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THOMISTIC FAITH NATURALIZED? THE EPISTEMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF AQUINAS'S APPEAL TO DOXASTIC INSTINCT

Mark Boespflug

Aquinas's conception of faith has been taken to involve believing in a way that is expressly out of keeping with the evidence. Rather than being produced by evidence, the confidence involved in faith is a product of the will's decision. This causes Aquinas's conception of faith to look flagrantly irrational. Herein, I offer an interpretation of Aquinas's position on faith that has not been previously proposed. I point out that Aquinas responds to the threat of faith's irrationality by explicitly maintaining that one may reasonably believe by faith because of an *instinct* to believe. I go on to point out other instances in which instincts amount to legitimate epistemic grounds for Aquinas. Given that this dimension of Aquinas's thought is not well developed, I close by introducing some extensions of it in the work of John Henry Newman as well as points of contrast.

"The general sense is [that faith is] belief, perhaps based on some evidence, but very firm, or at least more firm, and/or of more extensive content, than the evidence possessed by the believer rationally warrants."¹ Thus, John Hick succinctly articulated a concern that many share regarding specifically a Thomistic conception of faith.² It may be noticed that there are two problems here: one regarding *degree of confidence* outstripping evidence and another regarding *content* outstripping evidence. My focus will be on the problem of faith apparently involving a degree of confidence that outstrips the evidence.

Hick's representation of faith seems to have considerable grounds in Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas himself claims in *De Veritate*: "We can formulate a rough definition [of faith], and say: faith is a habit of our mind,

¹*Faith and Knowledge*, 12.

²Dawes similarly finds there to be a significant tension between faith and a rational doxastic response. As he puts it: "Aquinas makes a clear distinction between reason and faith. . . . We must, it seems, either reason or believe. We cannot do both, at least not with regard to the same proposition" ("The Act of Faith: Aquinas and the Moderns," 67).



by which eternal life begins in us, and which makes our understanding assent to things which are not evident (*inevidens*).³ This lack of *evidentia* requires independent treatment and will be dealt with in some detail below;⁴ so, for now I will leave it untranslated. In any case, suffice it here to say that one can begin to see how Hick's portrait of faith as inherently involving a confidence-evidence mismatch gets up and running. Further, in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas makes it clear that this lack of *evidentia* is not incidental to faith:

The believer's intellect assents to that which he believes, not because he sees it either in itself, or by resolving it to first self-evident principles, but because his will commands his intellect to assent . . . The intellect is convinced that it ought to believe what is said, though that conviction is not based on the evidence of the thing (*per evidentia rei*) . . . [If it were so based] the essence of faith would be taken away (*ratio fidei tolleretur*).⁵

What we learn, here, is that it is part of the very nature (*ratio*) of Thomistic faith to believe something that lacks *evidentia*, and, in its absence, the doxastic agent, consequently, comes to believe in virtue of an exercise of the will.⁶

The conception of faith wherein the will steps in to augment one's confidence or firmness of assent,⁷ rather than being an unfortunate and incidental feature of Aquinas's account, is crucial to it. This is because faith is a virtue and, as such, *meritorious*; if, then, one's confidence was fixed by the evidence alone, choice and merit would be absent.⁸ Yet, when we find that the content of what is believed by faith warrants (Aquinas says *convenit*) doubt, suspecting and opinion owing to its lack of *evidentia*—and

³*De Veritate*, 14.2.

⁴See section 1.ii.

⁵IIaIIae 5.2.

⁶I, here, agree with those interpreters who take Aquinas to be a *doxastic voluntarist*—holding that belief is under the direct control of the will. (E.g., Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith*; Stump, *Aquinas*; Grellard, *De La Certitude Volontaire*; Murphy, "Aquinas on Voluntary Beliefs") The element of indirectness involved—i.e., the fact that Aquinas holds that the will commands the intellect to assent ST IIaIIae.2.1.ad 3—I do not take to be evidence that he is, in actuality, an *indirect* doxastic voluntarist. Holding as much would run against the received framework of immediacy/non-immediacy and directness/indirectness that has shaped the literature at least since Alston's "An Internalist Externalism" and "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification."

⁷It is tempting to frame Aquinas's position on faith in terms of degrees of credence, owing to his insistence that faith involves a greater firmness of assent, owing to the will's intervention, than it otherwise would have. E.g., "Consequently a man's faith may be described as being greater, in one way, on the part of his intellect, on account of its greater certitude and firmness, and, in another way, on the part of his will, on account of his greater promptitude, devotion, or confidence." (ST IIaIIae.5.4) Given, however, that it is unclear that he has precisely the same notion in mind, I will refer to faith as involving a distinctively elevated "confidence," given that this nicely incorporates both the intellectual and volitional elements embedded in, for instance, the remark above.

⁸ST IIaIIae.2.9; *De Veritate* 14.2.

that it is only in virtue of the will's activity that one's confidence is as firm as that of knowledge—it is difficult to see how there is not a serious threat to the rationality of faith.⁹

This, of course, is no new problem, even if the details have been expressed somewhat differently in the past. However, in this article, I point out a possible solution that, to my knowledge, has not been hitherto proposed as Aquinas's preferred means of resolving the issue.¹⁰ This involves an appeal to a *doxastic instinct*—that is, an appeal to our natural belief forming processes; hence, I refer to it as a naturalistic response.¹¹ Now, given that his expression of this solution remains largely undeveloped, I close by bringing in the work of John Henry Newman as a possible way of developing what was only incipient in Aquinas's thought. For

⁹ST IIaIIae.1.1.resp; *De Veritate* 14.2.

¹⁰While John Jenkins, in his *Knowledge and Faith*, discusses what he calls “the *naturalist interpretation*” of Aquinas's conception of faith, which he views as endorsed by “[s]everal prominent contemporary philosophers of religion” (163), Terence Penelhum (“The Analysis of Faith”), John Hick (*Faith and Knowledge*), Alvin Plantinga (“Reason and Belief”), and Louis Pojman (*Religious Belief*) are among those mentioned. This sort of “naturalist interpretation,” however, turns out to be a substantively discrete position from the one I am advocating. On this view, the assent of faith is natural in the sense of natural theology: that is, faith is natural in the sense that “at least in the case of some persons” the belief involved in faith is the product “of arguments from natural theology.” As will become clear below, I strongly agree with Jenkins that there are serious problems with interpreting Aquinas in this way.

My proposed interpretation is that faith is naturalistic in the *epistemological* sense. That is, faith, for Aquinas, is perhaps much like perception in that it amounts to a natural belief-forming tendency. It's worth noting that, while Jenkins numbers Plantinga (in his earlier work) as among those who take the theologically naturalist reading of Aquinas, my interpretation would be eminently congenial to the “extended” religious epistemological dimension of Plantinga's proper functionalism. (*Warranted Christian Belief*, chpt. 8) Plantinga, however, appears not to have noticed Aquinas's recourse to the doxastic instinct of faith, or at least not to have thought it epistemically significant.

Jenkins's own interpretation, which he labels a “supernaturalist externalist” conception of faith (186), while certainly not terribly similar to my own, may possess some overlap with it, depending on Jenkins's understanding of the “non-discursive intuition” that he claims leads one to hold that “the articles of faith [are] propositions to be believed on divine authority and to which he should adhere in spite of considerations to the contrary,” (196). The view is externalist in that “the assent of faith” is ultimately “justified [in a] basic” way. I, however, do not regard Aquinas as taking faith to be justified in a basic way; for Aquinas claims that faith has “a sufficient motive (*causam sufficientem inducentem*) for believing,” (ST IIa.IIae.2:9) and that it is in virtue of this motive that one does not assent “shallowly” (*leviter*). See section 3.

Eleonore Stump offers a defense of the rationality of Aquinas's conception of faith, responding to the objection that “faith [for Aquinas] is without epistemic justification” (*Aquinas*, 366). Stump offers a very different solution than the one proposed here. She appeals to Aquinas's metaphysics of goodness in an attempt to defend the rationality of his conception of faith (367–369).

¹¹Though epistemological naturalism is often represented as a fairly new phenomenon associated with Quine, Kornblith and Goldman, there is ample reason to hold that it has a rich history winding through the modern period back into the Middle Ages and, as I argue, is manifest in Aquinas himself. (See Boespflug, “Robert Holcot on Doxastic Voluntarism”)

Newman explicitly offers a naturalistic defense of faith that is sophisticated enough to possibly have been a large part of Wittgenstein's inspiration in *On Certainty*.¹²

1. Faith as Trust

I begin by pointing out that faith should be understood as exercising itself in *trust*, which involves belief, for Aquinas, but is not equivalent to it. More specifically, faith should be understood to be the disposition or habit of mind by which an individual trusts that a specific testimonial report is true.¹³ (Aquinas, apparently following Augustine, does not confine faith to the religious domain.)¹⁴

i. *Crede* as Trust

The first thing to highlight regarding faith is that *credere* (standardly translated "to believe") is its *act*. (I leave *credere* untranslated here because I will presently challenge the standard translation.) Aquinas makes this clear in the way he puts the question that he will be addressing in article 1 of question 2 in the Treatise on Faith in *Summa Theologiae*: "What is 'to believe' (*credere*), which is the internal act of faith?"¹⁵ *Crede* appears consistently throughout the Treatise on Faith in the *Summa* and *De Veritate* as the act of faith, so I won't say anything more in service of this point here, except to note that this counts in favor of a voluntarist reading of Aquinas—that is, a reading that holds that believing is under one's direct voluntary control.¹⁶

Now, I suggest that *credere* in Aquinas—and perhaps in late medieval philosophy more generally—is more appropriately translated "trust" or "to trust."¹⁷ I'll give four reasons in support. First, while it is tempting to think of *credere* as a propositional attitude of assent, this is not Aquinas's view. Though he begins by following Augustine in IIaIIae.2.1 by characterizing belief as something much like a propositional attitude—i.e., "thought with assent," (*cogitare cum assensus*)—he ultimately regards this characterization as too broad. "If 'to think' be understood broadly . . . then 'to think with assent,' does not express completely what is meant by *credere* (*non dicit totam rationem eius quod est credere*): since, in this way, a man thinks with assent even when he considers what he knows by science."¹⁸ Thus, it would seem that *credere* is a species of thought with assent, albeit not corresponding to the broader category of propositional attitude of assent.

¹²Pritchard, "Wittgenstein on Faith and Reason."

¹³Having "faith in a particular individual" does not seem to run against the grain of this way of conceiving of faith, given that one may understand such faith to reduce to believing various specific propositions about that person.

¹⁴*De Veritate* 14.2; see my "Robert Holcot on Doxastic Voluntarism."

¹⁵ST IIaIIae.2.1.

¹⁶See n.6 regarding positions on Aquinas's doxastic voluntarism.

¹⁷I'm also inclined to say that the sense of "to believe" in early modern philosophy may be better understood as trust—and perhaps the same may be said about *glaube* in Kant.

¹⁸ST IIaIIae.2.1.

Aquinas's remark above brings up a second reason for regarding *credere* to be better translated "trust"—namely, that *credere* excludes *scientia* (or knowledge in the most strict sense) and vice versa, *scientia* excludes *credere*. In another remark he is more explicit about this: "It is impossible that one and the same thing should be believed and seen (*visum*) by the same person. Hence it is equally impossible for one and the same thing to be an object of knowledge (*scitum*) and believed (*creditum*)."¹⁹ Again, if we were thinking about *credere* as a propositional attitude of assent, it would be very difficult to square this with the idea that high-grade epistemic states like *scientia* lack it. However, if we are conceiving of *credere* as "trust," it makes perfect sense: it would seem that I cannot trust that *p*, while I know that *p*. And if I know that *p*, surely this excludes trusting that *p*.²⁰

Third, *credere* is expressly held to be voluntary and subject to free choice. In addition to the remarks above, Aquinas's discussions of faith are positively littered with this claim. Here is one example: "[*Credere*] is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will (*ex imperio voluntatis*) moved by the grace of God, so that it is subject to the free will in relation to God."²¹ This appears to suggest that it is part of the essence (*ratio*) of *credere* to be *voluntary*, but, of course, very few philosophers—including Aquinas it would seem—hold that assent or belief *simpliciter* is voluntary. So, we seem to have yet another point of dissimilarity.

Finally, *credere* is associated with taking someone at their word or believing a testimonial report—whether this is a human agent or, as we'll see, God.²² And when we believe someone, or take them at their word, this is often described as *trusting* that person. The act of faith, then, is to take on trust that a testimonial report regarding a specific proposition is true. Having this structure in mind will be important in what follows for assessing its rationality.

ii. Faith as Voluntary, Doxastic, and Regarding the Unseen

Now, it is also worth pointing out that taking trust to be both voluntary and doxastic is not a bad way of thinking about it. For it is eminently difficult to make sense of trust as *involuntary*. For if trust were involuntary, what are we to say of the regular practice of people asking one another to trust them? And how could there be imperatives to trust in certain cases?

But perhaps trust being voluntary is not a problem; perhaps, rather, maintaining that it is both voluntary and doxastic that is the problem. In order to avoid this conjunction, it is sometimes insisted that trust involves a merely sub-doxastic state like *acceptance*. But this generates serious difficulties. Suppose my wife asks me to trust her with a certain business venture she is engaging in, and I say that I will. Suppose, then, just for

¹⁹ST IIaIIae.1.5; see also IIaIIae.2.5.

²⁰Cf. substituting belief for trust in this context.

²¹ST IIaIIae.2.9; see also IIaIIae.4.2, IIaIIae.2.1.

²²*De Veritate* 14.2

confirmation she asks, “So you believe that I can do this?” If I were to respond, “No, I don’t believe you can do this, but I am willing to *act* as though you can,” she will not only be offended, but importantly, she will think that I have taken back what I just assured her of—namely, my trust. A different way of putting the same point is that thinking of trust as sub-doxastic can lead to something of a second-personal relative of a Moorean-style paradox—“I trust you that *p*, but I don’t believe you that *p*.” In any case, it seems that maintaining that trust is *sub-doxastic* is seriously problematic. And aside from conceptual difficulties, Aquinas’s view would not fit with this way of understanding trust given that he expressly holds *credere* to involve a high degree of credence.

The last thing to say about *credere* as trust is that trust is required for faith because the content of faith is *unseen*. This is evidenced in what was the touchstone regarding faith for much of Christian tradition into the modern period, namely, Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Aquinas takes this verse to encapsulate faith’s essence; and one of the most important elements it involves is faith’s content being *unseen*. As he would put it, in faith, “The will, under the movement of this good—i.e., eternal blessedness—proposes as worthy of assent something which is not evident (*non apparens*) to the natural understanding.”²³

The important point that this reveals about faith is that there is a significant misunderstanding regarding the content of faith not having evidence in its favor.²⁴ When Aquinas and others claim that faith lacks *evidentia* or that its content is *non apparens*, it is merely because that content is not, in some sense, *directly apprehended*. For *evidentia* implies among other things a *direct perception* of the thing in question, via rational or sense faculties.²⁵ While what this means in terms of sense perception is straightforward enough, the classic case of a rational apprehension is a demonstrative syllogism. And even if it is allowed that such an argument could not be directly apprehended all at once as entirely self-evident,²⁶ it is enough that the premises of such an argument have been grasped as self-evident along with the valid deductive structure of the argument.

Further, *evidentia* possesses the distinctive power to compel the intellect to assent. We find in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* that if the articles of faith were made evident to the intellect it would be “drawn necessarily (*necessario*

²³*De Veritate* 14.2. Though Aquinas uses *non apparens* in this context, it is fairly clear that he means to convey the same idea as in the quotation above from the *IIaIIae*—namely that faith involves believing what is not seen to be the case for oneself. (“We can formulate a rough definition [of faith], and say: faith is a habit of our mind, by which eternal life begins in us, and which makes our understanding assent to things which are not evident (*inevidens*).” (5.2))

²⁴This misunderstanding is found not only among academic philosophers (E.g., Kitcher (2004); Dawes (2016)), it is also prevalent among popular science writers such as theoretical physicist Victor Stenger (2012), evolutionary geneticist Jerry Coyne (2015) and Sam Harris (2004). [the author needs to add these citations to the references list . . .]

²⁵See, for instance, Pasnau, *After Certainty*, 32–35.

²⁶This is what Pasnau calls the “Anselmian Glance.” (*After Certainty*, 94–115)

tractus) to assenting to them."²⁷ Likewise, it is *evidentia* that famously leads demons to believe the articles of faith; they are compelled (*compellantur*,²⁸ *coactus*²⁹) by *evidentia* to believe even against their will. *Evidentia* also generates certainty and is a necessary constituent of *scientia*. "The certainty of knowledge (*scientia*) and understanding (*intellectus*) comes from the *evidentia* of the things that are said to be certain."³⁰ Consequently, as with justification in contemporary epistemology, *evidentia* "is the all-important quality that distinguishes *scientia* from mere true belief."³¹

What's most important for present purposes is that, if a proposition lacks *evidentia*, this is not as serious an epistemic indictment as it would be to say that a proposition lacks evidence.³² For, we believe things all the time that we do not directly perceive to be the case for ourselves—the existence of other countries, galaxies, facts about our plumbing, the quantity of money we have in the bank, parts in our car's engine, and so forth—and surely we do so on good grounds, at least in many cases. And while it is difficult to say exactly what is meant by "evidence" in the contemporary milieu, it is something like a reason that increases or decreases the likelihood for a particular agent that a particular proposition is true. Thus, an absence of *evidentia* is perfectly compatible with a proposition's still possessing "evidence," and on its own, a lack of *evidentia* would seem to be no serious indictment of a particular belief.³³

2. The Reasons for Trusting

Now, one of the most important benefits of clarifying the nature of faith is that it helps to make clear what elements we should be focusing on in assessing its rationality. Identifying its ground as testimony should lead us to ask two questions:

- (1) Whose testimony is it that one is trusting when one exercises faith, for Aquinas?
- (2) What reasons does Aquinas think we have for regarding this testimony to be true or reliable?³⁴

²⁷SCG 3.40.3.

²⁸ST IIaIIae.5.2

²⁹ST Ia.64.2; *De Veritate* 14.9.

³⁰*Super Sententiarum* III.23.2.2.3c.

³¹Pasnau, *After Certainty*, 32.

³²Though faith's lack of *evidentia* is not as epistemically problematic as it has been taken to be, it should be clear from this section that there is a deep and principled distinction between the status of *scientia* and the status of things believed by faith. It is thus hard to understand how Richard Cross could maintain that there is a widely shared assumption "in the Middle Ages and beyond: that Christian faith must be as epistemically robust as scientific knowledge" ("Testimony," 37).

³³John Jenkins helpfully makes much this same point. (*Knowledge and Faith*, 179)

³⁴Those who take Aquinas to be an epistemic externalist of some stripe will doubtlessly not think this question quite as pressing. However, putting the issue of whether Aquinas is an internalist or externalist to one side, I will show below that he is eminently interested in precisely this question, and asks it himself in the *Summa Theologiae*'s Treatise on Faith.

Though one might think that the answer to (1) is, for instance, one's local parish priest or parents, Aquinas maintains that it is in fact the testimony of *God* that one believes in the case of faith: "In order that men might have knowledge of God, free of doubt and uncertainty, it was necessary for Divine matters to be delivered to them by way of faith, being told to them, as it were, by God Himself (*traderentur quasi a Deo dicta*) who cannot lie."³⁵ The idea, as I understand it, is that God—whether through Christ, the teachings of the apostles or the Old Testament prophets—spoke directly to human beings.³⁶ Other human beings, in turn, have propagated that communication within the safekeeping of the Church and her authority. Yet, its source is, nonetheless, ultimately divine, given God's involvement through the Church in the care of its transmission.

Now, Aquinas seems to be articulating an idea here that would make its way into modern Protestantism as well as the writings of, for instance, John Locke and Mary Astell: namely, that God is the source of religious testimony and given that God is trustworthy to the highest degree, such testimony warrants the characteristically high degree of credence involved in faith.³⁷ But this only moves the critical question to a different level: what reason do we have to think this testimony ultimately came from God? Aquinas's reasoning here is a little complex, but the general idea is that we are warranted in trusting that the testimony comes from God in virtue of the miraculous signs that accompany it.³⁸ And he thinks that these are excellent evidence:

Those things which come under faith can be considered in two ways. First, in particular; and thus they cannot be seen (*visum*) and believed (*creditum*) at the same time, as shown above. Secondly, in general, that is, under the common aspect of credibility (*sub communi ratione credibilis*); and in this way they are seen by the believer. For he would not believe unless, on the evidentness of the signs (*evidentia signorum*), or of something similar, he saw (*videret*) that they ought to be believed.³⁹

Aquinas's use of *evidentia* here is clearly loose and idiosyncratic, but he seems to mean that the miraculous signs are powerful supportive evidence of God's being behind the message, such that it is clear to the hearer that they ought to believe the report.

Now, a problem that readily springs to mind is that it would seem as though the miraculous signs themselves are believed by faith. And if this is so, it would seem to make Aquinas's reasoning objectionably circular: I believe in the miraculous signs by faith, and I am warranted in having

³⁵ST IIaIIae.2.4.

³⁶As will be seen below, Aquinas explicitly states that the certainty of faith depends on the epistemic features of communications to prophets. (IIaIIae.171.5; p. 11)

³⁷Locke expresses this point in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (IV.xvi.17); Astell articulates it in her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (II.iii.104).

³⁸This too is a position that Aquinas shares with Locke. (*Essay* IV.xvi.13–14)

³⁹ST IIaIIae.1.4.ad2.

faith because of the miraculous signs. This makes it pressing to get clear on just what the articles of faith are. According to *IIaIIae.1.8*, there are, in one sense, 14 propositions or articles—7 having to do with the Godhead in general and 7 having to do with Christ, in particular. Yet, in another sense—the object of faith is just one thing: namely, the “First Truth,” as Aquinas likes to put it, or God himself.⁴⁰ This appears to be helpful for Aquinas, given that it means that none of the corroborating miracles are a part of what one initially believes by faith.

All that said, one might still see another serious problem looming. While this resolves one threat of circularity, it causes another to arise. When it is asked why the faithful are warranted in believing that the miracles occurred, Aquinas’s answer seems to be that it is because the Church’s transmission of the testimony is safeguarded by God.⁴¹ However, this would suggest that the faithful believe that God exists and is safeguarding the testimony regarding miracles on the basis of that testimony. That is, one believes in God on the basis of a reliable transmission and one believes that the transmission is reliable because God is ensuring that it is. So, the circularity problem has not gone away, it has simply been reconfigured. Though this isn’t the traditional qualm with the medieval conception of faith, my sense is that it is perhaps the central one to come to grips with.

3. Faith and Doxastic Instinct

The looming circularity seems to be a serious threat to how we were understanding the justificatory structure of Aquinas’s conception of faith. If one has no good reason to believe that the miraculous signs occurred, it would seem as though faith has lost its critical ground. This, in turn, would apparently confirm the original threat, namely, that faith involves a confidence that goes beyond the evidence. In determining Aquinas’s position on this issue, it is worth restating one of the objections he puts to himself in *IIaIIae.2.9*, where the question is, “Is faith meritorious?”:

He who assents to a point of faith, either has a sufficient motive (*causam sufficientem inducentem*) for believing, or he has not. If he has a sufficient motive for his belief, this does not seem to imply any merit on his part, since he is no longer free to believe or not to believe: whereas if he does not have a sufficient motive for believing, this is a mark of shallowness (*levitatis*).⁴²

Faith faces a dilemma: if one has a sufficient motive for believing, belief is compelled and hence not meritorious. But this, of course, would run afoul of faith’s being a virtue. Yet, if one does *not* have a sufficient motive, one is being intellectually shallow or believing with impropriety; one, it would seem, is committing an epistemic violation. What’s crucial for our purposes is that the dilemma conspicuously implies that the “motive”

⁴⁰ST *IIaIIae.1.2*.

⁴¹ST *IIaIIae.2.6.ad 3*.

⁴²This is the third objection.

the objection is concerned with is epistemic in nature. Consequently, in responding, Aquinas is attempting to isolate an adequate justificatory basis for faith.

In keeping with the interpretation of faith thus far given, Aquinas's answer to this objection takes the first horn, maintaining that one *does* have a sufficient reason for believing.⁴³

The believer has sufficient motive (*inductivam*) for believing, for he is moved by the authority of Divine teaching confirmed by miracles . . .⁴⁴

This reply should be expected by this point, but if it turns out to be the whole story, it would seem as though Aquinas fails to extricate himself from the threat of circularity. Fortunately, it turns out not to be the whole story. For Aquinas goes on to identify a second motive:

. . . [The believer is moved], moreover, by the inward instinct of Divine invitation (*interior instinctu Dei invitantis*): hence he does not believe shallowly (*leviter*).⁴⁵

Thus, the believer has a more fundamental epistemic motive or ground for believing in Aquinas's estimation. This is significant not only in that it is an accompanying ground further supporting the belief involved in faith, but it has the potential to break the vicious circle pointed out above. This is so because when Aquinas is pushed to address why the faithful are warranted in believing that the articles of faith are ultimately the testimony of God, he points to this inward *instinctus* that putatively comes from God as a further ground.

Aquinas, unfortunately, does not expound on what precisely this *instinctus* amounts to or why it is epistemically significant. It is also unclear whether the English cognate "instinct" is the most appropriate translation. While "instinct" implies some impulse *inherent* to, or natural for, a creature, Aquinas insists that though the impulse comes from within, it is nonetheless divine or supernatural in origin. We find elsewhere that Aquinas associates the activity of the Holy Spirit with an *instinctus*: "to resist the instinct (*instinctui*) of the Holy Spirit is a grave sin."⁴⁶ This, again, suggests that the impulse involved is not properly characterized as fully inherent or natural.

Yet, Aquinas also carefully circumscribes a sense in which believing the articles of faith *is* natural in character even though it is the product of a

⁴³Aquinas's explicit address of this point is very difficult to square with Cross's externalist reading of Aquinas's conception of faith (see Cross, "Testimony"). Jenkins's interpretation, on the other hand, while externalist in a "supernatural" sense (*Knowledge and Faith*, 186), possesses some overlap with my interpretation.

⁴⁴ST IIaIIae.2.6.ad 3.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Quodlibet III.5.4.

divinely given *instinctus*. In responding to the objection that faith is not natural, Aquinas claims that:

To have faith is not part of human nature [that is, it is a gift from God] but it is part of human nature that man's mind should not thwart his inner instinct (*non repugnet interior instinctui*), and the outward preaching of the truth. Hence, in this way, unbelief is contrary to nature.⁴⁷

Even if the instinct to believe by way of faith is divinely given—and hence, in a sense, not natural—once the intellect does have such an instinct to believe, this means that the agent should not resist the belief that would be the natural output of it. That is, one ought to believe the proposition in question on the basis of this divinely given impulse (once it has been implanted) just as one ought to follow one's natural impulse to drink when thirsty.

A divine impulse or instinct appears on the scene again in Aquinas's discussion of how the prophet knows his message:

[The prophet's] position with regard to the things he knows (*cognoscit*) by instinct is sometimes such that he is unable to distinguish fully (*ut non plene discernere possit*) whether his thoughts are conceived of Divine instinct or of his own spirit. And those things which we know by Divine instinct are not all manifested with prophetic certitude, for this instinct is something imperfect in the genus of prophecy.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, such an instinct can, according to Aquinas, produce,

. . . the greatest certitude about those things which he knows by an express revelation, and he has it for certain that they are revealed to him by God . . . Were he not certain about this, the faith which relies on the utterances of the prophet would not be certain.⁴⁹

The first part of the remark acknowledges that prophets are sometimes ambivalent about the source of their messages: does the message come from himself or from God? Yet, the same kind of impulse can apparently ground the highest certainty in virtue of it being the product of a God-given instinct.⁵⁰

Aquinas also identifies conscience as a kind of cognitive instinct: "Conscience is called spirit, that is, an instinct of our spirit."⁵¹ And though Aquinas interestingly goes on to suggest that conscience is not a power in its own right—rather, it is a distinctive function of the power of natural judgment—conscience is able to produce beliefs that possess positive epistemic status. "Conscience is said to know (*scire*) something not in a proper sense, [we are said to know by conscience] in the sense that knowledge is

⁴⁷IIaIIae.10.1.

⁴⁸IIaIIae.171.5.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Though this suggests that we might interpret this instinct as playing an externalist role in justifying a belief in its output, and thus helpful to Cross's interpretation, Cross himself does not appear to be aware of this thread in Aquinas's thought. ("Testimony")

⁵¹*De Veritate* 17.1.ad 8.

predicated of that by which we know (*secundum illum modum loquendi quo dicitur scire illud quo scimus*).⁵² Though this remark is rather obscure in that it appears to homunculize conscience, what's important is that conscience is a sub-faculty that naturally produces beliefs that are of good epistemic standing.⁵³ And these beliefs possess good epistemic standing precisely in virtue of their being the product of an instinct, rather than being justified by further epistemic reason.

Instinctus is also used by Aquinas in a sense much more clearly in keeping with the English, "instinct": namely, as the subrational impulse of animals. While humans make judgments about sensory particulars on the basis of something like reason (*attingat rationem*), "in other animals, since they do not reason, [such judgments] are from a natural instinct, which can grasp similar conceptions (*ex instinctu naturali habet hujusmodi intentiones apprehendere*); yet, this is not called reason, but estimation (*aestimatio*)."⁵⁴ This is not to say that judgments that are the product of instinct are irrational; rather, they are simply not the product of a discursive process. For reason, in the strict sense, "operates discursively moving from one thing to another."⁵⁵ This is certainly not what instinct does; yet, this is no indictment of its rationality. For the aforementioned *instinctus* would seem to be productive of epistemically valid judgments in many cases. Thus, even if instinctive judgments are not based on some further reason, such judgments are appropriately based on the instinct or impulse itself.

The important point is that Aquinas takes the beliefs which are the output of faith to possess an independent epistemic ground—namely, a divinely given instinct or impulse. Much the same sort of impulse is operative in the case of prophecy as well as the case of conscience; and in each case the impulses or instincts are capable of producing beliefs that possess positive epistemic status. And such a position would seem to be exactly what one might expect of doxastic agents designed by a benevolent Creator, even if Aquinas himself does not put it this way. In much the same way that humans and animals can trust their instincts to avoid tissue damage, so can we trust our instincts to acquire doxastic states.⁵⁶

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Again, this passage has a rather strong externalist sense to it; yet, given Aquinas's earlier remarks about instinct giving us an apparently internally accessible reason to believe, I will not take a stand on whether Aquinas's treatment of instinct suggests anything one way or the other concerning his commitment to internalism or externalism.

⁵⁴*Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 26 q. 1 a. 2 co.

⁵⁵ST Ia.59.1.ad 1; Hobbes, too, appears to have this sense of reason in mind in the *Leviathan's* treatment of reason: "The use and end of reason is not finding of the sum and truth of one or a few consequences, remote from the first definitions and settled significations of names, but to begin at these, and proceed from one consequence to another." (I.v.4)

⁵⁶This reading of Aquinas should be somewhat reminiscent of Plantinga's famous appropriation of him in *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000). At the same time, there are certain important differences that should be apparent. Moreover, Plantinga does not make use of the important role belief-forming instincts play in Aquinas. This, I expect, would have been of substantial interest to him and viewed as supportive of his theory of how theistic belief is warranted.

The important difference in the case of faith is that, as noted, the instinct is divinely given, and so is not natural in a thoroughgoing sense, even if it is natural in the sense that it is “part of human nature that man’s mind should not thwart his inner instinct.”⁵⁷ What is key for our purposes is that the motive (*inductivam*) that underwrites the epistemic legitimacy of faith is not a set of independent reasons, but the fact that faith is the product of an interior impulse.

4. Newman’s on Faith and Doxastic Instinct

Now, one might be deeply unimpressed by Aquinas’s appeal to doxastic instincts as guides for believing, especially as an explanation for why faith is rational. “Surely,” the objection would run, “the irrational among us believe on the basis of their natural impulses all the time! *That’s the problem!*” So, why should we think this is anything other than a tendentious appeal?

In order to address this objection, I am going to draw from another catholic thinker, who seems to have developed much the same idea found in Aquinas. This is John Henry Newman. Though Newman’s position ends up being distinct in an important respect, the two share a remarkable amount of ground in how they conceive of the justification of religious faith. However, I’ll connect some historical dots before proceeding. One such connection is that Newman was an admirer of Thomas Reid and Reid’s naturalistic response to Hume’s skepticism. That response can be construed in the following way: suppose that Hume, so to speak, won, in having shown that there is no good reason to trust some (or all) of our cognitive faculties. “Very well,” says Reid, “but we must believe on the basis of them nonetheless, for we cannot do otherwise.” Behold our natural tendencies or instincts to form beliefs on the basis of perception, memory, reason, and testimony—and how these instincts keep us alive in the street, even if we don a skeptical attitude in the armchair.⁵⁸

Newman’s embrace of this naturalistic response to skepticism is not only apparent in some of his more prominent Oxford sermons and his *magnum opus* the *Grammar of Assent*, it would later have an enormous influence inasmuch as it was a source of inspiration for Wittgenstein’s fideism (or quasi-fideism) as well as Crispin Wright’s related view.⁵⁹ The inspiration for Wittgenstein’s famed “hinge propositions” is Newman’s

⁵⁷ST IIaIIae.10.1.

⁵⁸It is a common misconception that Reid’s famed *principle of credulity* is first and foremost an epistemic principle (*Inquiry* 6.24). Instead, it is first and foremost a principle in the sense that the law of gravity is a principle. Doxastic agents have a natural tendency to believe testimony; it is this descriptive or psychological claim about human nature that ultimately vindicates the secondary sense of the principle, namely, as an epistemic norm that we ought to abide by. See Boespflug, “Why Reid was no Dogmatist,” Rysiew, “Reid and Epistemic Naturalism,” and Mounce, *Hume’s Naturalism*.

⁵⁹Pritchard, “Faith and Reason” and “Wittgenstein on Faith and Reason.”

“antecedent probabilities” which will make an appearance in his remarks below.

To begin, here is Newman’s expression of the challenge to faith’s rationality as it appears in his sermon, “The Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason”:

The act of Faith is sole and elementary, and complete in itself, and depends on no process of mind previous to it: and this doctrine is borne out by the common opinion of men, who, though they contrast Faith and Reason, yet rather consider Faith to be weak Reason, than a moral quality or act following upon Reason.⁶⁰

That is, most individuals—including the faithful, it would appear, for Newman—regard faith as being in tension with the exercise of reason. Or, to put the point somewhat differently, faith is not based on independent reasons.

Newman takes the apostle Paul to exemplify treating faith as independent of, or not needing, other reasons in support of it. For Paul did not corroborate his own report of Christ’s resurrection with more miracles but, rather, with “very like the evidence given to the mass of men now, or rather not so much.” That is, Paul did not give much in the way of independent considerations to support his pronouncements. Instead, Paul expected the “antecedent probability of a Revelation [to] be estimated variously according to the desire of it existing in each breast.”⁶¹ Newman goes on to say that, “This instance, then seems very full to justify the view of Faith which I have been taking, that it is an act of Reason, but of what the world would call weak, bad, or insufficient Reason; and that because it rests on presumption more, and on evidence less.”

So, we have roughly the same situation as with Aquinas: the original message of Christ is corroborated by miracles; yet, its subsequent transmitters (e.g., Paul) are mere authorities not underwritten by miracles themselves. Faith, then, looks to be epistemically ungrounded, at least inasmuch as the original miracles are not able to do the requisite justificatory work by themselves. Yet, the Apostle’s approach to eliciting faith is instructive inasmuch as it does not rely upon marshalling further evidence, but aims to activate a certain internal disposition to believe. This disposition Newman will call *instinct*.

The novelty of Newman’s conception of faith as epistemically grounded in doxastic instinct consists especially in the parallels he draws to other sources of belief or knowledge. After allowing that we have no independent grounds for faith, he claims that the same is true of these other sources:

Whether we consider processes of Faith or other exercise of Reason, men advance forward on ground which they do not, or cannot produce, or if they could, yet, could not prove to be true, on latent or antecedent grounds

⁶⁰*The Genius of John Henry Newman*, 48.

⁶¹*The Genius of John Henry Newman*, 48–49.

which they take for granted . . . However clear and tangible our evidence, yet when our argument is traced down to its simple elements, there must ever be something assumed ultimately which is incapable of proof, and without which our conclusion will be as illogical as faith is apt to seem to men of the world.⁶²

Yet Newman, like Reid, nevertheless thinks that we still ought to trust other sources of belief. It is just that we should, likewise, trust divine revelation, given that our instincts would lead us to believe this as well.

The senses may and do deceive us, and yet we trust them from a secret instinct, so it need not be weakness or rashness, if upon a certain presentiment of mind we trust to the fidelity of testimony offered for a Revelation. Again: we rely implicitly on our memory, and that, too, in spite of its being obviously unstable and treacherous . . . The same remarks apply to our assumption of the fidelity of our reasoning powers. Were it not for these instincts . . . the deceivableness of Senses, Memory, and Reason, would perplex us much . . . And so, as regards the matters of another, they who have not that instinctive apprehension of the Omnipresence of God and His unwearied and minute Providence which holiness and love create within us, must not be surprised to find that the evidence of Christianity does not perfect an office which was never intended for it.⁶³

Faith was not meant to be supported by conclusive independent grounds. And if one insists that it should be, they, Newman thinks, are placing an undue epistemic burden on faith that even paradigm sources of positive epistemic status—e.g., perception, memory, and reasoning—cannot shoulder. What independent grounds can we provide for thinking that our perceptual experiences, for instance, accurately represent a mind independent world to us? None, Newman thinks. Thus, since we are clearly within our epistemic rights to believe that there is an external world, so Newman maintains the same should be said of faith. Both kinds of beliefs are the result of *doxastic instinct*. Again, the interesting development in Newman that is absent in Aquinas is to commend the epistemic propriety of faith on the basis of its isomorphism to core sources of knowledge. Beliefs that are the product of faith are arrived at on the basis of impulses that do not (and perhaps cannot) admit of a further justification just like perception, memory, and reason.⁶⁴

⁶²*The Genius of John Henry Newman*, 54.

⁶³*The Genius of John Henry Newman*.

⁶⁴One might point out that Newman appears to maintain that the doxastic instinct in the case of faith requires a certain measure of "holiness and love," such that it is not natural in the sense that perception, memory and reason are natural. It's rather doubtful that such a worry should have much purchase, however; for certain conditions must be met in order for the impulses of the other sources of knowledge to obtain in us as well. And one fact that cognitive psychology has made abundantly clear is that propensities to believe—for good or ill—can be heavily affected by volitional dispositions. (See, for instance, Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow*)

5. Conclusion

Aquinas's conception of faith has looked irrational to many. This has been partly due to misunderstanding two notions critical to faith—*credere* and *evidentia*—as well as the specific sense in which faith employs the former and lacks the latter. And when we look closely at why Aquinas thinks we may trust that the articles of faith are true, we find a very interesting phenomenon that appears to have gone largely unnoticed—namely, an appeal to *instinct*. It is our inner impulse to accept the articles of faith that ultimately underwrites faith's rationality. And while this idea is not much developed in Aquinas, we find an interesting reappearance of it in John Henry Newman, wherein a case is made for the impulse behind faith as being on a par with the doxastic impulses associated with other sources of knowledge.

The major point of contrast between Aquinas and Newman is that while Newman seems to maintain that the instinct involved in faith is inherent to human beings (even if in a qualified sense), Aquinas holds that it is divinely given. For Aquinas, faith is, on the one hand, *not* natural in virtue of it being an impulse furnished by God. Yet, on the other hand, it *is* natural in the sense that, once it is given, it amounts to just the sort of belief-forming propensity that we are warranted in relying on. That is to say, faith becomes just the kind of interior impulse to believe that we should obey. And it is the fact that faith has just such an impulse behind it that constitutes the critical epistemic ground for Aquinas.

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