

Comparative Analysis Paper  
**Thomas Aquinas and Augustine's Philosophies**

**DANILO V. ROGAYAN JR.**

College of Education

Ramon Magsaysay Technological University

### **Abstract**

This paper renders a comparative analysis of philosophical tenets of two chosen philosophers. These are the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and the philosophy of Augustine. The author compared the two philosophers consistent with their convictions and principles on faith and reason, God's existence, and theory of knowledge as well as the analytical presentation of their essential philosophical approaches and conclusions.

The thoughts of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine are but imitations of the gestures of their philosophical heroes, Plato and Aristotle. Augustine is pointing up to the heavens, and Aquinas gesturing toward the earth as substantiated by their respective epistemologies or perspectives with the nature and scope of knowledge. However, their thoughts interweave as well. There are both similarities and differences within the epistemologies of these two philosophers as expounded in the Comparative Analysis.

The analytical comparison of the two sets of thoughts is critically formulated basing from the philosopher's metaphysical and theoretical thinking with the derivation of extensive conclusion from their beliefs. The argumentative comparison is thoroughly explicated in the Comparative Analysis where a variety of philosophical schemes were discussed.

**Introduction**

This paper presents an analytical comparison of philosophical principles of two chosen philosophers. These are the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and the philosophy of Augustine.

St. Thomas Aquinas, was born near Naples, Italy, in 1225. Educated in the Dominican Order in Paris and Cologne, he devoted his life to the knowledge of God. He taught at the great medieval University of Paris and at Naples, was engaged in all the major theological controversies of his day, and wrote works on every part of philosophy and theology. He died in 1274, was canonized in 1323, and in 1567 was proclaimed a Doctor of the Universal Church (Thomas Aquinas College Board of Governors, 2002). In him is the consummate union of sanctity and intellect. His achievements in philosophy and theology were so profound and permanent that he has long been recognized as the patron of all Catholic education. He has received the title of Angelic Doctor, not only because of his astounding purity, but because his wisdom surpasses, so to speak, that of mere men. St. Thomas was, in the words of his teacher St. Albert the Great, "the flower and glory of the world" (Thomas Aquinas College Board of Governors, 2002).

By profession, Aquinas was a theologian rather than a philosopher. Indeed he nowhere characterizes himself as a philosopher, and the references to philosophers found in his own work refer to pagans rather than Christians (Jordan, as cited in Blackwell, 2006). Nonetheless much of his work bears upon philosophical topics, and in this sense may be characterized as philosophical. Aquinas' philosophical thought has exerted enormous influence on subsequent Christian theology, especially that of the Roman Catholic Church, extending to Western philosophy in general. Aquinas stands as a

vehicle and modifier of Aristotelianism, Augustinian Neoplatonism and Proclean Neoplatonism (Wikipedia, 2010).

Augustine of Hippo (November 13, 354 – August 28, 430) was Bishop of Hippo Regius. He was a Latin-speaking philosopher and theologian who lived in the Roman Africa Province. His writings were very influential in the development of Western Christianity (Wikipedia, 2010)

Augustine, a Latin church father, is one of the most important figures in the development of Western Christianity. He "established anew the ancient faith" (Wikipedia as written by Jerome, 418). In his early years he was heavily influenced by Manichaeism and afterward by the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus (Wikipedia, as cited in Cross & Livingstone, 2005). After his conversion to Christianity and baptism, Augustine developed his own approach to philosophy and theology, accommodating a variety of methods and different perspectives (Wikipedia, as cited in TeSelle, 1970). He believed that the grace of Christ was indispensable to human freedom and framed the concepts of original sin and just war. (Wikipedia, 2010).

The basis of comparison is derived from the philosophical principles of the two philosophers in terms of their convictions and principles on faith and reason, God's existence, and theory of knowledge as well as the analytical presentation of their essential philosophical approaches and conclusions.

Three broad issues were considered in appraising the two philosophies, viz, rigor or the suitability and aptness of the approach that have been applied to key research methods in the study; credibility which focuses whether the findings are well presented

and meaningful; and relevance or how useful are the findings to the author and to his affiliation.

The comparative analysis gives emphasis to the concepts and principles of the two philosophers highlighting its relevance to the philosophical development, metaphysical basis of the universe, the source of knowledge, basis of morality, teacher education and/or the teaching profession.

**Description**

The comparative analysis focuses on the differences and similarities of the philosophies of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine consistent with their convictions and principles on faith and reason, God's existence, and theory of knowledge as well as the analytical presentation of their essential philosophical approaches and conclusions.

One of the differences of these two philosophers is the fact that they're over half a millennium apart. Augustine was much more influential to the development of early medieval philosophy, and Aquinas to later thought. But even more than that, the differences between the two in approaches and conclusions lead to huge clefs in medieval thought, which culminate in the Reformation (largely Augustinian) and the Counter/Catholic Reformation (largely Aquinian).

Thomas Aquinas lived at a critical juncture of western culture when the arrival of the Aristotelian corpus in Latin translation reopened the question of the relation between faith and reason, calling into question the *modus vivendi* that had obtained for centuries. In two stints as a regent master Thomas defended the mendicant orders and, of greater historical importance, countered both the Averroistic interpretations of Aristotle and the Franciscan tendency to reject Greek philosophy. The result was a new *modus vivendi* between faith and philosophy which survived until the rise of the new physics. The Catholic Church has over the centuries regularly and consistently reaffirmed the central importance of Thomas's work for understanding its teachings concerning the Christian revelation, and his close textual commentaries on Aristotle represent a cultural resource

which is now receiving increased recognition (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as cited in Mendelson, 2009).

Augustine is a Christian Neoplatonist, North African Bishop, Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the decisive developments in the western philosophical tradition was the eventually widespread merging of the Greek philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious and scriptural traditions. Augustine is one of the main figures through and by whom this merging was accomplished. He is, as well, one of the towering figures of medieval philosophy whose authority and thought came to exert a pervasive and enduring influence well into the modern period, and even up to the present day, especially among those sympathetic to the religious tradition which he helped to shape. But even for those who do not share this sympathy, there is much in Augustine's thought that is worthy of serious philosophical attention. Augustine is not only one of the major sources whereby classical philosophy in general and Neoplatonism in particular enter into the mainstream of early and subsequent medieval philosophy, but there are significant contributions of his own that emerge from his modification of that Greco-Roman inheritance, e.g., his subtle accounts of belief and authority, his account of knowledge and illumination, his emphasis upon the importance and centrality of the will, and his focus upon a new way of conceptualizing the phenomena of human history, just to cite a few of the more conspicuous examples (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as cited in Mendelson, 2009).

## Presentation of Data

The philosophies of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine are presented in logical scheme in reference to their metaphysical and theoretical thinking in their views on faith and reason, God's existence, and theory of knowledge.

Views on Faith and Reason. It can be said that Thomas Aquinas synthesized faith and reason to a greater extent than any other philosopher. Unlike Augustine—who had made a sharp distinction between the natural and divine world in his *City of God*—Aquinas made no sharp distinction between the natural and divine worlds.

He thought that all of creation—natural and supernatural—and all truth, revealed or rational, emanated from God. The two sources of knowledge, reason and revelation, do not conflict. Revelation does not contradict reason.

Aquinas thought that philosophy and science both lead to the truth. In fact, he tended to equate the truths of philosophy and science with the work of “the Philosopher,” Aristotle. He believed that Aristotle’s philosophical and scientific conclusions were true for the most part, and therefore must be in agreement with the revealed truths of religion; that is, with the contents of the Bible (everything.com as cited in Shouler, 2009).

Augustine believed that reason can never be religiously neutral. Reason is not one independent approach to the truth while faith is another. Reason is a function of the whole person and is affected by the orientation of your heart, your passion, and your faith. As he puts it, “Faith seeks, understanding finds; whence the prophet says, ‘Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand.’” The faith and reason issue also applies to moral knowledge. Contrary to the Socratic dictum that “Virtue is knowledge,” and that knowing



leads you to pursue the truth, Augustine maintained, as a result of his own moral struggles, that knowledge does not produce goodness." According to Augustine, "Faith goes before; understanding follows after" (everything.com as cited in Shouler, 2009).

Views on God's Existence. In the first way, Aquinas writes that "it is certain, and it is clear from sense-experience, that some things in this world are moved." Aquinas, like Aristotle, understood the term motion to be reduction from a state of potentiality to one of act. If something is in motion, it must have been moved by another, and that by another, and so on. "The second way is from the nature of efficient cause," Aquinas begins. "There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible." Imagine that you look outside your window and see a tree branch moving. That branch is being moved by the wind. That wind has its causes, and so on (everything.com as cited in Shouler, 2009).

These first two arguments are cosmological, since they show features of the world order, like motions and causes, and claim that these realities require an explanation from a divine reality outside the world order.

Augustine has already explained his notion of God as the being who created the universe ex nihilo. There are several other components to this view. First, Augustine provided an argument for the existence of God. More famously, he gave an explanation of how God's goodness could be explained in light of the evils in the world (everything.com as cited in Shouler, 2009).

Views on Theory of Knowledge. Augustine has a negative view of the senses.

He does not think knowledge can come from them because they never provide a stable knowledge. Everything the senses perceive is ever-changing. "Through Plotinus he early understood that pure sensism leads inevitably to universal doubt; if reality is in the end reducible to sensible appearance, then, since this is in a state of perpetual flux and self-contradiction, no kind of certitude will any longer be possible" (Sanders, as cite in Gilson, 1940).

Aquinas had the same sort of idea. First, there must be the knowledge and understanding of things on this earth, the physical, before the philosopher can move to something incorporeal. This is mostly because one gains knowledge through the senses—this is a subject that will be discussed later, however, it must be revealed at this point in time. After this knowledge, one would put down reason, as if it were a hat, to more fully know the divine. "Moreover, philosophical knowledge of God, though genuine is extremely limited" (Sanders, as cited in Copleston, 1972). More blatantly put, one must have a mystical experience. "Finally, knowledge about God, whether philosophical or theological, is subordinate and teleologically orientated to the experimental knowledge of God, knowledge by acquaintance, which is attainable, imperfectly in mystical states, perfectly in the vision of God in heaven" (Sanders, as cited in Gilson, 1960).

## **Comparative Analysis**

*On the views of faith and reason.*

Aquinas distinguished theology from philosophy. Theology gives you knowledge through faith and revelation, and philosophy gives you knowledge through the natural powers of the intellect common to all men.

Prior to Aquinas, Plato was widely available to early medieval readers. But Aristotle's writings didn't become available until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Aristotle's philosophy served up a great system, but it was a system that contradicted Christian doctrine on some crucial matters.

Shouler (2009) expounds that first, he thought that the world was eternal and uncreated. In addition, he denied personal immortality. On both matters, reason does not point to the world being created or eternal. So Aquinas thought one must side with revelation or Scripture.

The faith and reason issue also applies to moral knowledge. Contrary to the Socratic dictum that "Virtue is knowledge," and that knowing leads you to pursue the truth, Augustine maintained, as a result of his own moral struggles, that knowledge does not produce goodness." According to Augustine, "Faith goes before; understanding follows after."

Shouler (2009) also discusses that Augustine used reason to work out his own doctrines and to agree with or refute the doctrines of others. He was also a man of faith.

As a philosopher, however, he had to inquire and pursue the truth. True philosophy had to join faith and reason, he thought. But according to Augustine, faith was primary.

The way I see it, the two philosophers have an extensive view of faith and reason where they just differ in the degree of which of these two elements are more indispensable in accordance with their respective convictions. For Aquinas, he synthesized faith & reason extensively where his thoughts of creation and truth came from God heralding on the premise of distinguishing theology from philosophy as two different bodies of knowledge.

For Augustine, he firmly believed that reason can't be neutral and said that earth was created ex nihilo or from or out of nothing. He likewise insisted everything is form & matter. Unlike Aquinas, Augustine believes more intense in faith than in reason where he perceives that faith should come after understanding.

*On the views of God's existence.*

According to Aquinas, "for then there would be no first mover." And then there would be no subsequent movers, since subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are moved by the first mover; "the staff moves only because it is moved by the hand," Aquinas explains. "So there must be a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

Shouler (2009) contends that from the arguments one can observe a feature that appears in all five of Aquinas's arguments. Aquinas ends each of the arguments with the

conclusion that God is the cause of some reality, since without God the reality would not be explainable.

Though Augustine is in the Platonic tradition, he had several points of disagreement with Plato. Augustine didn't devalue the senses as much as Plato, since he believed that God created them, along with the natural world they reveal. Also, Plato believed that the mind retains knowledge from a previous existence before this life. Augustine could not accept this view, since there is no mind with information prior to birth when beings are "ensouled."

Shouler (2009) argues that neither does Augustine believe that these truths are known via the natural intellect, as the philosopher knows Plato's forms. Rather, Augustine claimed that you discover these eternal truths through the illumination of the divine light. He believed that the divine light is to the mind as the sun is to the eyes—a metaphor straight out of Plato's allegory of the cave. Every human mind needs God's light to uncover the forms or to see the truth. If a person thinks she has discovered this on her own, she simply misunderstood the source of their light.

Both philosophers resolutely believe on the existence of God as they are both part of the remarkable foundation of the Roman Catholicism. In this premise, they do have dissimilar perspectives on God's existence. Aquinas argued that God set everything in motion and concluded that God is the cause of reality where some of his arguments are cosmological or a logical argument that tries to prove the existence of God from empirical information about the universe. On the other hand, Augustine being a Neo-Platist argued on God's existence and said that God helps humans find truth. From these

comparison, I can say that they do have both profound faith that God exists, however, Aquinas relies on the premise that all real circumstances transpiring in the world are caused by no other than God while Augustine counts on the belief that human exists in the world to find the truth of life with the aid of the Divine Providence. Though they have different stances, they both are cognizant of the existence of God, whom they both believe is the being that created the universe.

*On the views of knowledge.*

For Aquinas sensing is how we come to knowledge. Augustine has different idea. Augustine says that we come to know through divine illumination of ideas in the memory. "We ought rather to believe that the nature of the intellectual mind was so made that, by being naturally subject to the intelligible realities, according to the arrangement of the creator, it see these truths in a certain incorporeal light of a unique kind, just as the eye of the body see the things all around it in this corporeal light" (Sanders, as cited in Maurer, 1982). One's knowledge is illumined by the light of God. Much like a flashlight or a candle illumines a dark house without electricity. "It is clear that in his opinion the human mind needs a divine illumination to apprehend truths which in some sense transcend it or are superior to it and thus exceed its capacity when it is left to itself" (Sanders, as cited in Copleston, 1972).

Sanders (2005) states that truths are beyond the weak human intellect. The human necessarily needs divine illumination to grow in knowledge; he cannot do it himself. This idea fits in well with Augustine's whole thought of the weakness of

humanity. To clarify, this illumination does not inhibit free will. Each man chooses to “see the light” or not “see the light.” “The divine illumination makes visible to the mind the elements of immutability, necessity and unchangeability in eternal truths, though it does not follow that we actually see the divine activity.” Men must have “an eye fit to see” the illuminated ideas, but that does not necessarily show that the illumination is divine. Augustine held firmly to this theory of divine illumination, but “As for the theory of divine illumination, it was given a minimizing interpretation by Aquinas.”

As I appraise these comparisons, I would say that Aquinas' idea of knowledge began with the senses. Meaning, knowledge shall originate within ourselves, within our senses, it is knowing what we know for us to know other things. It is like an understanding of our own senses that will pave the way in our acquisition of knowledge towards other things in this world.

For Augustine, being a man of faith, steadfastly believes on his assertion that knowledge originates through divine illumination of ideas in the memory. In other words, the acquisition of knowledge is through God's illumination of thoughts in the memories of individual human beings. Knowledge of God is the foundation of all the knowledge existing in the world where he believes that man will acquire this knowledge if he himself is ready to know and understand God.

In conclusion, Sanders (2005) asserts that Augustine and Aquinas have some similarities within their different ideas of knowledge. Both present an ascent which starts with reason and ends in a mystical experience. This is where they separate though. However one attains knowledge, knowledge of God is the end and final thought.

## **Conclusion**

Appraising the two philosophies of two great philosophers, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine is such a worthwhile endeavor to execute noting that they do have similarities and differences in the way they view faith and reason, God's existence and the theory of knowledge. It is at this juncture that I would conclude that their philosophies are extensively valuable specifically in philosophical development as these perspectives help in the foundation of more substantial studies between theology and philosophy.

Furthermore, it explicates the way these two philosophers perceive the source of knowledge where one asserts that it comes from the senses and the other in divine illumination. As a future educator, this greatly helps me in the formulation of educational tenets in the manner on which knowledge is acquired that would help my future students in their acquisition of this.

To end, the philosophical thoughts of Aquinas and Augustine also pave the way in opening the significance of faith and reason in the holistic development of man. Without faith, understanding of the world may not be considerable as it burns the flame of reasoning with the basis of the world's moral laws. In other words, knowledge and reasoning is futile, without faith specifically fidelity to God.



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