

6: Metaphysics: The Basic Concepts

We have thus far examined at length the basic concepts of Thomas Aquinas's system of ethics, such as the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we receive contemporaneously with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We then looked at a few of those concepts in greater depth. Now, for the next few lectures, we will be looking at the structure of Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics. While this topic can be somewhat difficult, it is an important task because this metaphysical structure underpins the rest of Aquinas's philosophy and theology.

1. The Reductionism of the Secular, Scientific Worldview: Contemporary, secular science gives a rather bleak view of the universe and our place in it. Here is an example of such a position, given by Simon Blackburn: "The cosmos is some fifteen billion years old, almost unimaginably huge, and governed by natural laws that will compel its extinction in some billions more years, although long before that the Earth and the solar system will have been destroyed by the heat death of the sun. Human beings occupy an infinitesimally small fraction of space and time, on the edge of one galaxy among a hundred thousand million or so galaxies. We evolved only because of a number of cosmic accidents... Nature shows us no particular favors: we get parasites and diseases and we die, and we are not all that nice to each other. True, we are moderately clever, but our efforts to use our intelligence...quite often backfire." - Simon Blackburn in Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

Rather than a purely scientific position, this is a philosophical interpretation of science, and it has two underlying metaphysical assumptions that require closer examination:

Fundamental reducibility: All things are reducible to the fundamental units of matter as supposed by the Standard Model of particle physics and the laws of nature governing it. This implies that the whole is merely the sum of its parts and nothing more.

Causality from the bottom up: This metaphysical model supposes that a complete picture of causality can be inferred at the finest level of reduction—everything that happens is governed by the interaction of elementary particles according to the laws of physics. The cause of each action at the macro level can thus be traced down, layer by layer, to the fundamental interactions of these particles.

Such a metaphysics renders the world at large and the plight of humanity very bleak. Everything is deterministic, cold, impersonal, and reducible to the causal interactions of basic particles according to physics.

II. Aquinas's Metaphysics: Thomas Aquinas holds a worldview starkly different from the modern, secular, scientific one on almost every point made thus far. Aquinas holds that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. To this end, Aquinas affirms human free-will (an impossibility if the world is deterministically governed by the interaction of fundamental particles from the ground up). The composite whole can indeed influence the lower levels of structure. Indeed, humans are capable at the macro level of starting causal chains of motion.

One of the primary differences between these two worldviews is how they treat matter. Whereas the secular, scientific approach gives precedent only to the fundamental interactions of particles at the most basic level, Aquinas says that while matter is important, we must also take into account the organization, or form of that matter (hylomorphism). Matter is the material of which something is made. The organization of that material is the form. The material composite thing has causal powers that derive from its form - that is from the organization of its matter. The function of an item is derived from its form. The organization of a material composite "that makes it what it is" is called "substantial form."

The substantial form of a thing gives that thing its causal powers, meaning that the functions of a substance are derived from the substantial form configuring the whole. Increasing complexity of organization brings about new and different powers of causality simply not present at lesser levels of organization.

III. Metaphysical Implications: For Aquinas, everything is not caused from the ground up by the interactions of fundamental particles. The substantial form, or the material organization present in any given thing, must be accounted for in his metaphysical picture. It is this substantial form that allows the composite whole to cause things to happen (things that simply could not happen at the fundamental level without the organization in place to enable them).

Reflection Questions

1. What is the difference between a bottom up metaphysics and a top down metaphysics?
2. Why does Aquinas think that while matter itself is important, we must also consider the organization or form of that matter?