverse is the case. For Aquinas here deploys the neoplatonic legacy and the metaphysics of participation to show that he regards our capacity for thought not as a ruefully humiliated endeavour, but as a partial receiving of divine intellection. Just as we only exist for Aquinas by participating in Being—which is also ‘accidental’ to our essence, since we do not ‘have’ to be, and yet super-essential, since Being alone gives us our determinate essence—so also we only exist humanly, that

is, according to a higher kind of life, exercising our intellects, by participating in Knowledge. Thus it seems that what is extra to us most defines us; here one must observe that intellection is akin to grace, because the most important part of us is in fact not part of our animal essence at all, but is super-added to us, properly and yet accidentally.

Thus, despite appearances to the contrary, Aquinas's theory of human knowledge does not make intellection an illusory or humiliated enterprise. Nonetheless, it seems there is a very great difference between our relation to knowledge and that of God, who knows by His very essence. Following Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine, Aquinas surpasses pagan neoplatonists who thought that the One and the Good lay beyond the subjective and psychic, ineffably above *nous*. For these thinkers, since the ultimate transcended mind, our mind could not analogically predicate anything concerning it. Aquinas, by contrast, incorporates Aristotle's idea of the Prime Mover as *nous*, but, unlike Aristotle, for whom *nous* was simply self-identical thought thinking itself, introduces a certain note of relationality and difference into God, even before elaborating a Trinitarian theology. Thus he speaks of God's knowledge of all the modes in which He can be participated (in this way, God knows the creation), something of which Aristotle does not speak. God knows things fully in knowing their ends, their perfection, which includes all that they are.

And yet, peculiarly, it is precisely this difference between God's manner of knowing and our own, which makes our manner of understanding, in a strange and entirely humble way, God-like. For God, as cause of knowing, is in Himself superabundantly knowing, and not simply an wholly inscrutable and unknown cause of our knowledge.⁴⁷ For this reason, we can know something—albeit very remotely—of God's knowing of Himself. That is to say, we can analogically predicate knowledge of God. Although our own imitations of God's knowledge are always marked by imperfection and diversity, even here what seems a deficiency in our modus in fact betokens its own remedy.⁴⁸ One might think, for example, that God's perfect knowledge of Himself would be in no way diverse, but would be oneness personified, as in the neoplatonic tradition upon which Aquinas draws when he characterizes God as Unity itself, One, and simple. Yet even God's Oneness contains within itself a superabundant plenitude which our very diversity—or very difference from God—seeks to express, albeit analogically. And it is paradoxically from within the idea of God's utterly unified and simple understanding of Himself, that one is pointed towards a kind of diversity. This is demonstrated by the question of whether there can be a perfect copy of God. Such a copy would, like God, have to be One.⁴⁹ Aquinas cites Pseudo-Dionysius to the effect that there can be such a perfect copy, even though, or even because, God is One, namely, the person of the Son who contains within himself all principles of diversity, since, for Aquinas, unlike later mediaeval theologians, God creates *ad extra* in and through the generation of the Son *ad intra*. Precisely because God is One, no otherness lies outside Him, and since this oneness cannot ever be diminished, it can be entirely shared amongst all this variety. Thus from the very idea of God's understanding Himself in a self-sufficient and unified act, one is directed towards the Trinitarian diversity.

IV

But there still remains the question of God's knowledge of singulars; this, surely, radically differentiates our manner of knowing from that of God.⁵⁰ For although God is pure Mind without remainder, and therefore a more spiritual kind of knower than human beings, nevertheless His knowledge is more concrete than ours. This is because when we know a thing, we cannot directly apprehend its material individuation, since, for Aquinas, following Aristotle, matter cannot enter the human intellect. The limits of one's intellect, as we know from Augustine's famous topos in the *Confessions* that to make is to know, keep pace with one's capacity to produce.⁵¹ So, just as we can produce a form in things, like a craftsman, so we can know forms (while, inversely, forms literally arrive in our minds as abstracted species). However, we cannot produce matter with our intellect, and so we cannot *know* matter, and hence cannot know singulars.⁵²

By contrast, Aquinas suggests that God is much more of a country bumpkin (*rusticus*) capable of a brutal direct unreflective intuition of cloddish earth, bleared and smeared with toil.⁵³ For God's mind, although immaterial, is (in a mysterious way) commensurate with matter, since God creates matter. Because he can *make* matter, so also he can *know* it. This does not mean that He receives matter into Himself; He does not receive forms or species either. Rather, He knows by the one species which is His essence, and knows things outside Himself entirely by His productive capacity—form and matter alike—for both are more fundamentally existence. At this point, one might note how very far Aquinas has moved from Aristotle.

It seems, then, that despite the graceful accident of our capacity to know beyond our natures, yet we cannot aspire to the noble estate of bumpkinhood where singulars can be espied and known in all their singularity—albeit in a mode beyond our finite contrast of singular with universal. Or can we? It seems that a token bumpkinhood is not denied us. Aquinas develops an account of how we do in a certain measure participate in the divine knowledge of singulars. God, as we have seen, knows singulars in time precisely because he is timelessly outside them and brings them to be from nothing. However, by stressing the nature of human knowledge as a ceaseless movement and a dynamic interaction between soul and body, Aquinas finds an adequation or approximation to the divine manner of knowing. He elaborates, beyond Aristotle, an account of knowledge as a relay system of signification. To explain this better, one must explicate the 'Aristotelian', 'Augustinian' and 'Thomist' phases in Aquinas's account of understanding.

In the 'Aristotelian' phase, the form departs from individual material substance, the hylomorphic form/matter compound, and enters on the path of abstraction. As it travels further along this path, the form becomes 'species' and is further abstracted as it passes through the 'senses' of the human observer, then into the imagination, to arrive at the ultimate Aristotelian destination of the Mind.

Here the species is received initially by the passive intellect, but then is articulated or expressed by the active intellect, the *intellectus agens*. Following Augustine, Aquinas describes the product of this expression as *verbum*, the inner word.⁵⁴

Here, in articulating the 'Augustinian' phase, Aquinas suggests, beyond Aristotle, that a concept does not just leave matter behind. For this reason he is *less* idealist than

Aristotle and moreover his greater realism draws on Platonic resources. The fundamental reason for this is theological. For Aristotle, the material element was simply inimical to understanding—it was still to do with irrational formless chaos. But for Aquinas (as for all post-Biblical monotheisms and ‘almost’ for the neoplatonists), matter is created by God, and therefore itself fully proceeds from Mind. Thus if our mind in order to understand must abstract from matter, this is a deficiency of understanding.

However, the Augustinian dimension compensates somewhat for this deficiency, because here the concept, as inner word, is like a sign. A sign points away from itself by means of its nonetheless essential mediation, back to what it represents. Thus Aquinas, like Augustine, speaks of all knowledge as intentional, as returning to concrete things that we cannot fully grasp. This concurs with the fusion of intellect as *intention* with desire, which returns us to things, encouraging us to learn more of them, since to intend something is also to desire to know more of the truth of the thing—this goal being regarded as a good. Thus in Aquinas, there is much more sense than with Aristotle, of knowledge as a never completed project.⁵⁵

The ‘Augustinian’ phase still does not explain, however, how we can have any inkling of singulars. For however much the sign points us back to the form/matter compound, we still cannot be sure that it exists, since matter cannot enter into the mind. Here Aquinas develops—perhaps in a very new way—a theory of the imagination, long before Kant. Just like Kant, in fact, he thinks that whenever we sense, we also *imagine* something, because imagination is the mysterious point of fusion of sense and intellect.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between sense and imagination. We are aware of sensing. But we are not normally aware of imagining, and even when we imagine something absent, we look through the transparency of this image towards the thing invoked, as if, says Aquinas, looking in a mirror.

Now because matter cannot get inside the mind, senses cannot provide the mind with awareness of singulars—rather, the senses have to be mediated by the imagination. Thus imaginary images of things here become an oblique mediating principle which provides a mysterious echo of material sensing in the intellect (or somewhere halfway between sense and intellect) and in this fashion we receive a notion of the singular and hence some awareness of the form/matter compound. Moreover, by virtue of the transparency of mediation, its presence in our intellect is mysteriously more than a fiction or figment. Because for Aquinas truth ‘corresponds’ not by copying but by a new analogical realization of something in the mind in an inscrutable ‘proportion’ to how it is in reality, the imagination can act creatively without fictional betrayal. Indeed, it *must* act creatively if it is to be ‘true’.

However, because we simply look through the imagination as if through a mirror and abstract the species from the imagination as from the senses in order to know, we can only be aware of the singular image via a reflexive return to the imagination; as when looking at something in a mirror one becomes aware of the mediating principle—the glass surface of the mirror itself. Here one looks through the image at the species, but reflexively one is aware of the image. This is not exactly a self-conscious reflection, because it accompanies *all* knowing. Hence, very oddly for us, Aquinas associates the concrete aspect of understanding with a reflexive operation. He also stresses that although our mind cannot know singulars, we know not just as mind but as a person and as a mind/body composite—and as such we *do*, in a way, know singulars. Of course, as a

proper bumpkin, God does not need to be subject to such complex phases, for He does not know discursively or by syllogism or dialectic.

All the same, we have seen that the act of intellection is accidental to us and yet defines our nature as human beings. And this has led us to investigate the possibility that our nature as human beings is paradoxically by definition *to exceed* our nature and enjoy further ‘accidental’ participations in the divine. We have seen, moreover, that this seems to be the case in several ways, but particularly in the exercise of our imagination which is the ecstatic principle by which our mind mysteriously overcomes the limits of its capacity to produce and hence know material singulars. In other ways, too, we have seen that those features which most differentiate us from God—such as our diversity—furnish us with the means by which we might analogically penetrate that difference. Thus here also, where it might seem that Aquinas stresses the difference and distance of human knowing, it turns out that we know by participation in divine knowledge; and moreover that this relation to the above is mediated by our turning to the material world below.

V

In conclusion to this chapter, we would like to consider one more aspect of God’s knowledge—as a self-expressive creative act—to see whether any further parity can be drawn even here with Aquinas’s presentation of human knowledge. For in the foregoing, there have been several intimations that human knowledge has a self-expressive or creative dimension; not only have we seen that knowledge involves an ‘aesthetic’ moment whereby one must judge the beauty of a particular proportion, but also that the practice of *imitation* or mimesis and the exercise of *imagination* is not merely a passive receiving, but rather one which gathers up images and modifies them.

But there is a third principle, namely, the dynamic movement or displacement of energy involved in knowledge (which contrasts to a more modern concept of knowledge as a static gaze or mirroring). Here Aquinas notes that Plato, and sometimes even Aristotle, was prepared to see knowledge as a kind of motion, and he cautiously concurs. Indeed, Aquinas gives several examples of a real procession in the mind: conclusions, he says, really proceed from principles; an actual conception really proceeds from habitual knowledge; our ideas about the essences of subordinate things proceed from ideas about the essences of higher things.⁵⁶ Even when the mind understands itself, it thinks of an expression, and not directly or reflexively of the mind. When the mind understands itself, it must proceed from itself, express itself, in an intellectual word. Moreover, this emanative expression, in contrast to Aristotle, transitively proceeds, and in some ways can be seen as craft-like, as a construction or internal operation of art, insofar as the procession of the word involves a development of thought that is originally constitutive of thought, in such a way that there is no original thought without such an expressive elaboration.⁵⁷

It is no accident, indeed, that the final and efficient cause—both end and archetype—of external expressions, described in *De Veritate* as the *verbum cordis*, should be seen not as a static ideal, but as akin to the interior shaping form of *ars* involved in all exterior artistic expression. Such an *ars* or *verbum* must itself come into being, by a kind of anterior creative supplementation. This suggests that in some way all human knowing is

to be seen as an artistic production, which again emphasizes that truth is regarded in ontological rather than epistemological terms, since it is in this way construed as an event rather than as a mirroring.⁵⁸

Moreover, this paradigm of knowledge as co-originally self-expressive, immediately points us to the Trinity, as Aquinas indicates, thereby suggesting a certain 'natural' intimation of this reality in God, despite his explicit confinement of the Trinity to revealed truth. This occurs in two ways: first, in the obvious sense of begetting a word in and through its own essential realization; and, secondly, in terms of the manner of emanation involved. This should be conceived in terms of the hierarchy of emanations described in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, where the higher the level of emanation, the more the procession or production is inwardly contained, in such a way that God, as the most perfect being, can emanate from Himself without leaving Himself.⁵⁹ Such a containment of emanation, one would think, would be reserved for God alone. And yet it seems that Aquinas's idea of the inner word in the human intellect in a certain way remotely approximates in its manner of procession to the inward emanation within God. For the mind can produce a word that is distinct from itself, and yet remains within itself; the mind *is* not these concepts (the inner words) and yet cannot *be* mind without its concepts.

What all this suggests is that correspondence in Aquinas's theory of knowledge means something far more nuanced than a mere mirroring of reality in thought. Rather, as we have seen, there is an intrinsic *proportio* or analogy between the mind's intrinsic drive towards truth, and the way things manifest themselves, which is their mode of being true. This *proportio* is assumed and experienced, but cannot be observed or empirically confirmed. It is assumed, because mind and things are both taken as proceeding from the divine creative mind, in such a way that the very source of things is dimly echoed in our minds which generate understanding. Yet it is also *experienced*, because the harmony between mind and things pre-established by God, is not a Leibnizian pre-establishment where no *real* relation between mind and things taken as windowless monads pertains. Rather, the proportion creatively ordered by God between mind and things really and dynamically flows between them, and in receiving this proportion, and actualizing it, we come to know.

If there can be correspondence of thought to beings, this is only because, more fundamentally, both beings and minds correspond to the divine *esse* and *mens* or intellect. Therefore correspondence, for Aquinas, is of what we know according to our finite modus, to God who is intrinsically far more knowable, and yet for us in His essence, utterly unknown. This means that rather than correspondence being guaranteed in its measuring of the given, as for modern notions of correspondence, it is guaranteed by its conformation to the divine source of the given. While to advance to this source is of course to advance in unknowing, it is only in terms of this unknowing, increased through faith, that we confirm even our ordinary knowing of finite things.

Moreover, this conformation to the unknown divine mind is far more emphatic in its claim than simply an analogical drawing-near or resemblance. It is an assimilation, an ontological impress which moulds or contrives the very forms of things; and all this happens, as it were, without our knowing it, without our contriving it, in the modern more pejorative sense of the word as 'forcing a shape', deceitful practice, invention or dissembling. One could perhaps say that correspondence in the modern sense of the word

fits far better these later meanings of contrivance, for it lays claim to grasp phenomena as they are in themselves, and not as they are insofar as they imitate God. So, in fact, what the mind corresponds to here is things *divided* from themselves, from their real ground in divine *esse*, and so to things forced to dissemble.⁶⁰ But what is ‘contrived’ or brought to pass according to Aquinas’s notion of fashioning or making-well, occurs transparently; as with the invisible mediations of beauty, we look through this ‘making’ without seeing it, even as we know beyond ourselves by means of it; we forget that *what* we know is *more* than we can possibly know. And, moreover, even when we are knowing ordinary temporal things, straining to be like bumpkins apprehending a lunar eclipse, even then, at such a moment of lowly endeavour, the motions of our intellect and of our will vastly exceed their capacity, and mould themselves into the idiom of the procession of the eternal Word from the Father, and that of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. Thus, just as for Aquinas, to correspond in knowing is to be conformed to the infinite unknown, so likewise our knowing of anything at all—however local—is in some measure an advance sight of the beatific vision, and union with the personal interplay of the Trinity.⁶¹