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Why Aquinas Stopped Commenting on Boethius's *De Trinitate*

Over the last decade, Aquinas's commentaries on the two works of Boethius, *De Trinitate* and *De Hebdomadibus*, has prompted worries among scholars. The central question is why Aquinas had to comment upon these works of Boethius nearly seven hundred years after the death of Boethius. Having made my submission in the ongoing debate,[1] I was yet confronted with another problem of why Aquinas did not continue the commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*. Note that Aquinas's commentary stops at question six, article four without any explanation as to why, and this is before the point in the text where Boethius gets to the heart of the subject matter. This question sounds unlikely and, as such, I do not think it can be shown answered directly from the texts. Nevertheless, I believe that from the absence of a separate text on Aquinas's reason for not continuing with the treatise of Boethius one may not conclude that such reasons do not exist. That such a conclusion would be premature can be clarified by comparison with the debate on the reasons behind his two commentaries on Boethius. Like the former, Aquinas produces no account for his reasons, but the intentions of changing the structural method of argument and the bid to establish the

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[1] See Faustinus Ugwuanyi, "Aquinas' Commentaries on Boethius' Treatises: A Modification or Interpretation?" *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* 10, no. 1 (2019): 33–51.

doctrine of creation into metaphysics have been attributed to him, although still under debate since the studies of Gilson, Duhem, and Kurdziałek.[2] This paper, therefore, is an attempt to reflect upon the question of why Aquinas resigns from further commenting on the Trinitarian work of Boethius.

The Justification and Background Study of the Concept of the Trinity

The Trinitarian doctrine has for centuries been a puzzle and the subject of discussion by scholars of all sorts of intellectual views. Scholars like Immanuel Kant, Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson did not hesitate to express their stands on the inadmissibility of the teaching of this doctrine. Nevertheless, as Richard of Saint Victor observes, the dogma of the Trinity is the central doctrine of the Christian faith, and its consequences present radical ontological effects.[3] This doctrine develops from the need of the Church to account for Christ's unity with the Father. The doctrine also presents justification as an objective act of God's grace.[4] Gilles Emery shows in his work how the avoidance of

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[2] See Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952); Pierre Duhem, *Le Système du Monde; Histoire des doctrines Cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, vol. 5 (Paris: Librairie Scientifique A. Hermann et Fils, 1917); Agnieszka Kijewska, "Ksiądz Profesor Marian Kurdziałek – promotor neoplatonizmu boecjańskiego [Rev. Prof. Marian Kurdziałek – Promoter of the Notion of Boethian Neoplatonism]," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 60, no. 3 (2012): 35–51.

[3] See Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, trans. and comm. Ruben Angelici (Eugene: Cascade Book, 2011), 8.

[4] If the Son, who becomes incarnate, is not God himself—one with the Father—then he cannot carry a vicarious redemption for humanity. Indeed, if the Son does not share the very same substance of the Father, then he merely becomes another enlightened creature, who has happened to achieve goodness. Salvation, therefore, would be the product of human works of righteousness, obtained by an imitation of the work of Christ. Christ would become humanity's prophet without being humanity's representative redeemer, failing to carry humanity with himself. The reverse of this teaching reflects the Arian theology against which scholars like Athanasius, Boethius and Aquinas criticized (See

Arianism and Sabellianism, alongside the reflection on Scriptures, constrained Aquinas to reflect on the distinctions between the Persons of the Trinity "as arising from actions immanent to the Trinity and not matters of the workings ('economy') of God towards the world in creation and salvation."[5]

The study of the existence of God and the Trinity no doubt is related to the inquiry about the origin of the universe and the nature of the First Cause. This study which proceeded right from the time of the Ionian philosophers through the Middle Ages has continued to the present era of computing science. Although the context of discovery of the concept of the existence of God was the preserve of theology in the Middle Ages, its justification cannot be exclusively limited to theology or the Scriptures. The concept of the unmoved mover advanced by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* is related to the concept of God's existence.[6] Therefore, the justification of this concept lies within the bounds of philosophy as well as theology. On the contrary, concepts like the truth of the Trinity or *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) find their origin in the Christian Scriptures alone. Thus, the unity and trinity of God is the central mystery of the Christian faith. Up till now, there are still diverse opinions as to the relationship between these two sources of knowledge and the justification of their claims. This investigation leads as well to the problem of faith and reason. The leading theologians and philosophers of the thirteenth century, who were all connected to the University of Paris, played prominent roles in defense of the Church's

Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* [London: Bles, 1944], III, 14–17).

[5] David Braine, "Gilles Emery OP, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas . . .*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 (February 2011): 120.

[6] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, L, Chapter VI–X: 1071b 33–1074b 18–19, in Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vols. 17, 18, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1933, 1989). Available online— see the section *References* for details.

doctrine and the reconciliation of faith and reason. The discussion further gave rise to other problems which Aquinas treated in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*: Whether some theological truths could be explained philosophically?[7]

Furthermore, one of the oldest properly Trinitarian models developed in the Christian tradition was presented by Athanasius in his theology. According to Athanasius, the Trinity itself cannot be explained outside the *ousia* (being) of God, and that *ousia* is one. The perichoretic relationship—the mutual indwelling of the divine persons—then, is based on the divine *ousia*, which also becomes the source and origin of the procession of the Son and the Spirit. The main Trinitarian models of West and East that have had a permanent impact on theological speculations are to be found in the accomplishments of Augustine—Boethius and the Cappadocian fathers.[8]

Augustine's understanding of the Trinity can ultimately be summarized by saying that God is three persons *ad intra*, and one essence *ad extra*, utterly one in will and action.[9] Augustine and Boethius both followed an expository syllogism format that: This divine essence is God the Son. This divine essence is God the Father. Therefore, God the Father is God the Son. The Greek model tried to study the Trinity's activities and involvement with creation. God's essence (*ousia*), the "ineffable being of God in Godself," started to be contrasted with God's energy (*energeia* or *dynamis*), "the characteristic activity of God in relation to creation."[10] On the contrary, the Boethian Latin tradition

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[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence Part I and II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), ch. III, q. 1.

[8] See Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*.

[9] See Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur W. Haddan (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1873), II.10.18.

[10] Duncan Reid, *Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodox and Western Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 26.

concentrated more on God's simplicity and unity *ad extra*, while the difference between God and creation was taken for granted.[11] The Latin emphasis on God's unity later received its most elaborate formulation in the thirteenth century in the works of Aquinas in his discussion on the relationship between essence and existence.[12]

The Significance of Boethius's *De Trinitate*

The philosophical demonstration of the truth of the existence of God and the Trinity was important for Aquinas for so many reasons. First, Augustine had earlier argued in the fifth century that "truth is not entirely to be looked for from the senses."[13] Thus, for Augustine, the truth about God's existence and the Trinity are not topics for philosophical discussions. Here, Augustine introduces the concept of illumination at the highest level of theological cognition through which the intellect cognizes the unchangeable truth. Augustine proposes a divine intervention in the knowledge of divine things. On the contrary, Aquinas, a realist philosopher, was convinced that whatever we believe in should

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[11] See *ibid*., 21.

[12] See Giovanni Reale and Antiseri Dario, *Il Pensiero Occidentale dalle Origini ad Oggi*, vol. 1 (Brescia: La Scuola, 1995), 423–425, 427–428.

[13] In response to Augustine's claim, Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* recalls Aristotle's agent intellect: "From those words of Augustine, we are given to understand that truth is not entirely to be looked for from the senses. For we require the light of agent intellect, through which we unchangeably cognize the truth in changeable things, and we distinguish the things themselves from the likeness of things." Here, Aquinas replaces Augustine's theory of illumination by introducing an innate Aristotelian active power. There was a shift in the framework of this concept from Augustinian to Aristotelian. Although Aquinas accepts Augustine's divine intervention in the knowledge of divine things, he, however, rejects some theories of Augustine's divine illumination. Thus, he denies the possibility of the human mind having a divine idea as an object of its cognition in this life and that the senses are not necessary in the case of divine illumination (Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on Human Nature, Summa Theologiae 1a 75-89*, trans. Robert Pasnau [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002], q. 84, a. 6: c. 90–95 and rep. ad 1; q. 88, a. 1, c. 36–159).

have a rational understanding. His knowledge of the historical development of the truths of God strengthened his conviction not only on the relationship between reason and faith but also on the possibility of a rational explanation of the existence of God and perhaps the Trinity. No doubt, Boethius's *De Trinitate*, which follows the path of philosophy and bears on the truth of the existence of God and the Trinity, provided an opportunity for Aquinas to continue this discussion in the thirteenth century.

Furthermore, note that before Aquinas's novelty, the Neo-Platonist's view of reality was always defined by its affiliation and association. In this way, all levels of realities were related through various mediations. According to Albertson, "Platonist traditions have always relied axiomatically on the necessity of such mediations shuttling between God and the world."[14] This vision of reality seen as interwoven and interrelated was the interest of philosophers, poets, and scientists mostly, of the twelfth century. And

> the Platonist sources studied within the new schools not only encouraged and shaped this line of thought, but also advanced potential candidates to fill such mediating roles whether it was nature, seminal reasons, providence, love, number, or Plato's *anima mundi*.[15]

This doctrine of association explains how the human intellect can come to the knowledge of God, that is, discovering the truth of the Trinity. The above doctrines have two implications. The first is that the knowledge of the Trinity is possible only at the level of theological abstraction, and second, it is relational. In this way, theological abstraction becomes the highest level of philosophical investigation. Note that Boe-

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[14] David Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies: Nicholas of Cusa and the Legacy of Thierry of Chartres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99.
[15] *Ibid.*

thius formulated his *De Trinitate* along this vision of Neo-Platonism.[16] This treatise created a method that beautifully highlighted the Neo-Platonic method of transcending from physics, through mathematics, to theology. This was the structure of theoretical philosophy accompanied by a deductive methodology.[17] There is no gainsaying that Boethius's *De Trinitate* provided an opportunity for Aquinas's novelty which separated philosophy from theology and introduced the rational cognitive approach to the knowledge of God which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Another major significance of Boethius's *De Trinitate* as Douglas Hall argues is that this treatise provided the background for Aquinas's re-emergence of the Trinitarian discussion[18] which, according to David Albertson, became an important topic alongside the discussion of Incarnation two generations after the Council of Nicaea.[19] Note that

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[16] "To be something, it participates in something else. Hence that which exists participates in absolute Being through the fact that it exists, but it exists in order to participate in something else." We find a similar sentence in Boethius's *De Trinitate* where he made a distinction between *esse* and *id quod est* as principles of identity and relationship. This explanation shows how the Divine Form (*Essendi Forma*) mirrors itself in its creatures as *sub forma* through Augustine's *Sapientia* (*Logos*) which is also "the divine Word, the Wisdom equal to the eternal father who leads reason to God." Unlike the Neo-Platonist's view of the relationship of beings, Aquinas's *esse-essence* theory redefines the former's view by altering the place of *esse* and *id quod est* and introducing a theology that is entirely independent of rational cognition and relation. But on the contrary, Aquinas's new vision as informed by his classical tradition rejects this doctrine and begins its inquiry from the senses. (See Boethius, "De Hebdomadibus," in *The Theological Tractates*, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand [London: William Heinemann, 1968], 14–17 and 40–45; Boethius, "De Trinitate," II, in *The Theological Tractates*, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand [London: William Heinemann, 1968], 30–35; Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies*, 72).

[17] See Joseph W. Koterski, "Foreword," in Siobhan Nash-Marshall, *Participation and the Good: A Study in Boethian Metaphysics* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing, 2000), x.

[18] See Douglas C. Hall, *The Trinity: An Analysis of St. Thomas Aquinas' "Expositio" of the "De Trinitate" of Boethius* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 9.

[19] See Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies*, 71.

Boethius's *Opuscula Sacra* were very influential texts in the twelfth century. But even before then, they were the basis of philosophical and theological arguments and also featured prominently in the controversy between Gottschalk and Hincmar of Rheims on the theology of the Trinity.[20] Boethius's *De Trinitate* played a vital role in the history of the Church apart from its philosophical influence. It is no surprise, therefore, that the discussion of the Trinity which began initially with the problem of mathematical mediation and transmitted to the scholars of Chartres in the twelfth century became a major topic for Aquinas in the thirteenth century.[21] This problem, especially as featured in the work of

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[20] See John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 170.

[21] The Trinitarian debate that eventually became a heated topic in the medieval period *ab initio* started with Plato's and Aristotle's discussion on mediation. In the *Timaeus* Plato presents an extensive account of the formation of the universe (*kosmos*), its order and beauty. The universe according to him is the product of rational, purposive, and beneficent agency. It is the handiwork of a divine craftsman, the *Demiurge* which is neither a divine intelligence nor a personal ruler or the Christian creator. The beautiful orderliness of the universe does not only manifest the intellect but also serves as a model for rational souls to understand and emulate. For Plato, the whole concept of the Demiurge and its mediation is apprehended by the understanding, not by the senses. Such understanding reinstates the souls to their original state of excellence which was lost during their embodiment. The cosmology of the *Timaeus*, however, was later rejected by Aristotle on the ground that it requires not only the beginning of the universe (*nous*) in time but also the beginning of time itself. This discussion continued after Plato's death with the leaders of the Academy, Speusippus (Plato's nephew) and Xenocrates, who tried to reconcile their master's written doctrine of forms with his latter mediating role of mathematics. However, the discussion lost its attention in the New Academy for almost two centuries but later resurfaced through Eudorus and Moderatus of Gades. These two scholars attempted to reconcile the Platonism of Speusippus and Xenocrates with the Pythagorean doctrines of Philolaus and Archytas concerning the principle of the One and the Dyad. This tradition gave rise to the Neopythagorean Platonism that influenced Plotinus in the third century. Eudorus sought a reconciliation of the two traditions by teaching that "the Supreme One stood above two lesser principles: a second One or Monad (representing form) and the indefinite dyad (representing matter)." This henological theology initiated by Eudorus was later continued by Plotinus and Proclus, down to Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa. This argument continued into the medieval period through the great works and masters like Macrobius, Hermetic texts, Calcidius's *Timaeus*, and Boethius. The height of this controversy could be traced down to the second through the sixth centuries DC, and it

Boethius, enabled Aquinas to achieve his teaching on the question of *Method* and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Aquinas's Major Teachings in the Commentary of Boethius

In this commentary, Aquinas goes forth to demonstrate how we could know the Divine Truth and the truth of the existence of God philosophically. There was no doubt also that he had in mind to demonstrate, like Boethius, the truth of the existence of the Trinity in the same manner. In other words, Aquinas was initially looking for tools in Boethius's *De Trinitate* to give a rational explanation of the truth of the Trinity. The whole of chapter one to the sixth chapter of his commentary to Boethius was devoted to the knowledge of the truth of God as God. In the introduction, Aquinas teaches that the natural intuition of the human mind cannot fix its gaze in the prime light of First Truth in which all things are easily knowable because the weight of a corruptible body burdens it. As a result, the progress of its natural manner of cognition advances from the things that are known to those that are unknown

was these varied opinions that formed the sources for the twelfth century Christian Platonists and finally gave rise to the Trinitarian discussion. Boethius' Theological treatises systematically introduced a division between mathematical and theological ideas; hence the logic of Christian theologies of Trinity and Incarnation came to be separated from the Nicomachean philosophies of One and number. The themes were treated from two utterly irreconcilable points of view. Having identified Nicomachus's fourfold mathematical science as the *quadrivium*, he isolated this discussion which borders around the Neo-Pythagorean henology and its mystical implications from his *Theological Tractates* and the *Consolatio*. For further reading see Plato, *Timaeus*, 28a6, in *The Dialogues of Plato and the Seventh Letter*, trans. Benjamin Jowett and J. Harward (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 447; Aristotle, *Physics* VIII: 251b14–26, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 420; Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies*, 35–98.

and prior; from creature to God.[22] Therefore, philosophers, who follow along the way of natural cognition, place knowledge about created things before knowledge about divine things, that is, natural science before metaphysic. Theologians, on the other hand, proceed in the reverse order, so that study of the Creator comes before that of creatures.[23] In this way, Aquinas distinguishes the two methods of cognition.

The above distinction was explained further in chapter six of *De Trinitate.* In this chapter, Aquinas analyzes Boethius's statement that "physics proceeds *rationabiliter*, mathematics *disciplinaliter* and theology *intellectualiter*."[24] In so doing he examines the different methods in respect/reference to the theoretical sciences they consider. In his discussion of the method of divine science, Aquinas made a significant distinction between physics and the divine science using the difference between *intellectus* and *ratio*.[25] *Ratio* is the method of knowing which is common to every human being.[26] For Aquinas, "it pertains to human nature to use reason in order to know the truth."[27] This mode of knowing is natural to man and thus, defines him, not as an entirely spiritual being but a rational animal. In chapter six, article one of *De Trinitate* Aquinas identifies two features of this rational mode of knowing. The first characteristic is that it relies on sensible things for its intellective knowledge, that is, its knowledge is derived from sense-experience. Thus, "the human soul is marked by receptivity and by potentiality."[28]

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[22] See Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boethium* De Trinitate, Q. 1–4, trans. Rose E. Brennan (London: Herder Books, 1946), and Q. 5–6, trans. Armand Mauer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1953). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

[23] See *ibid*.

[24] Boethius, "De Trinitate," II, c. 15–20.

[25] See Aquinas, *Super Boethium* De Trinitate, q. 6, a. 1, Rep.

[26] See *ibid*.

[27] *Ibid*.

[28] *Ibid*.

The second feature is the soul's progression in its method of inquiry. The most compelling evidence is the soul's inquiry from the knowledge of effect to its cause. Thus, "the rational mode of knowing is discursive."[29] Having separated the study of philosophy from theology as against the Neoplatonist axiomatic ascension, and their various means of investigations, Aquinas demonstrated in an entirely new vision a credible starting point for every scientific inquiry—how the mind should progress from things that are posterior to the knowledge of the First Truth. His separation of philosophy from theology as independent disciplines changed the former's entire vision of interconnection in the broadest sense and also demonstrated the power of the human mind in the cognition of Truth.

Having established the two primary ways of investigating the truth of the existence of God, Aquinas goes further to make a distinction between knowing what God is and knowing that God is.[30] This distinction points to the two ways philosophy comes to the knowledge of God. The first is the way of the *Quinque viae* (the Five Ways) which was discussed extensively in his *Summa Theologiae*[31] and the second from the knowledge of who God is. The second approach, which is the cognition of the essence of God, helps us to know God as God but not as a Trinity. This cognition arrives at God's essence through causality, negation, eminence and analogy. Analogy on its part is divided into attributive analogy, propositional analogy and metaphysical analogy. These ways are not the different ways to God through creatures, but rather the consecutive stages in a rational path to God. Aquinas emphasizes in his *Summa Theologiae* that the proposition that God exists is not self-evident in itself because its subject and predicate are identical

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[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*, q. 1, a. 2, Rep.

[31] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Chicago: William Benton Publisher, 1952).

and that God's effects are enough to prove the existence of God, even if they are not enough to help us comprehend what he is. This view follows from the logic that any effect that is better known to us than its cause can demonstrate that its cause exists since effects are dependent on their causes and can only occur if their causes already exist.[32] The above claim contrasts Anselm's conviction that human beings can only know the existence of God rationally, as exemplified in his ontological proof. Aquinas, on the contrary, objects to the former's claim by proffering that human beings can know God's existence through the effects of God's creation. There is no doubt that among the reasons why Aquinas undertook the project of the "five ways" was to demonstrate the power of the human mind to prove the existence of God.

Another key point is that in his doctrine of the procession, Aquinas places inanimate bodies at the lowest place; to be followed by plants whose emanation starts from what is within to the point of being converted into the seed. Beyond the life of plants comes the sensitive soul, found in animals. The sensitive soul is followed by "the supreme and perfect grade of life which is in the intellect, for the intellect reflects upon itself, and the intellect can understand itself."[33] A perfect intellectual life belongs to the angels while God is the ultimate perfection of life.[34] He believes that we cannot understand divine generation in the way emanation appears in the sensitive soul. According to his explanation,

> something which was in the plant or the animal is separated from it for the generation of one like it in species, and this, at the term of generation, is entirely outside the generator. But, since God is

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[32] See *ibid*., I, q. 2, a. 1–3, Rep.

[33] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O'Neil (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 80–82 (n. 5, ch. 11).

[34] See *ibid*., 81–82 (n. 5–7, ch. 11).

indivisible, nothing can be separated from Him. The very Son begotten by the Father is not outside the Father, but in Him.[35]

He sees the Holy Spirit as generated from the love of God the Father and the Son. These three persons of the Trinity are neither parts nor aspects of God, but are each in themselves, God.[36] For Aquinas, the procession in God entails both a distinction and a genuine relation. Thus, distinction in this sense has to be established only within the context of its relation, since it is "only in the category of relation do we find terms which express what is conceptual and not real."[37] To avoid thinking that God the Son and the Holy Spirit came into existence through God the Father, Aquinas uses the term "principle" to mean "that from which something proceeds."[38] In this way, God the Father could be described as the principle of the Son and the Holy Spirit. To identify the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, Aquinas further employs the traditional term "person" (*persona*),[39] which he defines as "that which is most perfect in the whole of nature, namely what subsists in a rational nature."[40] At this point, he refers to Boethius's definition of person as "an individual substance of a rational nature."[41] Thus, for him, the phrase "divine person" signifies "relation as something subsisting."[42]

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[35] *Ibid.*, 82 (n. 8, ch. 11).

[36] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 27, a. 1, in Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99.

[37] *Ibid.*, q. 28, a. 1, c. 1.

[38] *Ibid.*, q. 33, a. 1, c. 1–3.

[39] *Ibid.*, q. 29, a. 1, c. 3.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.*, q. 29, a. 1, c. 1.

[42] *Ibid.*, q. 29, a. 1, c. 4.

Reasons for Stopping the Discussion with Boethius

Matthew Kostelecky also thinks that one cannot be certain as to why Aquinas did not complete his discussion of Boethius's commentary on the Trinity. What is certain is that Aquinas begins the *Summa Contra Gentiles* either shortly after discontinuing the commentary on Boethius or in the later stages of its incomplete composition and that there are some startling similarities between structural aspects of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and how Aquinas casts aspects of Boethius's oeuvre. Again, Aquinas himself was open to amending his work as necessary and thereby breaking some new ground that would yield a transformation of his early statements about Boethius's teaching and the various methods of pursuing knowledge of the Trinity that later formed the framework of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Therefore, there is the possibility of Aquinas abandoning his pursuit of the methodological investigation of Boethius's commentary on the Trinity having seen a way forward into his new project of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.[43]

Other indications of why Aquinas stopped commenting on Boethius's *De Trinitate* could be traced from Aquinas's project in his philosophical and theological discourses. This project centers more on the distinction between philosophy and theology. The implication of this project is spelt out mainly in the *Method* and the human knowledge of God. Aquinas had in mind to investigate the possibility of using the human intellect to know the truth of the existence of God and the Trinity. He wanted to find philosophical justification for the truth of these doctrines. In the commentary of Boethius and in his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas had earlier attempted the demonstration of the rela-

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[43] See Matthew Kostelecky, "Thomas Aquinas' Commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate* and the Structure of the *Summa contra gentiles*," *Religious Studies and Theology* 35, no.1 (2016): 145–162.

tions in the Trinity.[44] Note that although the inquiry on the notion of relation received its coherence in the scholastic period, the idea of relation itself was first philosophically analyzed by Aristotle. Lucian Turcescu in his work gave some of the central ideas on relation Aquinas borrowed from Aristotle.[45] According to Hans Meyer, the Aristotelian understanding of relation lays at the background of Aquinas's teaching that "relation depends for its being not only on the existence of its subject but also on the existence of something besides this subject."[46] Aquinas's concept of relation characterizes his proofs of God's existence and moves into an understanding of the truth of the Trinity. A whole section of the first part of his *Summa Theologiae* from question twenty-seven to forty-three was devoted to the discussion on the Trinity. According to his teaching, the relation signified by the term "the same" is a logical relation and the divine processions are in the identity of the same nature; these relations, according to the divine processions are necessarily real relations.[47] It was, therefore, not a surprise that Aquinas wanted to follow this pattern of argument to prove the existence of the Holy Trinity in his commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*.

In the previous chapter, Aquinas was able to demonstrate the rational proof of God's existence from the principle of causality.[48] But in the case of the truth of the Trinity, the situation seems difficult since the truth of the existence of the Trinity leaves no known effect. Thus, the principle of causality cannot be applied, since the progress of the natural human manner of cognition advances from the things that are

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[44] See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 28.

[45] See Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30–35.

[46] Hans Meyer, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fredric Eckhoff (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book, Co., 1954), 114.

[47] Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 28, a. 1, Rep.

[48] See ibid., I, q. 2, a. 1–3, Rep.

known to those that are unknown and prior.[49] Aquinas also finds it
difficult to demonstrate the truth of the Trinity using reason alone, since
a philosophical demonstration must follow along the way of natural
cognition by placing knowledge about created things before knowledge
about divine things. This difficulty also is seen in the area of the human
soul which must investigate from the knowledge of effect to its cause.[50]

Aquinas further realizes the difficulty of his project in the course
of distinguishing between metaphysics and the theology of the scrip-
tures, in other words, revelation. He teaches that divine things could be
studied in two ways since they are principles of all things and at the
same time are complete natures in themselves. Thus, they could be
studied "first, insofar as they are the common principles of all things,
and second, in so far as they are beings in their own right."[51] However,
he acknowledges that although these first principles are evident in them-
selves, that the light of our human intellect can only reach this divine
knowledge to the extent that their effects reveal themselves to us.[52]
They are, therefore, according to him, "the objects of the science that
investigate what is common to all beings, which has for its subject
being as being. The philosophers call this divine science."[53] He further
argues that divine things could be studied not from their effects but as
they reveal themselves. They are, therefore, known and studied as they
subsist in themselves.[54] In this way, Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of
theology: philosophical theology, otherwise called metaphysics, and the
theology taught in sacred scripture. According to him, being as such
rather than the divine is the subject of the philosophical theology,

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[49] See Aquinas, *Super Boethium* De Trinitate, q. 2, a. 2, Rep.

[50] See *ibid*.

[51] *Ibid*., q. 5, a. 4, Rep.

[52] See *ibid*.

[53] *Ibid*.

[54] See *ibid*.

although the divine is its principle. But the divine and its investigation is the subject of the theology of sacred scripture.[55] Following the distinction Aquinas made between metaphysics and theology, metaphysics in the thirteenth-century came to acquire a new term, "ontology." But unfortunately, as Aertsen observes, "this modern phrase . . . does not express the fact that for Thomas metaphysics also includes the study of the divine."[56] Also, Aquinas did not hesitate in his commentary to make a distinction between two kinds of commonness: "first, by predication, as when I say that form is common to all forms because it is predicated of all; second, by causality, as we say that the sun, which is numerically one, is the principle of all things subject to generation."[57] Therefore, for Aquinas, God could be studied in metaphysics to the extent that He is the universal cause of being.[58] According to Aertsen,

> [T]he "highest intelligibles," which first philosophy considers, are of three sorts: (i) the first causes; (ii) what is most universal, such as being and that which is consequent upon being; and (iii) that which is altogether separate from matter.[59]

Note that Aquinas also rejects the claim of some Platonists who believe that God is the first object of the human mind. For them, "that in which all other things are cognized, and through which we judge other things, is cognized first by us—as light is, by the eye, and first principles, by the intellect."[60] This conviction is also found in the tenth Book of Augustine's *De Trinitate* and *De Vera Religione*.[61] Aquinas, however, rejects this position on the ground that to know God through

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[55] See *ibid*.

[56] Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden–New York–Köln: E. J. Brill, 1996), 123.

[57] Aquinas, *Super Boethium* De Trinitate, q. 5, a. 4, Rep.

[58] See *ibid*.

[59] Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, 129.

[60] Aquinas, *The Treatise on Human Nature*, q. 88, a. 3.1, c. 2–7 (202).

[61] See *ibid*.

His essence would amount to the blessedness of every individual be-
ing.[62] He does not believe that God and other separate substances can
be the first objects of our intellection. Instead, they can be understood
only from other things.[63] Thus, our natural cognition cannot know any-
thing about God except through His effects. It, therefore, follows that

> the existence of a Trinity of persons, however, cannot be per-
> ceived from a consideration of divine causality, since causality is
> common to the whole Trinity. Nor can it be known from His
> lacking any imperfection. Therefore in no way can it be demon-
> stratively proved that God is three and one.[64]

Aquinas believes that

> the truth that God is three and one is altogether a matter of faith;
> and in no way can it be demonstratively proved. For, although
> certain reasons can be found (by way of demonstration *ad hoc*),
> they are not necessary, or even very probable except to one who
> believes it.[65]

From the established analysis, it seems safe to conclude that A-
quinas had to resign from further commenting on Boethius's *De Trini-
tate* because the treatise could not afford him a further means to dem-
onstrate how the human intellect, in strict adherence to the procedure
outlined by Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics*, can begin from an ef-
fect better known to us, and proceeds through a finite series, to an abso-
lute truth of the existence of the Trinity.[66] Having realized this difficul-
ty, Aquinas finally concludes that one could not reasonably come to
know the existence of the Trinity. Note that Boethius in this treatise
tries to prove the existence of the truth of the Trinity using philosophy,

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[62] See Aquinas, *Super Boethium* De Trinitate, q. 1, a. 3, Rep.

[63] See *ibid*.

[64] *Ibid*., q. 1, a. 4, Rep.

[65] *Ibid*.

[66] See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 3, in corp.

which Aquinas later denied to be possible. Aquinas further concludes that although revelation can give us knowledge about the nature of the Trinity as one God, it cannot give us the exact knowledge of the plurality within God.[67] His final account presents the view that the sole source of our knowledge of the Trinity is revelation.

Conclusion

As stated earlier in this paper, the reason why Aquinas stopped commenting on Boethius's *De Trinitate* cannot directly be proven from the text since he left no account for such reason. But what is certain is that Aquinas indicated interest to continue with this commentary.[68] The inquiry, therefore, is still open to investigation. However, in this paper, I have tried to show that Aquinas, a renowned philosopher and theologian of the thirteenth century (who was convinced that the classical understanding of science developed in the Aristotelian tradition should form the background of every rational inquiry), decided to stop commenting upon the Trinitarian text of Boethius because this treatise could not afford him the means of demonstrating the existence of the Trinity. He finally came to a more refined realization of the proper role of revealed theology. He, therefore, concludes that although rational explanations could be given in terms of proof of God's existence, one cannot come to the knowledge of the truth of the existence of the Trinity by reason alone. He also insists that although we cannot prove the doctrine of the existence of the Trinity through philosophical demonstration, we can, however, show that this doctrine and other doctrines known through the light of faith are not contradictory. And this was what he set out to do in his treatment of the Trinity. The knowledge of the Trinity belongs to revelation. And unfortunately, Boethius's *De Trinitate*, whose back-

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[67] See *ibid*., q. 29, a. 1, c. 4.

[68] Aquinas, *Super Boethium* De Trinitate, q. 6, a. 3, Rep.

ground inquiry was set upon philosophy, could not be stretched beyond its scope.

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Why Aquinas Stopped Commenting on Boethius's *De Trinitate*

SUMMARY

The article is an attempt to answer the question of why Aquinas stops his commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate* at question six, article four, whereas this is before the point in the treatise where Boethius gets to the heart of the subject matter. The author shows that Aquinas (1) decides to do so because the treatise cannot afford him the means of demonstrating the existence of the Trinity, (2) holds that, although rational explanations could be given in terms of proof of God's existence, one cannot come to the knowledge of the truth of the existence of the Trinity by reason alone, and (3) concludes that, although we cannot prove the doctrine of the existence of the Trinity through philosophical demonstration, we can, however, show that this doctrine and other doctrines known through the light of faith are not contradictory.

KEYWORDS

Aquinas, Boethius, *De Trinitate*, Trinity, Neoplatonism.

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