

## 10: Knowledge

In the previous lecture, we began our examination of human nature in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Having previously examined the basics of his ethics and metaphysics, we then explored the concept of free will. Aquinas's conception of free will is contrary to causal determinism, and also contrary to libertarian models of free will based upon the principle of alternative possibilities. Now we are shifting to Thomas Aquinas's understanding of knowledge.

**I. Knowledge and Classical Skepticism:** Contemporary philosophy about knowledge concerns two primary questions: The first question is whether or not we do (or even can) know anything, or whether the sense of having knowledge is delusional. Classical (and contemporary) skepticism regards the idea that we can truly "know" anything as suspect. We are limited by our finite, possibly faulty perceptions, and we cannot come to a place of certainty (we could be dreaming after all). The second concern is what precisely the nature of knowledge is. What is knowledge? It is a true belief? What distinguishes knowledge from other related categories? Thomas Aquinas takes knowledge and the human's ability to obtain knowledge seriously. Now we must look at what makes this possible.

**II. Basic Assumptions:** To understand Thomas Aquinas's epistemology (the study of knowledge and how we know things), we must examine the fundamental assumptions that he builds upon to reach his conclusion. Aquinas assumes that there is in fact something for us to know - that is to say that there is an external world separate from our perception of the world; there is a way things "really are."

Aquinas takes seriously the passage in Genesis wherein God creates people in God's image. God has knowledge, and it is central to the idea that we are created in the image and likeness of God. *The Creation of Eve* by William Blake, 1822  
We too are knowers, able to understand ourselves, the world around us, and the world's creator. We can have knowledge because we were designed to attain the truth.

Where the skeptics went wrong is that there is no way outside of human reason to call into question human reason. The skeptics can make a compelling argument that we cannot trust human cognizance to be a true foundation for knowledge, but that very argumentation is built on human reason, which cannot be divorced from itself to check itself. The argument is ultimately circular. We cannot prove one way or the other the reliability of our cognitive faculties. It is important to note here that Aquinas does not and cannot prove our cognitive capabilities reliable for above same mentioned reasons that skeptics cannot argue in a non-circular manner

against it. Rather, the Christian worldview can give an internally consistent and principled explanation of why our cognitive capacities are reliable. We now have Thomas Aquinas's answer to the first question about knowledge, in.

**III. What Is Knowledge?** Thomas Aquinas holds that when the human cognitive capacities of sense and intellect are functioning properly, the result is knowledge, perceptual or intellectual. Our cognitive capacities were designed by God for the acquisition of knowledge. If and when our capacities are functioning properly as they are designed to work, in the environment for which they were designed to work, they are reliable and yield knowledge.

It is possible to generate scenarios where one or both of those caveats are not met, and in such circumstances the result would not be knowledge. Generally, however, our cognitive capacities are reliable. Again, as a skeptic would point out, this is not a proof. Then again, a skeptic cannot prove anything fundamentally either. We must ultimately trust our cognitive capacities and the God who designed them.

Following in Aristotle's footsteps, Aquinas list five forms of knowledge. The first two are practical, the later three are theoretical. They are as follows: Prudence: is when one is able to reason out in a situation what is needed in order to act well. Technical knowledge: is when one is able to make things in a good way (e.g., handyman fixing things). Wisdom: is a matter of understanding the highest and deepest causes of things. For Aquinas, that is God. Recalling the doctrine of simplicity, and that goodness is a correlate of being, to have wisdom, one must understand what true goodness is. Understanding: is when one is able to see and comprehend things without having to dissect them. Scientific Knowledge: is somewhat self-explanatory; it lets us understand in a fundamental manner the processes behind how something is as it is.

All of these forms of knowledge can be held by humans to a greater or lesser degree. It is interesting that four of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge) have to do with knowing as well. Here we begin to come full circle. These four gifts which all have to do with knowing are second-personal in nature, stemming from a relationship with God. The fullness of knowledge is second-personal, and comes from God.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. What is the fundamental problem with philosophical skepticism?
2. What are the five types of knowledge, and how can we have knowledge?