CHAPTER 3

AQUINAS AND THEOLOGY
AS SUBALTERNATE SCIENCE

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, we saw that while Grosseteste did not address himself to the question of the scientific character of theology, his interpretation of Aristotle through Neoplatonism led him to the position that all knowledge is ultimately theological. Aquinas seems not to have had access to Grosseteste’s work, and thus does not address himself directly to Grosseteste. However, Aquinas does ultimately end up with a position somewhat close to that of Grosseteste. That is, while Aquinas often speaks of the role of revelation in theology, while he often protests that knowledge of God is impossible, while he often states that predicates are not univocally predicated of God and creatures, he ends up with a great deal of positive, natural theology and an insistence that in some sense all knowledge is ultimately theological. In order to trace this through Aquinas’s thought, we need first to explicate his argument that theology is a subalternate science. This position depends on Aquinas’s understanding of three important issues: (1) self-evident truths; (2) the scientia beatorum; and (3) the scientia dei. After these three aspects of Aquinas’s argument are delineated, we will then be in a position to see just how much knowledge of God is not only possible, but necessary for him, and the consequences this has for his understanding of the relation between reason and the existing singular.

Per se in Aquinas

In q. 1 art. 2 of the Summa Theologiae, Aquinas addresses the question of “Whether Sacred Doctrine is a Science.” He argues that it is a science, but that the genus of science is twofold. On the one hand, there are those sciences that proceed from principles known by the natural light of the
intellect (such as arithmetic and geometry). On the other hand, there are those sciences that proceed from principles known by the light of a superior science (such as optics, which proceeds from principles known through geometry, and music, which proceeds from principles known through arithmetic).\textsuperscript{1} In response to an objection, Aquinas tells us that the principles of any science are known either \textit{per se} or are reduced to knowledge of a superior science.\textsuperscript{2} As we shall see, he will ultimately argue that theology is of the latter category, that is, it is a science whose principles are not \textit{per se},\textsuperscript{3} but are known through some superior science. Aquinas does not present an argument here as to why theology cannot be a science that begins with principles that are \textit{per se}. The first article, however, has already prepared us for this move. In that article, Aquinas argued that in addition to the philosophical disciplines, some further doctrine is required. This is because, he explains, “humans are ordered to God as toward a certain end which exceeds the comprehension of reason. . . . This end, however, ought to be known beforehand by humans, who ought to order their actions and intentions to that end” [... quia homo ordinatur ad deum sicut ad quendam finem qui comprehensio ne rationis excedit. . . . Finem autem oportet esse praecognitum hominibus, qui suas intentiones et actiones debent ordinare in finem].\textsuperscript{4} Aquinas shows here that there are some aspects of the divine that simply fall outside the grasp of human reason. These, then, must be revealed by God.

This same theme is picked up again as Aquinas moves toward his proof for the existence of God. For if he is going to prove that God exists, he must show first that God’s existence is not known \textit{per se} by us.\textsuperscript{5} In order to show this, Aquinas points out that something can be known \textit{per se} in two ways: “in one way, in itself and not for us; in another way, in itself and for us” [Dicendum quod contigit aliquid esse per se notum dupliciter: uno modo, secundum se et non quoad nos; alio modo, secundum se et quod nos].\textsuperscript{6} Something is known \textit{per se} when the predicate is included in the definition of the subject. Whenever one knows the quiddity of the subject, one will know such a proposition \textit{per se}. It could happen, then, that one does not know the quiddity of a subject and yet that which is predicated of that subject would be included in the definition of the subject. In this case the proposition would be known \textit{per se} in itself, but not for the one who does not know the quiddity of the subject. This is the case whenever the subject is God. In fact, because any predicate that can be applied to God can only be applied essentially, all true predications whose subject is God are known \textit{per se}, but not \textit{for us}. As a result, theology, from our point of view, cannot be a science that begins from per-se premises. If it is to be a science, it must begin with premises known through the light of a superior science.