

Lee Anne Detzel  
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### The Middle Path: A Case for the Philosophical Theologian

Leo Strauss roots the vitality of Western civilization in the ongoing conflict between philosophy and theology. This tension is inherent in the dialogue between philosophers and theologians because philosophy is a-historical and capable of reinvention through the refining tool of reason whereas theology is necessarily historical and therefore constrained by the teachings of the past through revelation.<sup>1</sup> According to Strauss, the philosopher is guided by reason and the theologian by revelation. As a result, the discourse of philosophers and theologians may overlap in content, but the premises of their arguments lead to differing conclusions. For Strauss, it is our conclusions that define us. If our arguments arrive at reasonable ends we are philosophers, but if our arguments assent to revelation then we are theologians.

In perpetually dividing ideas and arguments in to the categories of philosophy and theology Leo Strauss has missed the mark. The animating force behind Western civilization does not arise from a bifurcation between the philosopher and theologian, but rather in the rich interplay between premises and ideas in thinkers better characterized as philosophical theologians.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the fundamental questions of philosophy can best be examined and explained once the door is open to conversation with the theologian who holds to the standards

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Philosophy and Theology," in *Essays* (1954). 218.

<sup>2</sup> As the paper develops note the distinction between the terms 'theologian' and 'philosophical theologian.' The term 'theologian' will serve as a broad designation inclusive of the philosophical theologian and therefore arguments, ideas, and conclusions accepted by both the theologian and the philosophical theologian will be denoted as 'theologian.' Whereas, the term 'philosophical theologian' is utilized to mark arguments, ideas, and conclusions more carefully refined through reason and premises of philosophy. By this approach, I attempt to carefully allow for some areas in which the theologian, without necessary assent to philosophical methods, may agree with the philosophical theologian.

of logic and philosophy. In this way, the search for the first principles, knowledge of the whole, and a life marked by happiness arises primarily from the ideas of synthetic thinkers properly described as philosophical theologians in contradistinction to Leo Strauss' isolated philosopher and theologian.

The philosopher and theologian are similar in their quest for three basic answers. Both types of thinkers seek a foundation based on the first science, namely metaphysics. In addition, the philosopher and theologian pursue a way of life they consider the best way of living. Lastly, both thinkers conclude this best way of life is characterized by happiness and contemplation. In examining the similarities and differences between the philosopher and theologian on these points a new type of thinker emerges. This person is one who synthesizes reason and revelation in order to arrive more completely at an answer to these perennial questions. First, I will refute Strauss' assumption that philosophy and theology aim at different ends. Next, in describing the characteristics of the philosopher and theologian I will establish a unique type of thinker better described as the philosophical theologian and articulated in Thomas Aquinas' *Exposition on Boethius' De Trinitate*. Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate why the role of the philosophical theologian is the true source of the vitality of the interplay between philosophy and theology in the intellectual tradition.

Civilization is characterized by a desire for knowledge. Some people indiscriminately live their lives without deeply searching for reasons, explanations, or truth, while others are inquisitive and seek a richer understanding of their human experience. Whatever the case, we are all epistemic beings. Our ability to apprehend, reason, and judge is what delineates us from other creatures according to the philosopher and theologian. Aristotle writes, "All men by nature

desire to know,”<sup>3</sup> but the animals only perceive<sup>4</sup>. And the theologian agrees the soul’s intellectual activity is “knowing the truth.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the philosopher and theologian agree that all people look for knowledge and understanding.

While all people seek to understand the world around them to some extent, it is evident that different types of knowledge exist. Our primary way of knowing comes through our senses. We describe our world through adjectives related sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. In addition, the combination of our senses gives us more information into the substance of a thing. But, the philosopher and theologian are not satisfied with merely sensible knowledge of objects. Rather, they seek for an underlying essence that governs abstract knowledge of ideas and principles. True knowledge is found through knowing the thing in itself and this can only be accomplished if a thinker attempts to know the essence of a being.<sup>6</sup> For the philosopher and theologian this is knowledge in its highest form. In addition, both thinkers agree in the posterior quality of knowing. Aquinas argues, “human reason . . . must advance from things that are posterior to those that are prior, and from creatures to God.”<sup>7</sup> A person does not first encounter the essence of a thing and then abstract from it its sensible attributes. On the contrary, knowledge of a thing is acquired in a progression from knowledge from sensible world, next to ideas abstracted from the senses, and finally to being known apart from either sensation or abstraction from the sensible. All people acquire knowledge from sensation, but the philosopher

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<sup>3</sup> The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon. *Metaphysics* (New York: Random House, 1941), 980 a1.

<sup>4</sup> The Basic Works of Aristotle, *De Anima*, 427b 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Faith, Reason, and Theology*, trans. Armand Maurer, vol. 32, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Notably, after Descartes and Kant thought in itself can be the object of thought, but for the scope of this paper I will concentrate on the three ways of knowing as outlined in Aquinas’ *Exposition on Boethius’ De Trinitate*.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas 1987, 3.

and philosophical theologian abstract from sensation in order to develop their explanations of higher things.

The philosopher and philosophical theologian are chiefly in agreement about the three ways a person knows a thing. It is clear that knowledge of natural objects is the most rudimentary type of knowing because it relies on matter and motion. As children our knowledge develops from the general to the particular as our faculty of judgment is refined through habit. Aristotle utilizes this example in *Physics* Book I when he writes, “a child begins by calling all men ‘father,’ and all women ‘mother,’ but later distinguishes each of them.”<sup>8</sup> In this example, the child’s knowledge is rooted in the matter of person. The child calls out, “father,” because he perceives the form of a man standing near him. Additionally, the child mistakenly calls all human forms either father or mother because he has yet to individualize his father or mother from the general form of man or woman. As the child matures his rational faculties enable him to differentiate matter and motion by their qualitative accidents. In the same way, knowledge begins in the sensation of natural things and then later on the intellect is able to abstract principles from the knowledge of natural things.<sup>9</sup>

The philosophical theologian agrees with the philosopher on the subject of how the mind knows things that depend on matter and motion for their being, namely natural objects. Just as Aristotle proves a child’s initial way of knowing is characterized by familiarity with first the universal and then the particular, Aquinas also demonstrates this necessary development of human knowledge. The objects of the physical sciences are located in a certain spacio-temporal reality and it is the task of the scientist to study these objects “without determinate matter and

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<sup>8</sup> The Basic Works of Aristotle, *Physics*, 184b 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> This idea is more fully described in Aristotle’s *De Anima* 426b 7-16.

everything following upon such matter.”<sup>10</sup> So, if the physical scientist studies the nature of man he must do so without regard for the particular attributes of a person, but instead he must focus on what attributes are common to all people. “Thus the nature of man . . . is considered without *this* flesh and *these* bones, but not absolutely without flesh and bones,”<sup>11</sup> states Aquinas. Further, “the intellect first knows the more universal and it knows composites before their constituent parts.”<sup>12</sup> This ability to abstract the particular from the universal is gained through the refining practice of judgment. According to Aristotle and Aquinas, the mind does not know through apprehension of some conceptual idea, as Plato posits, but rather through practicing judgment. The philosopher and philosophical theologian agree that knowledge of physical objects is through the mind’s judgment abstracting the particular species of a thing from its universal genus.

As human beings we are not limited to sensate knowledge. There are things that we know because our intellect abstracts principles from objects. This second way of knowing, categorized as mathematical knowledge by Aristotle, is a higher form of knowledge than sensible knowledge because its basis is those things reliant on matter but not motion for their apprehension. Thus far, the philosopher and philosophical theologian are in agreement regarding the modes of knowing. We know originally through the senses and secondarily through abstraction. In both instances of knowing a person utilizes their reason to comprehend the world around them. The first act of knowing is a generalization through the senses. Only after the generalization is established does the intellect then abstract the form from the object and this is

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences*, trans. Armand Maurer, vol. 3. Mediaeval Sources in Translation, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas 1987, 27-28.

called mathematical knowledge. The methodology of sense gathering and abstraction is successful in establishing the fundamental premises of the philosopher and philosophical theologian because it corresponds to our experience.

The first conflict between the philosopher and theologian arises when the thinkers move beyond sensible and abstracted knowledge. Both thinkers concur there must be a further underlying principle giving order to the flux of being experienced through physical and mathematical knowledge. The philosopher believes when he discovers these first principles he then can explain the order of the whole universe. Like the theologian, the philosopher is searching for a first principle. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle is looking for “that which causes derivative truths to be true.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, he writes, “evidently there is a first principle, and the causes of things are neither an infinite series nor infinitely various in kind.”<sup>14</sup> It is this first principle that orders the universe and makes knowledge of the whole possible according to the philosopher.

Like the philosopher, the theologian seeks higher knowledge originating from a first principle, but for the theologian the source of this first principle is made known through divine illumination from God. As it is written in Colossians, in Christ is “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> In as much as the philosophical theologian seeks knowledge of natural things he “does not require a new light but only divine movement and direction.”<sup>16</sup> When the philosophical theologian moves beyond natural knowledge and onto knowledge of

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<sup>13</sup> The Basic Works of Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 993b 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 994a 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Colossians 2:2-3.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas 1987, 18.

God's essence, the human mind "needs in addition a new illumination."<sup>17</sup> While the philosopher can know God exists through reason, only divine illumination can reveal the essence of God. In this way the philosophical theologian is also a metaphysician in the philosophic sense because he concurs that knowledge of the first principle is the way to knowledge of the whole.

The philosophical theologian and philosopher are like-minded inasmuch as each thinker does not believe he will have knowledge of the whole during this life. Aquinas states the explanation of the philosophical theologian when he writes, "the intelligible light," our mind, "is darkened by its union with the body and this hinders it so that it cannot readily grasp the truth."<sup>18</sup> The essential difference between the philosopher and the philosophical theologian on this point is how one arrives at a knowledge neither reliant on matter or motion for its being. Insight into the first principle, contends the philosophical theologian, is beyond the scope of natural reason and therefore is available to the human mind solely through the divine light given by God.

Ultimately, the philosopher never succeeds in finding the essence of the first principle.<sup>19</sup> He is limited in his knowledge because he knows only sensible and mathematical things. Near the conclusion of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle writes, "Evidently the principles are not being correctly described, nor are the first substances."<sup>20</sup> After thorough investigation into what constitutes the first principle the philosopher's answer is incomplete. The premises of his knowledge only reveal, "the objects of mathematics are not separable from sensible things, as

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>19</sup> Given, the philosopher is able to arrive at the law of non-contradiction, the law of identity, and the excluded middle which may be classified as first principles. My argument contends the philosopher does not know the essence of the first principle beyond these logical conclusions.

<sup>20</sup> The Basic Works of Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1092a 10-11.

some say, and that they are not the first principles.”<sup>21</sup> The argument follows if true knowledge is rooted in the first principle and the first principle is unknowable by the philosopher then the third mode of knowing comes through theology “since it is obvious that if the divine is present anywhere, it is present in things of this sort.”<sup>22</sup> In summary, the philosopher and philosophical theologian aim at the same end, namely knowledge of the first principle, but only the theologian has access to the first principle through divine illumination from God.

Contrary to the claim of Leo Strauss, the philosopher and theologian do not aim at different ends, rather in seeking the same end they arrive at divergent conclusions regarding the ability of reason to arrive at the first principle. As proven, the philosophical theologian does not immediately delegate to revelation a person’s ability to know the world around him. Like the philosopher, the philosophical theologian employs reason to comprehend the sensible and abstract things. It is only when the limits of reason are insufficient to understand the first principle the philosophical theologian then appeals to divine illumination to more fully answer the quandary of metaphysics. The philosophical theologian is unique because he studies being as both subjects and principles of those subjects.<sup>23</sup> This particular perspective is available to the philosophical theologian because he unites both reason and revelation in his explanations of the world around him. In this way, the theologian supercedes the philosopher because he is not satisfied to plead ignorance, but rather earnestly pursues knowledge of the whole through the divine illumination he receives in revelation.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1093b 27-29.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1026a 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> This argument is outlined in Aquinas 1986, 52-53. At the conclusion of the argument he claims, “Thus philosophical theology investigates beings in the second sense as its subjects, and being separate in the first sense as the principles of its subject.”

It has been demonstrated that a life of inquiry is common to both the philosopher and theologian. Not only do these thinkers question our ability to reach the first principle, they further seek to discover the best way to live life in accordance with this knowledge. The philosopher and theologian pursue a way of life they consider to be the best. This lifestyle is characterized by inquiry, happiness, and contemplation of the highest things. Unlike the common man the philosopher and theologian are not content to live a life prescribed to them by others. It is clear the philosopher and philosophical theologian pursue answers to the same enduring questions, but once again the philosopher's answers are incomplete at best because he is limited in knowledge of the whole. A brief examination into these thinkers' conception of the best life reveals the incompleteness of the philosophic way of life. Therefore, one must conclude the best way of life comes through knowledge of the first principle and this is only possible through divine illumination from God given to the theologian.

According to philosophy the best way of life is one of questioning and refining of ideas. As Plato claims, "the unexamined life is not worth living,"<sup>24</sup> and again, "it is best not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible."<sup>25</sup> It follows the best way of life is a journey of inquiry and preparation for goodness. In order for a person to perpetually question, refine ideas, and examine new premises his life must be ordered to eliminate nearly all distraction and interference. It is no wonder few desire to be philosophers since even the philosopher admits of the difficulties in arranging for himself such a lofty lifestyle. After arguing for the reasonable life as that which leads people to true happiness, Aristotle writes, "but such a life would be too high for man; for it is not so far as he is man that he will live so, but in

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<sup>24</sup> Plato Complete Works, ed. John M. Cooper. *Apology* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 38a.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 39d.

so far as something divine is present in him.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the life marked by happiness and manifest in contemplation of the highest things is merely an ideal for the philosopher and not a reality.

The philosophical theologian, like the philosopher, attempts to order his life in accordance with reason and contemplation of the highest things. In distinction from the philosopher, however, the theologian is not limited by things known through reason alone such as physical and abstracted things, but the theologian also possesses qualified knowledge of the first principle if revealed to him by God or the tradition of revelation. Aquinas does not relegate sensible and mathematical knowledge to the realm of philosophy and therefore leave the theologian with only the tools of revelation. On the contrary, “just as our natural knowledge begins with the knowledge of creatures obtained by the senses, so the knowledge imparted from above begins with the cognition of the first Truth bestowed on us by faith,” he writes.<sup>27</sup> In this way, only the theologian is truly capable of living a life of happiness and contemplation of the highest things because he receives the divine illumination through faith. In contrast to the theologian, the philosopher “must strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in [him].”<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Aquinas concludes, “For even though by his nature man is inclined to his ultimate end,” in part the philosopher’s contemplative happiness, “he cannot reach it by nature but only by grace.”<sup>29</sup>

The dialogue between the philosopher and theologian reveal their interconnected search for the first principle and a life denoted by happiness and contemplation of the highest things.

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<sup>26</sup> The Basic Works of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas 1987, 3.

<sup>28</sup> The Basic Works of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b 35 – 1178a 1.

<sup>29</sup> Aquinas 1986, 93.

Contrary to Strauss' claim that a person must choose to be either a philosopher or theologian, I argue for a richer method of thought arising from a middle path of synthesis best articulated in the philosophical theologian. This unique methodology is only possible if the philosopher and theologian meet on the common terms of reason and inquiry. With these premises established the philosopher contributes a vital foundation of metaphysics, an epistemology true to human experience, and a way of life characterized by virtue and the refining of ideas and principles through reason. Beyond this, the philosophical theologian provides hope for the philosopher whom has necessarily concluded he is ignorant of the whole. At the crossroads of philosophy and theology lay not a contentious divide between the two, as Strauss contends<sup>30</sup>, but rather an opportunity for substantial dialogue whereby the intellectual tradition may thrive and cultivate questions and answers for a life worth living.

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<sup>30</sup> Strauss 1954, 217.

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