

THE NARRATIVE OF NATURAL LAW IN AQUINAS'S COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 1

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[Editor's note: Aquinas's Commentary on Romans 1 follows Paul in recounting a narrative about natural knowledge and the culpable loss of its effectiveness through injustice and ingratitude. Throughout his commentary Aquinas imitates Paul in making knowledge depend upon justice. Differing views of justice may lead to differing interpretations of natural law.]

THOMAS AQUINAS'S *Summa theologiae* directs readers to Romans 1:20 as warrant for the existence of natural law, and there we find a narrative. Aquinas used the language of natural law for several purposes.¹ The end it serves in his Commentary on Romans 1 bears special scrutiny because the *Summa* refers to Romans 1:20 as natural law's scriptural warrant, and yet there, without impugning other uses, Aquinas treated it more as a character in a drama than as a guide to goodness. Although I set the episode in Romans 1 into the context of both the entire commentary and Aquinas's commentaries on the other Pauline epistles, I focus in this article on a comparison with the more immediate context of Romans 1:20, since that is the verse to which the *Summa* refers students of natural law.

Aquinas's Commentary on Romans 1² follows Paul in telling a real if sketchy story into which Aquinas fitted natural law—a story of a natural knowledge and the culpable loss of its entire effectiveness through injustice and ingratitude, so that the Gentiles have no use of it any

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¹ I owe my view about the trope of natural law as a language to John R. Bowlin. For a similar analysis of "will" that dissolves difficulties, see Bowlin, "Psychology and Theodicy in Aquinas," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 7 (1998), forthcoming.

² I follow the Marietti edition. Thomas Aquinas, *Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, 8th rev. ed., P. Raphael Cai, O.P., ed. (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1953). Translations of this and other works of Aquinas are my own. For the convenience of readers who wish to see which Pauline verse is being analyzed by Aquinas, I provide biblical chapter and (anachronistically) verse, followed by the Marietti paragraph number, e.g. *In Rom* 1:19, #113.

more.³ That story lies embedded in the larger one of the coming of Christ, one in which God's wrath at injustice and ingratitude reflects the loving forgiveness that works to restore them. Yet the Romans Commentary and the story it tells appear to be almost entirely unknown here to students of natural law, perhaps because an English translation is only now in preparation.⁴ The exception proves the rule. When scholars do refer to the Romans Commentary, they tend to quote isolated *dicta* or formal *quaestiones* rather than to trace the narrative movement of Aquinas's attempt to follow a biblical text, so that it is often hard to tell that the citation comes from a genre different from that of the *Summa*.⁵

Aquinas's much better-known treatment in the *Summa theologiae* points to the commentaries in general and on the subject of natural law. Its Prologue introduces the *Summa* as a more systematic treatment of the topics that arise from commentary on Scripture. Its first question parses the Aristotelian first principles of a distinct science as the revelations (lower case "r") of its formal light, so that sacred doctrine becomes more, not less Aristotelian as it proceeds from Scripture. Indeed, in proceeding from Revelation it becomes *scientia* par excellence, and, by the time Aquinas is through with question 1, its Aristotelian or principled character is its biblical character.⁶ Students of natural law, precisely if they care about the scientific (which for the *Summa* is the biblical) character accorded natural law, would do well

³ It is not clear to what extent Aquinas realized that Paul's story is about differences between Gentiles and Jews, or whether he assimilated the Pauline "original sins" to his account of the Fall in Eden. References to "the Gentiles" gradually disappeared from Aquinas's exposition, and now he seemed to be referring to human beings in general. By chaps. 9–11 he was definitely speaking of Gentiles as non-Jews, and eventually at 10:19 he would even speak of *gentilitas* (#851). God does not directly lead human beings into sin, but rather subtracts the grace by which human beings are held upright.

⁴ Steven C. Boguslawski is now preparing a full translation. What appears to be a French version by Pierre Leroy, *Le Commentaire ad Romanos de S. Aquinas* (Louvain, 1970), is in fact a concordance complementary to Deferrari and more useful than Busa. I do not address here the nature and scope of Scholastic exegesis, but I share the perspective of Thomas Domanyi, *Der Römerbriefkommentar des Thomas von Aquin: Ein Beitrag zur Untersuchung seiner Auslegungsmethoden* (Bern: Lang, 1979) esp. 193–201. For an earlier, more traditional reading, see Pierre Leroy, "La conscience dans le commentaire ad Romanos de S. Thomas d'Aquin," 2 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1970). See also Mary Catherine Daly, *The Notion of Justification in the Commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Epistle to the Romans* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1985), and the more recent work of Marc Aillet, *Lire la Bible avec S. Thomas: Le passage de la littera à la res dans la Somme théologique* (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1993).

⁵ See, e.g., Daniel Westberg's admirable *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action, and Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 227–28, citing *In Rom* 8:6, ##617–18.

⁶ *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 2–3, 8. For a detailed interpretation of how Aquinas makes use of the Aristotelian scientific character of sacred doctrine in the *Summa* in order to render it more scriptural and christocentric, see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995) 16–70.

to attend to Aquinas's commentaries as the place where Aquinas expounded and commented on the first principles of sacred doctrine concerning it.

It is in the Romans Commentary that natural law finds its scriptural home. In the *Summa*, the statement that "the invisible things of God can be known from the things God has made" (Rom 1:19–20) serves as biblical warrant for the existence of a natural moral law, as well as for the demonstrability of the proposition "God exists."⁷ To many, therefore, it will signal a change of genre from sacred doctrine to metaphysics, so that the Aristotelian rather than the scriptural commentaries come to mind. That is to mistake the matter for the function, or in Aquinas's terms to miss the formal rationale. He quoted the verse in obedience to the rule of the *Summa* to take its proper arguments from Scripture.⁸ Rom 1:20 is the warranting authority in sacred doctrine for arguments for the demonstrability of God's existence; on the basis of Rom 1:20, or on Paul's authority, Aquinas believed that God's existence is demonstrable, even if each of the five ways should fail. He allowed explicitly for that possibility when he opened the *Summa* with the observation that sacred doctrine always contains "an admixture of many errors."⁹

On the basis of Rom 1:19–20 Aquinas also believed there is such a thing as a moral law of human nature, even if it should prove unable to perform its office of leading human beings to the good. "Good is to be done and evil to be avoided"¹⁰ does not ground but elaborates the argument in favor of natural law in the *Summa*. Despite the numerous articles that intervene between the beginning of the *Summa* and the

⁷ *ST* 1–2, q 93, a 2, ad 2, 1, q 2, a 2

⁸ According to *ST* 1, q 1, a 8, metaphysical arguments (and therefore the famous "preambles") "may be cited only as *external* evidence with *probable* authority," rather than proper arguments in sacred doctrine, on this matter, see Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1967) 22–34. Used authoritatively, merely Aristotelian demonstrations would, perhaps paradoxically, destroy the integrity of sacred doctrine as Aristotelian science in the way that Aquinas was careful to define it. By merely Aristotelian demonstrations, I mean demonstrations that have not been taken up into the demonstration of the Father by the Son, of which Aquinas made metaphysical demonstrations a penultimate case. Aristotelian demonstrations work in the *Summa* by the courtesy accorded deficient Christology, see Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* 58–70, 211–13. For similar readings of preambles, see Michel Corbin, *Le chemin de la théologie chez Thomas d'Aquin*, Bibliothèque des archives de philosophie, n s 16 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974) 700–27, Otto Hermann Pesch, *Die Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin: Versuch eines systematisch-theologischen Dialogs*, 2nd ed (Mainz: Matthias Grunewald, 1985) 568, 583 n 10. In particular, this article does not make the overarching existential/sapiential distinction that some have found too broad, but only the careful and exhaustively supported distinctions on nature and grace that comprise the book's most useful detail.

⁹ *ST* prologue

¹⁰ In adopting this translation I am not referring to the account of John Finnis, for this debate, see Russell Hittinger, *Critique of the New Natural Law Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1987)

treatise on law, Aquinas has not forgotten the ruling of question 1 that it is Scripture which renders sacred doctrine a science, and he did not backslide into philosophy¹¹ when he took up natural law. The *Summa* intends to take its authoritative first principles from Scripture everywhere in sacred doctrine because otherwise its unity disintegrates.¹² The treatise on natural law follows that rule, insisting upon rather than undermining its scientific character. To read Aquinas in another way is to do him the disservice of rendering him inconsistent. Why Aquinas argued in favor of natural law is explained in the *sed contra*: the reason is because Paul says in Rom 1:20 that “the invisible things of God can be known from the things God has made.” Other quotations of Rom 1:20 in the *Summa*, which are numerous, also fit my interpretation.¹³

But in his Commentary on Romans, Aquinas portrayed natural law as an injured and therefore ineffective party in a story of decline and fall. Aquinas followed Paul in reporting that the Gentiles had detained the natural knowledge of God in unrighteousness. That natural knowledge of God is at once the natural knowledge of God’s existence, and the natural knowledge of God’s will, or knowledge of the human end and the human good. So bound, natural knowledge could no longer exercise the office of true cognition of God, which is “to lead human beings to the good.”¹⁴ It became a failed knowledge of God, an instance of ignorance rather than knowledge, an ignorance brought about by injustice and therefore culpable. Aquinas made the story a subplot in the larger narrative of the gospel grace of Christ, which first reveals

¹¹ See Pesch, *Die Theologie der Rechtfertigung* 865.

¹² *ST* 1, q. 1., a. 3.

¹³ *ST* 1–2, q. 93, a. 2, ad 2; see 1, q. 12, a. 12, *sed contra* and 1, q. 2, a. 2, *sed contra*. Besides those, other quotations of Rom 1:20 appear in the *Summa*, most of them important. I give Aquinas’s own interpretation of Rom 1:20 in parentheses, even when the quotation appears in an objection: 1, q. 13, a. 5 (names may be used of God and creatures by analogy); 1, q. 32, a. 1, obj. 1 (the Trinity may and may not be said to be known by natural reason); 1, q. 56, a. 3 (human knowledge of God is unlike that of angels); 1, q. 65, a. 1, ad 3 (creatures do and do not lead to God); 1, q. 79, a. 9 (human beings discover truth by temporal things); 1, q. 84, a. 5, obj. 2 (truth is known through eternal types); 1, q. 88 a. 3 (God is not the first object of knowledge); 1–2, q. 111, a. 4 (*scientia* of human things is necessary to the teacher); 2–2, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 3 (in faith a human being assents to the truth on account of a right will); 2–3, q. 27, a. 3, obj. 2 (after being known by faith, divine things are not recognized by created things, but through God’s own self); 2–2, q. 34, a. 1 (God can be hated as author of created effects by a depraved will); 2–2, q. 81, a. 7 (the human mind needs to be united to God by the assimilation [*manuductione*] of sensible things); 2–2, q. 175, a. 1, ad 1 (as an abstraction from sensible effects, rapture is not natural to the human being); 2–2, q. 180, a. 4 (the contemplative life includes the contemplation of created things); 3, q. 1, a. 1, *sed contra* (Rom 1:20 warrants the fittingness of the Incarnation, as 2–2, q. 81, a. 7 *necessitates*); 3, q. 60, a. 2, obj. 1 (sensible creatures may indicate something sacred without being sanctifying). See also the one quotation of Rom 1:18 at 2–2, q. 45, a. 4, obj. 2 (the wisdom gained by study is compatible with mortal sin, but not the wisdom of the Holy Spirit).

¹⁴ *In* Rom 1:18, #112. At *ST* 1–2, q. 92, a. 1 the desired effect of law is also precisely to make human beings good.

the bondage of the natural law in freeing it for renewed effectiveness in a life of grace-sustained justice and gratitude exemplified by the justified person such as Paul.¹⁵

The *Summa*, on the other hand, portrays natural law more as a cause than as a character. Natural law is defined as a human rational participation in God's eternal law; God's knowledge, after all, is causative, while "participation" is first of all causal language.¹⁶ Natural law in the *Summa* becomes a subset of the ways or laws by which God, as a provident or prudent ruler, governs creaturely subjects, not so much by informing them (which God also does) as by moving them in ways that befit the creaturely nature God has given each species. God's moving creatures in ways that befit them does not mean God has undermined divine freedom in constraining future choices by past ones; rather Aquinas thought of the creature's nature and God's movement of it as one unitary gift—since to have a creaturely nature is to enjoy a principle of movement as God-given. The law of nature for rational creatures allows God to move them by involving what is most their own, namely their reason, in their free movement of themselves.

Although the two portrayals of natural law differ as character and cause, they are not at odds. An interest in causes recurs in the Romans Commentary, as narrative structures persist in the *Summa*.¹⁷ But since narrative structures have been overlooked, it is to them that this article attends.¹⁸ Narrative structures are the more important since Aquinas insisted, in a passage little adverted to, that "the mode of this science is fittingly narrative,"¹⁹ a mode to which Aquinas may subordinate law as a subcategory.²⁰

¹⁵ For an account of how Aquinas portrayed Paul as an exemplar of virtue, see my *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* 73–95.

¹⁶ *ST* 1–2, q. 93, a. 2; 1, q. 14, a. 8. God's knowledge is not the mechanical efficient causality to which non-Aristotelians may reduce the word, but has a great deal of the final cause in it. See Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1939) 308–11; on participation in the divine nature, the older Italian version of this study is preferable to the expanded French version.

¹⁷ For a compact version of the similar narrative underlying the *Summa theologiae*, see the prologue to the Sermon on the Two Precepts of Charity, cited in n. 75 below.

¹⁸ Along the way, the narrative structures tend to enrich and qualify the interpretation of natural law as moved by the virtues; see Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas and the Implications for Modern Ethics* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University, 1991) 96–97, 100–101.

¹⁹ The context is that the evidence of the faith must appear within the framework of a certain story in order to make sense as saving (*In I Sent.*, prolog., a. 5, corpus). Compare Aquinas's treatment of the resurrection, where he said that to understand that a resuscitation of a human being has occurred is not yet faith, until one understands that it is the resurrection of the saving humanity of God (*ST* 2–2, q. 1, a. 4, ad 1; see *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* 176–80).

²⁰ The passage uses the word *narrativus* in a larger and a narrower sense. In the first place it is a form of human reception of revelation, a gloss on *orativus*, and opposed to

At least five logically distinct types of theology and ethics compete for the designation "narrative": (1) a "christological" type, which takes the narratives of the life of Jesus Christ as central to Christianity, in opposition to the 19th-century dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith (so Hans Frei²¹); (2) a "genre critical" type, which distinguishes biblical narrative forms from biblical legal, poetic, and other modes of composition; (3) a "typological" type, which sees how other Christian narratives, especially hagiographical ones, conform their subjects to the life of Christ;²² (4) an "existential" type, in which narratives are important because they organize space and time for us;²³ (5) what we may call a "biographical" type: narratives provide the best way for liberation theologians, say, to get a hearing; the most elegant example of biographical narrative as argument may be a non-theological, fictionalized one, Virginia Wolf's *A Room With a View*.

According to Aquinas's Prologue to the Pauline epistles, Paul's "whole teaching is the grace of Christ."²⁴ In the Romans Commentary as a whole the narrative is one of the grace of Christ "in itself,"²⁵ where "the power of gospel grace is for the salvation of all human beings,"²⁶ and "all human beings" are divided in typical Pauline fashion into Jews and Gentiles.²⁷ It resembles most closely therefore the first of the

revelativus. As narrativus signorum, sacred doctrine places the sensible evidence of God's saving humanity in the context of God's preaching through the mouth of Christ, since faith comes by hearing. In this context sacred doctrine descends, by use of metaphor, symbol, and parable, to argument, precept, promise, and example. "Law" glosses precept, and "narrative," now in a narrower sense, expounds example.

²¹ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974); *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); "Theological Reflections of the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations," and "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York: Oxford, 1993); and Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1982; Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 1994).

²² See Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).

²³ See Stephen D. Crites, "The Spatial Dimensions of Narrative Truth-telling," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 97-118.

²⁴ *In Rom*, Prol., #11.

²⁵ "Secundum se," as opposed to the grace of Christ as head of the Church (Hebrews) or the grace of Christ as present in the Mystical Body (the others)—so *In Rom*, Prol., #11.

²⁶ "Virtutem evangelicae gratiae esse omnibus hominibus in salutem," *In Rom* 1:18, #109.

²⁷ For more on Jews and Gentiles in the Romans Commentary, see Steven Boguslawski, "Aquinas on Romans 9-11" (Yale Ph.D. dissertation, in preparation); and Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "Aquinas's Commentary on Romans 9-11" (a translation of excerpts with an introduction), in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 320-37.

types; it is christological through and through.²⁸ Here I mention the wider context of the rest of letter and of Aquinas's commentaries on the other Pauline epistles in order to focus on the episode of the story in which natural law appears as a character, Rom 1:18 ff., and its relation to the characterizations in the *Summa*. Because of the context of the letter, natural law does not show up in the order of creation abstracted from God's plan to elevate it, but in the order of creation as seen precisely in the light of the gospel grace of Christ. The drama of the story consists in the surprising situation in which Paul's narrative locates natural law: it appears bound and captive. Many read the *Summa* as portraying natural law as strong and able. But the *Summa* refers to a Pauline context, and in his commentary on that passage in Paul, Aquinas narrates the eclipse of natural law. What is the story that makes that difference?

NATURAL LAW IN THE COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 1

Chapter 1 of the Romans Commentary tells among other things how injustice and ingratitude reduced the character of natural law—like nature itself—from strength to weakness and left it in need of mercy. In short, it is a radically theological story, one that has more in common with the parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son than with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Despite the presence in the Romans Commentary of elegant distinctions and arguments for the proposition "God exists," philosophical rubrics do not control there.²⁹ Admirers and detractors of Aquinas who regard him as making Paul "a religious interpreter of the human situation as such, a Christian student of the philosophy of religion"³⁰ may be surprised. In Aquinas's Romans Commentary, Paul is a "vessel of election," an apostle.³¹ Accordingly, Aquinas announced the topic of the entire epistle as *gratia Christi secundum se*, the grace of Christ considered in itself.³² Aquinas characterized the whole epistle from 1:16b to 12:1 as "show[ing] forth the

²⁸ Pamela M. Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law: An Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994) speaks explicitly of a narrative of the agent's coming to moral maturity and implicitly of salvation history in the *Summa*; the second theme is closer to the one considered here. For another version of natural law where a biblical narrative stands in the foreground, see David Novak, "Jewish Ethics and Natural Law," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 5 (1996) 205–17.

²⁹ This thesis is the burden of my *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* chaps. 4–6.

³⁰ The phrase, derogatory in context, comes from Karl Barth, *Kurze Erzählung des Römerbriefes* (Munich: Kaiser, 1956); trans. as *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond; John Knox, 1959) 24. I discuss and counter Barth's charge in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* chap. 3.

³¹ See also Otto Hermann Pesch, "Paul as Professor of Theology: The Image of the Apostle in St. Thomas's Theology," *The Thomist* 38 (1974) 584–605.

³² *In Rom*, Prol., #11.

power of gospel grace.”³³ His Commentary reveals that the purpose of the natural knowledge of God’s will or law, as of the natural knowledge of God’s existence, is to show forth the power of the gospel grace of Christ.

In Aquinas’s Commentary, natural law does not show the power of the gospel by its straightforward success; rather natural law demonstrates the power of the gospel by its failure. Natural law is here a self-consuming artifact.³⁴ It serves not to improve behavior but to increase guilt. Aquinas elsewhere deployed the natural law of the Romans Commentary to explicate two features of the Old Law of the Commentary on Galatians, that it “manifests infirmity” and lends the “experience of impotence.”³⁵ Those are other, less accustomed uses to which Paul, or Aquinas following him as commentator, put the language of natural law.

According to the Romans Commentary, natural law moves human beings not one step closer to right action—unless it is restored by grace. Only the New Law, the Holy Spirit indwelling in the heart, rectifies nature.³⁶ This seems a paradox to some, namely that natural law works not by itself but by grace. Against many understandings of nature that would oppose it to supernatural grace, the Christian paradox is that natural law does not, in the concrete world of God’s creation, work by nature alone. Even in the Garden of Eden the nature of Adam and Eve worked by grace. God might have created them otherwise, but in fact did not.³⁷ Aquinas insisted straightforwardly and repeatedly:

[Paul] says [the nations] “naturally did those things that were of the law,” that is, what the law commands, namely with respect to moral precepts, which are under the authority of natural reason. But a problem arises because he says “naturally.” For it seems to furnish a defense for the Pelagians, who taught that human beings were able to observe all the precepts of the law by their own nature. Thus “naturally” is to be expounded as meaning *by nature reformed by grace*. . . . Or “naturally” can be said to mean the natural law showing them what is to be done, . . . which is the light of natural reason, in which is the image of God. And even so it is not excluded that grace is necessary for moving the affect. . . . [G]race is furthermore required for moving the affect.³⁸

³³ “Virtutem evangelicae gratiae,” *In Rom* 1:16b, #97.

³⁴ The term originates with Stanley Fish.

³⁵ “First [Paul says this] because the law shows sins. Rom 3:20: ‘By law came the knowledge of sin.’ Then because it manifests human infirmity, inasmuch as the human being cannot avoid sin, except by grace, which was not given by law. . . . So the law has yielded to grace, inasmuch as it afforded the recognition of sin and the experience of its own impotence (*experientiam propriae impotentiae*)” (*In Gal* 3:22, #174). Note that Rom 3:20 primarily refers to the law of nature, according to *In Rom* 3:20, #297.

³⁶ *In Rom* 1:16b, #109, interpreted in terms of *ST* 1–2, q. 106, a. 1 and q. 109, a. 3–4.

³⁷ *ST* 1, q. 95, a. 1; q. 100, a. 1.

³⁸ “Unde exponendum est *naturaliter*, id est per naturam gratia reformatam,” *In Rom* 2:14, ##215–216. On account of Aquinas’s strict procedure of arguing in articles, the role of grace in working nature goes without saying in the parallel *ST* 1–2, q. 91, a. 2, misleading commentators who read the treatise on law as though it stopped short of the

In the Romans Commentary, therefore, Aquinas did not imagine natural law operating as a rival to grace. He perceived natural law shot through with grace, if it were to operate at all.³⁹

Aquinas's portrayal of natural law as lacking grace, as an awkward and pitiful figure, hangs on a central turn of Paul's plot: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven upon all impiety and unrighteousness of those human beings who detained 'The Truth of God' in unrighteousness" (1:18). That turn raises several questions that Aquinas's Commentary attempted to answer about the character here called "The Truth of God," detained by human beings: In what light does the revelation of God's wrath show The Truth of God? What was its original character? Does The Truth of God include natural law? How did human beings detain it? How did Aquinas portray the character of natural law under detention? How did its detention affect its human captors? I now provide Aquinas's answers to these questions.

In What Light Does the Revelation of God's Wrath Show The Truth of God?

Aquinas glossed the wrath of God as God's providential design by which God vindicates the divine purpose and justifies human beings, culminating in the cross and Resurrection, by which God brings good rather than vengeance out of evil. Thus Aquinas's explanation leaves room even for Karl Barth's way of putting the matter: that Paul "sees the Gentiles as well as the Jews in the reflected light of that fire of God's wrath which is the fire of [God's] love."⁴⁰ If not, Aquinas has lost sight of his purpose already stated, of interpreting this part of Romans as a treatise whose subject matter is *virtus evangelicae gratiae*.⁴¹ The narrative of the power of gospel grace—rather than some rival narrative of Aristotelian inquiry or existential development—remains the controlling narrative.

What Was Its Original Character?

Having asserted the detention of The Truth of God, Aquinas continued on for a few paragraphs without speaking of it as he inserted a set piece on what the effective cognition of God would look like, if the (non-

New Law, or grace, although Aquinas insisted on the point percussively in *ST* 1–2, q. 109, a. 2–4. *ST* 1–2, q. 109, a. 1, which appears to talk about natural knowledge abstracted from grace, does so for purposes of an analysis that explains the character of the necessary grace as gratuitous; the point of the article is that human cognition of truth may neither extort God's gift, nor escape God's rule, so that the article affirms not so much human freedom as God's: God remains free to rule and free to save.

³⁹ For a survey of the controversy about nature and grace in the interpretation of Aquinas I regard the work of Otto Hermann Pesch as still unsurpassed, especially for an ecumenical audience; see *Rechtfertigung* 516–26, 606–719.

⁴⁰ Barth, *Shorter Commentary* 26.

⁴¹ *In Rom* 1:16b, #97.

Christian) Gentiles had had it.⁴² It depicts the human character of The Truth of God before injustice and ingratitude took it captive. This is a flashback to how natural law by grace used to be and by grace will again become. Although the passage foreshadows a comeback, it reveals natural law as a has-been. It is not, at this point in the plot, a picture of a character strong and healthy, or a cause in good working order.

Aquinas made an important distinction. He followed the rule set out in *ST* 2–2, q. 9, a. 2, that the only things human beings in this life can know with *scientia* about God are what they must believe. That is, the adherence in this life of the human soul to the first truth is due not to a full possession by a finite intellect of the first principles that would allow it to render a creaturely structure adequate to divine reality. Rather that adherence arises first in the will that, in loving God, moves the intellect to rely on the first principles enjoyed not by itself, but by God and the blessed in heaven.⁴³ The apophatic strain in Aquinas comes to the fore: “It is to be known with *scientia*, therefore, that one thing about God is entirely unknown to the human being in this life, namely what God is.”⁴⁴

Knowing that God is unknown presents a seeming paradox: theology is a science, since it has first principles; but in this life theologians are not yet scientists, since they believe principles seen only by others, namely God and the blessed in heaven. What human beings know with *scientia* when they lack God’s definition is that they lack *scientia* about God.

Human beings lack *scientia* about God not only in the sense that they could mount a proof for God’s existence that would proceed deductively from a definition known through itself or uncompromised by inference from God’s effects⁴⁵ but also in the sense that they could mount a proof for the contents of God’s will or eternal law that would proceed deductively from definitive principles known by themselves. Both the existence of God and the contents of God’s will are therefore known to human beings only inferentially from God’s effects in the world.⁴⁶ Aquinas always marked the gap between knowledge of God by immediate access and by inference from effects.⁴⁷ In considering our

⁴² Anyone who does have effective use of the cognition of God available to nature has it not by nature alone, but by *graced* nature, or nature perfected by faith formed in love (e.g., *ST* 2–2, q. 2, a. 2, esp. ad 3).

⁴³ *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 2–3, 8.

⁴⁴ *In Rom* 1:19, #114 *in fin.*; see also *ST* 1, q. 2, a. 1; q. 12, a.13 ad 1; q. 14, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴⁵ *ST* 1, q. 2, a. 1. The usual translation of *per se nota* as “self-evident” excludes some things that Aquinas meant to include; hence the stricter “known through itself” is preferable (Preller, *Divine Science* 81–86).

⁴⁶ In general, *ST* 1, q. 12, a. 12, ad 2. Applied to the natural knowledge of God’s existence, 1 q. 2, a. 1. Applied to the natural knowledge of God’s law, 1–2, q. 93, a. 2, ad 1 and 2.

⁴⁷ David Burrell calls this gap “the distinction” (*Knowing the Unknowable God* [Notre Dame, 1986]), *passim*. For an argument that the gap occurs between divine science and

natural knowledge of God's existence, he marked it in the *Summa* by rejecting the ontological way (from definition) and licensing the cosmological ways (from effects).⁴⁸ Here in the Romans Commentary he marked it more simply by distinguishing God's essence which remains "entirely unknown to a human being in this life" from "the cognition of the human being, which begins from . . . sensible things."⁴⁹ Terminologically he described it as human beings' knowledge of God through their own account by the weak word *cognitio* and not calling this *scientia* about divine things.⁵⁰ The discipline of sacred theology is *scientia*; but the habit that human beings have of it is faith, not *scientia*.

More importantly for our present purposes, Aquinas marked the distinction also for natural law: it falls between eternal law to which human beings lack direct access (*in seipso*) and natural law that they learn from the world around them (*in suo effectu*).⁵¹ He then quoted the passage now under examination in Romans 1: "[T]hose things that are of God cannot indeed be recognized by us in themselves, but they are manifested to us in their effects, according to the famous passage in Rom 1[:20]: 'The invisible things of God are known from the things that have been made.'"⁵² Aquinas then rehearsed (in a manner reminiscent of the five ways of the *Summa*⁵³) three ways of natural cognition of God's existence: the *via causalitatis*, the *via excellentiae*, and the *via negationis*.⁵⁴ None of these ways has anything to do with the way in which natural law is often popularly imagined to be known, namely by introspection, even though Aquinas described the natural light of reason as *indita*, or placed in the human being. Aquinas felt no tension between affirming that placement and giving examples of arriving at natural knowledge that involve reasoning from sense impressions.

This then is the original character of The Truth of God available to human beings. It is a knowledge of God's effects known through the senses in the context of grace. Why grace? Because the entire point of

the science of God, see Preller For an argument that the gap occurs between the theology that belongs to sacred doctrine and the theology that belongs to metaphysics, see my *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* For an argument that the gap occurs between technical hermeneutics and the interpreter's infused virtues, see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "How the Virtues of the Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996) 64–81 And for an argument that the gap occurs between the conjectural knowledge of merit and the (unavailable) knowledge whether one is in a state of grace, see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "Good Works and the Assurance of Salvation in Three Traditions: *Fides Praevisa*, the Practical Syllogism, and Merit," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997) 131–56

⁴⁸ Technically, he rejected a demonstration *per causam* or *propter quid*, since human minds do not possess the intellectual correlate (a definition) of a cause for God, in favor of a demonstration *per effectum* or *quia*, see Preller, *Divine Science* 81–91

⁴⁹ *In Rom* 1 19, #114, *in fin*

⁵⁰ *ST* 2–2, q 9, a 2 Preller puts it this way "The word *scire* is never used in connection with cognitions of God through natural reason" (*Divine Science* 32) For discussion, see my *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* 31–39

⁵¹ *ST* 1–2, q 93, a 2

⁵² *ST* 1–2, q 93, a 2 ad 1

⁵³ *ST* 1, q 2, a 3

⁵⁴ *In Rom* 1 19, #115

the set piece on nature remains “to show forth the power of gospel grace.” If The Truth of God available to human beings by natural reason were available to them by reason without grace, then Aquinas would have undermined rather than furthered his project, incidentally departing from Paul’s plot, which speaks of knowledge only in order to render ignorance culpable: “[Paul] asserts the cognition that they had of God, when he added ‘of those human beings who detained the truth about God,’ that is, the true cognition of God, ‘in injustice,’ as if captive.”⁵⁵ Aquinas followed Paul in asserting the existence of knowledge precisely in order to exhibit its captivity. He asserted its existence in order to deny its effectiveness.

Furthermore, we have seen that the Romans Commentary glosses *naturaliter* in exactly two ways: either as reformed by grace, or as moved by grace. Ungraced is not an option for unfallen nature. As Otto Hermann Pesch puts it:

It is easy to overlook: the justification of the sinner is no “new” dispensation of God’s, but the carrying out of God’s creatorly will over against the rebellious human creature. The dimensions of nature that remain *undisturbed* are therefore to be conceived of as the effectiveness in advance of the grace that saves.⁵⁶

Readers of the Commentary have little excuse, therefore, to suppose that the knowledge here described actually functions as knowledge ought. It is a self-consuming artifact in the Romans Commentary that Aquinas may abstract from the context of grace for temporary purposes of analysis.

Does The Truth of God Include Natural Law?

Before giving Aquinas’s answer to this question, I wish to anticipate three possible objections. Someone might object that these considerations seem to remove Aquinas’s discussion about creation, as Josef Pieper has noted. It is true that Aquinas’s commentaries on the Pauline epistles devote less space to creation as an explicit subject. This is

⁵⁵ *In Rom* 1:18, #112.

⁵⁶ Pesch, *Rechtfertigung* 526. Grace is not constitutive of nature, any more than life is constitutive of a human body; but life is both a good of the body and a gift to the body, the loss of which could not be restored by the body itself. As Pesch puts it, “Original righteousness is a good of nature, in that it neither altered nor added to its constituents; it is a ‘supernatural,’ ‘gracious’ gift to nature, because it cannot be made available by nature’s own power” (489). For the first clause Pesch cites the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] 4.52; *In Rom* 5:12, #416; *De malo* q. 4, a. 2 ad 1; and *ST* 1–2, q. 85, a. 1. For the second clause he cites *ST* 1, q. 95, a. 1, corpus; q. 100, a. 1, corpus; *De malo* q. 4, a. 1, corpus, *ca. med.*; q. 4, a. 4, ad 1; q. 4, a. 8, corpus; q. 5, a. 1, corpus; and *SCG* 4.52. For discussion, see also Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “Aquinas and Barth in Convergence on Romans 1?” *Modern Theology* 12 (1996) 57–84, esp. 62–64, 70–71. For an interpretation of the apparent differences between the *Summa* and the *Summa contra gentiles* on whether the human end is twofold or unitary, see Michel Corbin, *Le chemin de la théologie* 697–700.

because their stated topic is "the grace of Christ";⁵⁷ this is especially true for the Romans Commentary which considers the power and necessity of grace for the salvation of all human beings.⁵⁸ A superficial answer to this objection would be that the epistles simply focus more on redemption, the grace that saves, than many of Aquinas's other works; the commentaries on the epistles offer limited perspective on his work as a whole. But a deeper answer would be that in the Romans Commentary God's redeeming work shows precisely God's commitment to creation and the divine plan to elevate it. God loves creation by restoring it, vindicating rather than overturning the divine promise. This means that even God's wrath serves the end of doing justice to the creature, a justice that, far from destroying creation, perfects and elevates it.⁵⁹ It is God's will as Creator that God carries out.

One might also object that I am undermining natural law, and that such an undermining, whether desirable or not, cannot be in accord with Aquinas. On the contrary. The language of natural law is one to which the wise (as Aristotle called them) or the *maiores in fide* (as Aquinas called them) may always resort. Nothing here disputes Aquinas's claim that any human act against right reason is also objectively against the law of the nature of the human being, known particularly by God and in abbreviated form by participant human reason. It is hard to imagine cases in which the virtuous judgments of the wise would not be able to be stated in the language of natural law. But it is easy to imagine cases in which the virtuous judgments of the wise would not be effective or persuasive in the language of natural law. Aquinas knew of such a case and rehearsed its surprising story in following Paul in Romans 1.⁶⁰ Aquinas might also have used the language of natural law to explicate the loss of virtue, but he did not, because Paul told the story differently, as one in which the wrath of God is revealed in virtue language, "against injustice," and the language of natural law has been gagged (*ligatur*).

Finally one might object that since Aquinas's examples all concern natural cognition of God's existence, natural law is not after all in question in the Romans Commentary. Is Natural Law an alias of The Truth of God, or a different character altogether? The surrounding context indicates that God's existence does not exhaust what Aquinas had in mind under natural cognition of God. Human participation in God's will, or God's eternal law, by rational observation of human nature, also counts as natural cognition of God. The Romans Commentary does not distinguish but assimilates speculative and practical reasoning. The usual distinction, relative and penultimate in any case,

⁵⁷ *In Rom*, Prol., #11.

⁵⁸ *In Rom* 1:18, #109.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* ##109–112.

⁶⁰ I owe this paragraph to a conversation with John Bowlin; see his *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University, forthcoming 1998) chap. 3.

does not appear. Aquinas followed Paul in moving back and forth between them without remark.⁶¹

That Natural Law is an alias of The Truth of God appears in two moves Aquinas made in the immediate context, one before and one after the passage on the three ways. Before that passage Aquinas indicated that Paul's concern with a natural knowledge of God is not primarily speculative but moral; the passage appears "because certain philosophers were saying that the penalties of sinners did not come from God."⁶² The famous "fool" of the Psalms, "who says in his heart, 'There is no God,'" is not primarily one who speculates, but one who supposes he or she can get away with some injustice because God is not watching—as if "there is no God" to watch. After the passage on the three ways, Aquinas returned, with Paul, to moral matters (the list of vices at Romans 1:26) and felt no need for new argument. The ignorance in question has to do no less with the knowledge of God's design than with the knowledge of God's existence—or no less with natural law than with natural theology. So with respect to natural law as well, the ignorance follows from injustice. Otherwise the ignorance is not culpable.

What Happened to Natural Law?

The Gentiles detained the truth about God in unrighteousness in two ways: first in impiety, sin committed against God, ingratitude indicated in refusal to pay God proper cult; and second, in injustice proper, sin against other human beings.⁶³ The result of that injustice is that the Gentiles held their knowledge captive, so that it could not form their souls as Aristotelian cognition should. This is the heart of Aquinas's teaching about natural human knowledge of God, whether about God's existence or God's will. It does not succeed except by grace. It proves feckless, except by the Spirit. Human beings have culpably held it in captivity by their lack of justice. Aquinas could not but constrain it to prove his Pauline thesis: "that the power of gospel grace was necessary for the salvation of the Gentiles, since the wisdom in which they had been confiding was not able to save them."⁶⁴

Truth is detained or held captive in a precise sense: it fails to do what Aquinas said true knowledge of God is supposed to do, namely to lead human beings toward the good: "For the true cognition of God, insofar as it is in itself, leads human beings to the good. But it is bound, as if held in captivity, by the affect of injustice, by which, as Ps. 11[12]:1 has

⁶¹ Aquinas at once distinguished and compared the two numerous times: cf. *ST* 1–2, q. 57, a. 2; *ST* 2–2, q. 47, a. 6; and q. 56, a. 1: "the natural ends of a human life . . . dispose themselves in things to be done as principles naturally known in speculative matters" (2–2, q. 56, a. 1).

⁶² In Rom 1:18, #110.

⁶³ *Ibid.* #111.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* #109.

it, 'truths are diminished by the children of human beings.'⁶⁵ In Aquinas's words, these Pauline moves abbreviate a whole moral psychology. In the *Summa*, one needs the intellectual virtue of prudence to reach the right conclusions from sense impressions; prudence in turn is formed in Aquinas's Christian system by justice and finally the grace of charity.⁶⁶ Here Aquinas transposed that into Pauline language. We have already noted Aquinas's insistence that it takes grace to move the human affect; here the affect in need of grace is identified as that of injustice. Virtue is a necessary concomitant of effective cognition, and injustice breeds culpable ignorance.⁶⁷

First Aquinas insisted explicitly on the matter of culpable ignorance. "But when one's ignorance is caused by fault, one cannot by ignorance excuse subsequent fault."⁶⁸ Injustice leads to culpable ignorance which leads to more, still culpable, injustice.

Then Aquinas confirmed that the ignorance in question is an ineffective knowledge, or one of which human beings no longer have the use. "Those having cognition of God no longer used it for good."⁶⁹ And that for two reasons: they "subtracted from God's power and knowledge," and they refused to give thanks for it, ascribing it to themselves:

For they recognized God in two ways. In one way as the super-eminent of all, and so they owed God the glory and honor that is owed to the most excellent things. They are therefore called inexcusable . . . either because they did not pay God the due cult, or because they imposed an end to God's power and knowledge, subtracting somewhat from God's power and knowledge. Second, they recognized God as the cause of all good things. Therefore thanksgiving was owing to God in all things, which they were not, however, intending; but rather they were ascribing their good things to their own ingenuity and virtue.⁷⁰

In Aquinas's reading of the Romans narrative, the original sins are sins of subtraction and insult. In failing to pay to God due cult, the Gentiles landed in idolatry. In imposing an end to God's power and knowledge, they imagined, as Aquinas had already explained,⁷¹ that God would either fail to see their injustice or prove unable to punish it. In ascribing their good to themselves they show ingratitude, or, as a

⁶⁵ Ibid. #112.

⁶⁶ This generalization, though sweeping, should be uncontroversial. Skill about things to be made does not need virtue, but use does: "In order that one may make good use of art, one needs a good will, which is perfected by moral virtue" (*ST* 1-2, q. 57, a. 3, ad 2). On the application to prudence, see the next article (1-2, q. 57, a. 4). For the argument that the interpretation of Scripture constitutes a use of skill in need of charity, see Rogers, "The Virtues of an Interpreter." For a more complete account, see Daniel Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence* chaps. 2-3.

⁶⁷ I do not say "virtue is a *precondition* of effective cognition of God," which would fly in the face of Aquinas's doctrine of grace.

⁶⁸ *In Rom* 1:20b, #124.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *In Rom* 1:21, #127.

⁷¹ *In Rom* 1:18, ##111-12.

later passage has it, a lack of fiducial faith.⁷² From those original sins comes ignorance: "Next [Paul] asserts the subsequent ignorance, saying 'and [their heart] was darkened'; that is, because it was darkened, 'their heart' was made 'foolish,' that is, deprived of the light of wisdom by which the human being recognizes God truly."⁷³

The pattern is complete. Impiety leads more or less automatically to idolatry: the Gentiles became mistaken about who God was.⁷⁴ Injustice and ingratitude have now led them to culpable failure to use the light of wisdom by which a human being truly recognizes God, that is, has the *vera Dei cognitio* that "leads human beings to the good." Since the due knowledge of God is of God's eternal plan or law for their good, in which human participation is natural law, it may be said in summary: They lacked the effectiveness of natural law.

Aquinas himself put it more strongly in *De duobus praeceptis charitatis*: "The law of nature had already been destroyed [*lex naturae . . . destructa erat*]."⁷⁵

What happened to natural law? It was held captive or, Aquinas was not afraid to say, it was destroyed. Why do ethicists and moral theologians make so many appeals to it, if it has been destroyed and is resurrected only in the presence of saving grace? Why not rather appeal to the New Law, the Holy Spirit working in the heart, which alone restores it?

How is Natural Law Portrayed under Detention?

Part of the answer has to do with Aquinas's description of captive natural law. Aquinas exploited metaphors of subtraction in two directions. On the one hand, natural cognition has had its effectiveness taken away, so that it counts as ignorance. On the other hand, since by grace it used to be effective knowledge, it can become effective again.

The Romans Commentary makes the same move with a different form of cognition, that of unformed faith. The parallel is instructive. Unformed faith is ineffective, but it continues to be called "faith." Why? Because should God revive it, it is the "identical" habit revived, and not

⁷² "They became empty 'in their own thoughts' insofar as they had *fiduciam* in themselves, and not in God, ascribing their good things to themselves and not to God" (*In Rom* 1:21, #129).

⁷³ "Vere Deum cognoscit," *In Rom* 1:21, #130.

⁷⁴ *In Rom* 1:23, ##132–136.

⁷⁵ The context is the more familiar decline narrative of Genesis, which Aquinas referred to Romans 7:23–24: "But even though God had given the human being this law, namely of nature, nevertheless the devil overseeded the human being with another law, namely that of concupiscence. . . . and this is what the Apostle says in Rom 7:23: 'I see another law in my members, opposing the law of my mind.' . . . Since therefore the law of nature had been destroyed by the law of concupiscence, it was necessary that human beings be redirected [by grace] to the works of virtue, and drawn away again from their vices" (*De duobus praeceptis charitatis*, prologue). I owe the reference to Russell Hittinger.

another one.⁷⁶ The two versions of faith do enjoy continuity. Only they enjoy it in virtue not of the human creature, but of God's action. Unjust knowledge is like unformed faith: a gift of God, it means that God, in withdrawing grace in punishment for sin, need not at the same time withdraw the assent of the understanding. The sinner continues to enjoy it by God's mercy. It does not mean that God first gave a feckless knowledge to the helpless creature and then the justice to form it as an afterthought. Unjust knowledge is a matter of a decline from the original justice of nature granted it by grace, not an ascent by unaided nature to justice before God.⁷⁷ Thus natural knowledge is defective cognition which Aquinas continued to call cognition by a sort of courtesy, in virtue of what it has been and might again be, rather than in virtue of what it has penultimately and temporarily become at this point in the story. God's courtesy, as Julian teaches, is itself grace. Such "cognition," so called by courtesy, may be assimilated into faith. For faith involves a taking up, or christological assumption, of nature into grace, of the light of reason into the light of the Spirit, as the Word assumes flesh. Thus Aquinas appropriated natural law to the Second Person of the Trinity.⁷⁸ That is part of the reason why we seem to retain a higher opinion of natural law than the narrative of the Romans Commentary would seem to recommend. But the courtesy, in the Romans Commentary as in the *Summa*, does not last long.

How Did Its Detention Affect Its Human Captors?

The narrative goes on to depict an effect not of the good that natural knowledge might do, but of the evil that corresponds to culpable ignorance.

I quote first of all according to the Vulgate version of Romans 1 as Aquinas knew it:

²⁰Therefore they are without excuse.

²¹Since, although they knew God, they did not so glorify God or offer thanks, but emptied themselves in their own thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened.

²²For calling themselves wise, they were made stupid.

²³And they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for a likeness of the image of the corruptible human being and of birds and of beasts and of serpents.

Aquinas made certain sins characteristic of what we may call *cognitio detenta* by arguments *ex convenientia*. He found it appropriate that the Gentiles can no longer rely on their God-given nature when God pun-

⁷⁶ "Idem numero," *In Rom* 1:17, #107.

⁷⁷ That paraphrases Pesch's corresponding analysis of unformed faith (*Rechtfertigung* 735-37).

⁷⁸ *ST* 1-2, q. 93, a. 1, ad 2; *In Rom* 1:20a, #122, read with 1:19, #115.

ishes them for their idolatry with corresponding sins: "Then when [Paul] says 'For that reason God gave them up,' he asserted a penalty corresponding to such faults."⁷⁹ The fault (the instance of culpable ignorance) is natural theology; the penalty, sins against nature.⁸⁰ Given later usage, it may come as a surprise that *theologia naturalis* is a term of disapprobation also for Aquinas, as it was for Augustine and would be for Barth. It denoted a sort of Gentile theology, one of three, "which the philosophers practiced in the world."⁸¹ Both natural theology and sins against nature exhibit culpable ignorance; the first fails to give God the due gratitude of worship, while the second fails to give God the due service of justice. Aquinas described the sin of impiety, accounted for in terms of virtue and the lack thereof, now for the first time in terms of nature, in order to render Paul's move. "The fault of impiety having been set forth, according to which [the Gentiles] sinned against the divine nature, [Paul] sets forth the penalty, by which namely they were reduced to this, that they should sin against their own nature."⁸² This is formally an argument *ex convenientia* or from fittingness.⁸³ I say "formally" because Aquinas had not yet explained in what a sin against human nature might consist. Here it is simply a matter of coordinating "nature" and "nature." To be sure that is just what an argument *ex convenientia* consists in, the fitting coordination of concepts.

Here nature does not formally serve the purpose of assigning praise and blame. That belongs, analytically, to the virtues. Rather it serves an explanatory function: it serves to connect views about God to views about human beings, or cosmology to ethics.⁸⁴

The appeal to "nature" language, it may be noted, serves primarily a theological purpose. It serves first to mark a correspondence between God and creatures, and only second to explain how a lack of creaturely virtue harms the creature or counts as vice. It is an odd correspondence for Aquinas, since he ordinarily issued sharp disclaimers (as he did in the case of human ignorance of God's essence) about how God and creatures cannot be in the same class, especially since "nature" is a specification of "the essence of a thing considered as the source of its operation."⁸⁵ On Aquinas's own terms, this use of "nature" must be highly analogous, or, to express it as an oxymoron, an appropriate

⁷⁹ *In Rom* 1:24, #137.

⁸⁰ *In Rom* 1:25, #142.

⁸¹ *In Rom* 1:20a, #122. For more on this point, see my *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* 154–56.

⁸² *In Rom* 1:25, #142.

⁸³ For an interpretation of some uses of the technical phrase *ex convenientia*, see my "The Virtues of an Interpreter."

⁸⁴ So, a Catholic anthropologist argues, concepts of nature always function; see Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University, 1986) 45–54.

⁸⁵ Preller's summary of *De ente et essentia* (*Divine Science* 123). For the usual disclaimer, consider this example: "God is not like material things, either according to natural genus or according to logical genus, for God is not in *any* general class. . . . Thus, through the similitudes of material things something affirmative may be known of [im-

equivocation.⁸⁶ One may state the ground of the analogy thus: “nature” explains how God operates creatures as their provident ruler, in the way most proper or essential to them. Aquinas read Isaiah 26:12, “You have worked all our works in us, Lord,” as a proof-text for that analogous way of talking.⁸⁷

In short, in the Romans Commentary, Aquinas followed Paul to make knowledge depend upon justice. Under conditions of injustice, human knowledge fails so badly that Aquinas called it ignorance. That may come as a surprising conclusion, not, indeed, as a reading of Paul, but as a reading of Aquinas. For it shows that Aquinas had ample structural room for some of the claims of liberation theologians, namely that injustice can hinder right knowledge of God.⁸⁸ The question then is: What does justice require? To that question our present age may reach quite different conclusions than Aquinas and different interpretations of Paul.

Only the intervention of God’s own humanity in Christ can restore the lost knowledge as the Holy Spirit writes the New Law upon the heart. Aquinas distantly alluded to the restoration when he said that the Gentiles were “lacking in the third sign, that is, in the Holy Spirit”⁸⁹—which is a trinitarian way of pointing out natural law’s ineffectiveness. The intervention of God’s saving humanity too is variously appropriate, or *conveniēns*. First, Aquinas appropriated natural law to the second person of the Trinity.⁹⁰ More important, since the root problem lies in the will, or heart, which Aquinas here called the *affectum*, the solution must also lie there.

To reprise the story I add nuances from the *Summa* about how God governs the world with the prudence of a ruler.⁹¹ The deliverances of God’s prudence in singular cases make up the eternal law, in which, since God’s knowledge is causative,⁹² natural law is an ontic as well as a psychological participation, or in the realm of cases, an abridgment.⁹³ In the narrative of the Romans Commentary Aquinas told a story in

material] angels according to a common [logical] *ratio*, even if not by virtue of a specific [material] *ratio*: but in no way is that possible with God [*de Deo non nullo*]” (ST 1, q. 88, a. 2, ad 4, cited in Preller, *Divine Science* 91).

⁸⁶ See Preller, *Divine Science* 243.

⁸⁷ In the *sed contra* for ST 1, q. 8, a. 1.

⁸⁸ If true, the claim would also count as additional evidence for Nelson’s contention that prudence (which is oriented to justice) does have some priority, even to the construal of natural law (*The Priority of Prudence*, esp. chaps. 3–4). My argument rests not, however, on the grounds of Aquinas’s moral psychology, but on the grounds of his commitment to Paul and the Bible.

⁸⁹ In Rom 1:20a, #122.

⁹⁰ In Rom 1:20a, #122; ST 1–2, q. 93, a. 1, ad 2.

⁹¹ 1–2, q. 90, a. 1, ad 2; a. 3–4; q. 91, a. 1. For an elegant account, owing a similar debt to Preller, of natural law as the work of God’s rulerly prudence, see Bowlin, *Contingency*, esp. part 2 of chap. 3, “Natural Law and Moral Diversity.”

⁹² ST 1, q. 14, a. 8.

⁹³ ST 1–2, q. 91, a. 1–2; “abridgment” is Bowlin’s word.

which God allowed the causation of natural law, or God's providential movement of the Gentile heart, to fail. God's providential rule could afford the failure for reasons explained only in the story of Christ.⁹⁴ It failed because the Gentiles had imposed the obstacles of injustice and ingratitude, which had the effect for them of "subtracting somewhat from God's power and knowledge." In the *Summa*, and in the frame narrative of the Romans Commentary, the obstacle is removed and the causation of natural law restored by the help of operative grace. Both the imposition and the removal of obstacles take place in the will, which, in Augustinian fashion, remains free even to ignore the directions of the intellect. The will is the space in which both the creature rebels and God redeems.

NATURAL LAW, NATURAL KNOWLEDGE, AND AQUINAS'S APOPHATICISM

It should not be controversial that the natural knowledge of God's existence and the natural knowledge of God's will, or natural law, are parallel, as I here argue. The natural law as our rational participation in eternal law matches natural knowledge of God as our rational participation in divine truth. Aquinas encouraged the comparison when he yoked together "truths about God and about living in society" as proper to the nature of reason.⁹⁵ But the parallel tends to go unexploited. What does it suggest that the Romans Commentary holds together what the *Summa* distinguishes?

By way of response and conclusion, let me summarize the parallelism in eight theses.⁹⁶

1. Just as the article on the knowledge of God's existence⁹⁷ validates and explicates Rom 1:20 in terms of the five ways, so the article on the knowledge of God's eternal will does the same in terms of natural law.⁹⁸ Aquinas repeated the distinction, that first appeared before the five ways, between knowledge of essence that he insisted is beyond us, and the knowledge from effects that Rom 1:20 again served to warrant. Natural law provides a second, parallel, perhaps closer elaboration of how God is known (as it happens, ineffectively) from the things God has made.

2. Just as the five ways as probable arguments⁹⁹ appeal not to the apodictically indisputable but to what no one in fact disputes, each one ending with a variation on "which all people call 'God,'"¹⁰⁰ so natural law appeals not directly to the eternal law beyond our grasp but to what "is the same for most people."¹⁰¹ More clearly but no differently

⁹⁴ *ST* 3, q. 1, a. 2–3, esp. 3, ad 3, quoting Rom 5:20.

⁹⁵ *ST* 1–2, q. 94, a. 2, corpus, para. 3.

⁹⁶ Similar theses apply to Aquinas on merit and hope; see my "Good Works and Assurance of Salvation" 146–56.

⁹⁷ *ST* 1, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2.

⁹⁸ *ST* 1–2, q. 93, a. 2, ad 1.

⁹⁹ *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 8.

¹⁰⁰ *ST* 1, q. 2, a. 3.

¹⁰¹ *ST* 1–2, q. 94, a. 4.

Aquinas in practical as in speculative theology distinguished the objective (the eternal law, the argument from definition) from the intersubjective (the natural law, the argument from probability). His purpose in doing so here as there was not to impugn but to increase the usefulness of the natural law, not to undermine the natural law by contrast to something more objective, but to license appeal to what most people agree on by contrast to that to which we lack access. The category of eternal law, like the missing definition of God, serves not to give us something better than shared beliefs on which to start our arguments but to name the absence of anything better. Here as there a distinction between the objective and the intersubjective protects the apophatic strain in Aquinas and identifies our ignorance. In ethics Aquinas followed Aristotle's attention to what is true generally and for the most part.¹⁰² In probable argument he followed Aristotle's attention to those truths useful to rhetoric because agreed upon. Neither helps much if an opponent dissents,¹⁰³ or when dispute about what the natural law consists in becomes widespread. We can answer objections and appeal to context without however going beyond probable argument or ethical mores. We can observe as a last resort that someone refusing to call the prime mover God or murder unnatural is using the words differently. Natural law, like the ways' linguistic end, marks the place where reason giving comes to a penultimate stop. Natural law, like "what we call God," names our consensus; eternal law, like God *in se*, names our earthly ignorance and our hope of glory.

3. Just as the natural knowledge of God's existence involves reasoning from sense impressions of God's effects,¹⁰⁴ so too does the natural knowledge of God's law. We have no more access to the law God's prudence has established for us than the law God has established for rocks. For the intellectual soul does not know itself by its own essence, but by its act, that is, its effects. "[A]s in this life our intellect has material and sensible things for its proper natural object . . . it understands itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from sensible things."¹⁰⁵ We *cannot* see the eternal law until we can *see God*. That would be to confuse the discursive knowledge characteristic of human beings with the intuition proper to God.¹⁰⁶ Until then we can observe only its *effects*.¹⁰⁷ Similarly we cannot know the natural law

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 8.

¹⁰⁴ *ST* 1, q. 2., a. 1, parallel to 1–2, q. 93, a. 2.

¹⁰⁵ *ST* 1, q. 87, a. 1, *in med.*

¹⁰⁶ *ST* 1, q. 85, a. 5; 1, q. 14, a. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Besides the quotations of Rom 1:20 cited above, one should not overlook *ST* 1, q. 88, a. 3. For a speculative account of Kant as confusing what Aquinas called human beings with what he called angels, see my *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* 209–10. For a careful account of the controversies of post-Kantian Thomists over the *a priori* as against the texts of Aquinas, see George A. Lindbeck, "The *A Priori* in St. Thomas's Theory of Knowledge," in *The Heritage of Christian Thought*, ed. Robert E. Cushman and Egil Grisliis (New York: Harper, 1965) 41–63. For a technical formulation compatible with the present account, see Preller, *Divine Science* 69–80. Nelson proposes to read remarks

for ourselves without observation until in the next life we can see ourselves in God.

4. Just as the five ways provide less new knowledge of God than many would like to think, so too the natural law provides us with less knowledge of right and wrong than many would like to think. Just as our knowledge of preambles comes through the senses but is not guaranteed by the senses and we may therefore “blink at the most evident things like bats in the sunshine,”¹⁰⁸ so too our knowledge of right and wrong may come through our reason but not because of it, and thus it makes sense for Aquinas to write that “the Germans did not consider robbery wicked, though it is expressly against natural law.”¹⁰⁹ A natural law that depending on context can fail to exclude robbery proves about as effective as a natural knowledge of God that can depending on context add to or detract from the merit of believing.¹¹⁰

5. Just as the natural external world motivates the speculative reason to inquiry, so too natural law is natural because our nature motivates the practical reason. And, as the natural external world does not predetermine the deliverances of natural science, so too the nature that human beings share with animals does not predetermine the deliverances of practical reason. Rather in both cases the same motive cause—a nature, whether internal or external to the human being, that provides impetus for reflection—leads to an inquiry that proceeds largely by dispute. “‘Natural law’ helps explain why there is a good deal of transcultural ethical commonality, but our knowledge of it is of such a character that it cannot serve as a foundation for setting disputes apodictically.”¹¹¹

To be sure, reference to transcultural agreement is not merely linguistic; it does not render Aquinas a nominalist. Natural law does have a connection in Aquinas to a nature other than overlapping convention, if not to nature as usually conceptualized. The connection is not, however, to a nature from which human beings could read off rules about their nature. Rather, various natural demands shared with animals, such as hunger, thirst, shelter, and sexuality,¹¹² raise questions for human beings to answer by discursive reasoning that in animals would be answered by instinct. Aquinas spoke here not of the sources of

about the placement of the light of reason in terms of causality (*Priority of Prudence* 98–101).

¹⁰⁸ *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 5, ad 1.

¹⁰⁹ *ST* 1–2, q. 94, a. 4.

¹¹⁰ *ST* 2–2, q. 2, a. 10.

¹¹¹ I owe this way of putting the matter to a restatement of my argument by George Lindbeck. In a similar vein, Bowlin argues that natural law helps to explain how the Stoics are wrong, and contingency in moral matters does not go all the way down (a chief claim of *Contingency*).

¹¹² Goods available to nature include building houses and planting vines, *ST* 1–2, q. 109, a. 2, corpus, which illustrate demands for shelter and drink; or, quoting Augustine, *Hypognost.* 1. III, c. 4, n. 5, “to labor in the field, drink, eat, and have a friend, and other such things”; see also Nelson 99–101, 122–25.

knowledge, but of the causes of inquiry—the causes of the Aristotelian desire to understand, which is, as it were, the human instinct. So nature-talk serves the distinguishing of (efficient) causes, but the material content emerges under the direction of the virtues.¹¹³ That conclusion receives support from the deep preoccupation of the Romans Commentary with the relation between natural law and the virtues of justice and gratitude.

6. As the five ways make God's claim on the world as its creator,¹¹⁴ so natural law makes God's claim on the world as its ruler. In the case of the five ways we have to supply the reasoning because Aquinas was working from below: "Granted that we regard God as creator, exemplar, and end, then it makes sense to relate God to world as cause in these five ways." In this case Aquinas, now working from above, supplies it for us: "Granted that the world is ruled by divine Providence . . . , it is evident that the whole community of the universe is governed by God's mind. . . . [I]t follows that this law should be called eternal."¹¹⁵

7. If exhibiting the providence of God through natural law reflects deep, sometimes submerged, theological interests and purposes, they reach the surface in Aquinas's service of Christology. Just as in the Romans Commentary, Aquinas assigned all reasoning from effect to cause to Christ as the power of God, so too in the *Summa* the eternal law and hence the natural law under it "is specially attributed to the Son on account of the close agreement exemplar has with word."¹¹⁶ The natural knowledge of God and the natural law belong to Christology because they can become means of the human creature's *reditus in Deum*, our return home. This became especially clear in the Romans Commentary because the natural law appears as a character in a drama about the "gospel grace of Christ."

8. In the *Summa* too Aquinas left room for the Pauline pattern in which natural law, like the natural knowledge of God, serves first of all to increase guilt in the faithless. Aquinas insisted that natural law without the supernatural infusion of charity, like the natural knowledge of God without the supernatural infusion of faith, falls short of any effectiveness for salvation.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ So Nelson argues in *Priority of Prudence*, esp. 99–100, 120–21.

¹¹⁴ I owe the language of the ways as God's claim on the world to J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1992) 130.

¹¹⁵ *ST* 1–2, q. 91, a. 1.

¹¹⁶ *ST* 1–2, q. 93, a. 1, ad 2.

¹¹⁷ See, e.g., *ST* 1–2, q. 93, a. 6, ad 1 on fulfilling the law out of fear, and 2–2, q. 2, a. 5 on the demons who "believe and tremble." Hatred of the good or the true takes away merit (2–2, q. 2, a. 10) in both cases.