

# The Spiritual and the Supernatural according to Thomas Aquinas

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## Introduction

As we investigate in this conference what is meant by “supernatural” and whether or not we wish to admit anything that falls within its scope, it seems worthwhile to make a survey of the works of one of Christianity’s most significant Theologians, Thomas Aquinas, in order to see how he used the term. Further, as a medieval thinker, he lived before the claims and problems of modernity had arisen. What did “supernatural” mean then, and how might that meaning inform our discussion. The term “spiritual” makes it clear that for Thomas it is not just a matter of material things versus supernatural things but that there are spiritual things that are part of nature though immaterial.

It is surprising to discover that Thomas uses forms of the term “supernatural” only 336 times in over eight and a half million words, or on average once in every twenty-six thousand words. This is not a high rate of usage, when you consider, for instance, that “grace” is used 16,004 times and “natural” is used some 15,394 times, nor is distribution of the term even. It ranges from about one in 6,000 for the Disputed Questions on Truth (*De veritate*) to one in 92,000 for a number of other works. Within works, while there is some scattered use of the term, its usage tends to be concentrated around particular discussions. In the *De veritate*, for instance, two thirds of the occurrences are in one of twenty-nine questions, and half of these are in one of twelve articles.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This count is made from the Latin CDROM version edited by R. Busa, *Thomae Aquinatis opera omnia cum hypertextibus in CD-ROM* (Milano: Editoria Elettronica Edetel, 1992). English translations are from a English CDROM version of published by the IntelLex Corporation in the Past Masters series. Paper editions of the works of Thomas cited are as follows: *Summae theologiae*. 5 vols. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1955. Translated by the English Dominican Fathers as *Summa Theologica*. 3 vols. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947. *Summa contra gentiles*. 3 vols. Turin: Marietti, 1961. Translated by Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, Vernon, J. Bourke and Charles O’Neil.

In preparation for this paper, I have gone through all the occurrences of “supernatural” except those in the Commentary on the Sentences and grouped them into significant discussions. Further study of other scattered occurrences might yield some fruit; I have simply used these isolated texts when they proved helpful. I have gathered Thomas’s discussions using the term into three groups: Matters Strictly in the Order of Faith, Phenomena Viewed through Faith, and Human Nature and its Destiny. I will treat each of these in turn and then draw some conclusions.

## Matters Strictly in the Order of Faith

In this section, I wish to note three topics that I will not explore in detail but that are important instances of Thomas’s use of the term “supernatural”. Each lies completely within the order of salvation, so that they are known only through faith, and reflection on them is properly and solely theological, even though it may use philosophical categories.

## Christ

The first has to do with the generation and nature of Christ<sup>2</sup>, who, according to faith, was both divine and human. In Christ’s conception, Thomas distinguishes a supernatural mode, in which “the active principle of generation was the supernatural

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*Summa Contra Gentiles*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.

*Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*. In *Quaestiones Disputatae*, vol. 1. Turin: Marietti, 1965.

Translated by Robert W. Mulligan. *Truth* Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952.

*Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei*. In *Quaestiones Disputatae*, vol. 2. Turin: Marietti, 1965. Translated by the English Dominican Fathers. *On the Power of God*. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd, 1932.

*Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus in communi*. In *Quaestiones Disputatae*, vol. 2. Turin: Marietti, 1965. Translated by John Patrick Reid. *On the Virtues in General*. Providence RI: The Providence College Press, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> The full discussion is found in *Summa theologiae* III qq. 1-59.

power of God” and a natural mode according to which “the matter from which His body was conceived is similar to the matter which other women supply for the conception of their offspring”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Eucharist**

The second has to do with the Eucharist, in which bread is changed into the body of Christ. “This change”, Thomas says, “is not like natural changes, but is entirely supernatural, and effected by God’s power alone.”<sup>4</sup> Nor is it a mere formal change occurring in matter as happens with natural agents, but rather, because God is infinite act, “His action extends to the whole nature of being”. One whole substance is changed into another whole substance.<sup>5</sup>

### **Grace**

The third topic is that of grace.<sup>6</sup> Thomas calls grace “a supernatural gift”.<sup>7</sup> To have God’s grace is to be subject to the effects of God’s gratuitous will. This can happen, says Thomas, in two ways. God can move a human being to act in a certain way, or God can infuse habits in people that allow

them to pursue and to achieve supernatural goods,<sup>8</sup> especially eternal life.<sup>9</sup> The necessity of grace is twofold: first, to heal the corruption of nature through sin; second, to allow actions that exceed nature, such as love of God, and so to gain supernatural merit.<sup>10</sup>

### **Phenomena Viewed through Faith**

The second grouping, concerns those actions that human beings perform, according to Thomas, by power that is higher than their own. These, he says, are supernatural operations and he names two: prophecy and the working of miracles.<sup>11</sup>

### **Prophecy**

Thomas’s major discussion of prophecy is found in Question 12 of the *De veritate*<sup>12</sup> and is complemented by a discussion in the *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>13</sup> He takes prophecy seriously both as depicted in the Old Testament<sup>14</sup> and as a gift of the Holy Spirit promised in the New Testament and still active for the sake of the Church.<sup>15</sup> He defines it as “a kind of supernatural knowledge”<sup>16</sup> “of things far away”<sup>17</sup> and thereby “far beyond our ordinary knowledge”.<sup>18</sup> It is something transient rather than an enduring habit.<sup>19</sup> It applies to “all those things the knowledge of which can be useful for salvation... whether they are past, or future, or even eternal, or necessary, or contingent”.<sup>20</sup> Future contingents, however, are in some sense primary, since their non-existence makes them least knowable.

Thomas makes further distinctions. First, prophecy simply speaking provides knowledge of things beyond the ken of anybody at all, while in a secondary sense it can be applied to knowledge given to the uneducated who can not grasp difficult matters through demonstration.<sup>21</sup> Second, he allows for a kind of natural prophecy “due to the

<sup>3</sup> *Summa theologiae* III 31, 5; trans. vol. 2, p. 2189.

<sup>4</sup> *Summa theologiae* III 74, 3; trans. p. 2449.

Thomas’s discussion of the Eucharist is in Questions 73 - 88.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa theologiae* III 74, 3; trans. p. 2450. “For it is evident that every agent acts according as it is in act. But every created agent is limited in its act, as being of a determinate genus and species: and consequently the action of every created agent bears upon some determinate act. Now the determination of every thing in actual existence comes from its form. Consequently, no natural or created agent can act except by changing the form in something; and on this account every change made according to nature’s laws is a formal change. But God is infinite act, as stated in the First Part, Q7, A1; Q26, A2; hence His action extends to the whole nature of being. Therefore He can work not only formal conversion, so that diverse forms succeed each other in the same subject; but also the change of all being, so that, to wit, the whole substance of one thing be changed into the whole substance of another. And this is done by Divine power in this sacrament; for the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole substance of Christ’s body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ’s blood. Hence this is not a formal, but a substantial conversion; nor is it a kind of natural movement: but, with a name of its own, it can be called ‘transubstantiation.’”

<sup>6</sup> Thomas’s treatise on grace is in *Summa theologiae* I-II qq. 109-114.

<sup>7</sup> *Summae theologiae* I-II 114, 2; trans. p. 1155.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa theologiae* I-II 110, 2; trans. p. 1133.

<sup>9</sup> *Summae theologiae* 109, 5; trans. p. 1127.

<sup>10</sup> *Summae theologiae* I-II q. 109.

<sup>11</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* II, 76; trans. p. 210.

Thomas adds “and other like things which men do by God’s favour”. He does not go into this, but one would expect that actions done in response to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for example, the gift of tongues, would be included.

<sup>12</sup> *De veritate*, question 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II-II question 171-175.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Gen 41:25-36; Jer 1:13; Zach 6:1-6; Dan 5:5.

<sup>15</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 2; trans. P. 111.

<sup>16</sup> *De veritate*, 2, 12; trans. P. 141.

<sup>17</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 2; trans. p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 1; trans. p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 2; trans. p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 2; trans. p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 2; trans. p. 112.

proper activity of secondary causes”, but insists that this is not the supernatural prophecy he is talking about, namely, “foreknowledge of future things [had] directly from God”.<sup>22</sup> Third, in the act of prophesying, he distinguishes between the reception of a form in the act of knowledge and the light that enables judgement about what has been received. The reception can be at the level of either sensation or imagination or intellect. Intellectual reception is not given to prophets, since it would imply the direct vision of the divine essence. Sensitive reception, such as the sight of writing on a wall can be shared with many. Imaginative reception is proper to the prophet alone. Essential to prophecy is the supernatural judgement “given to the prophet through the light infused in him which gives his understanding strength to judge”.<sup>23</sup>

The privileged nature of this knowledge is shown in the case of future contingents. Although these can be known through a knowledge of causes, as when a meteorologist predicts future rain, such prediction is not certain, because causes may be impeded. God’s vision, on the other hand, is eternal and knows also the outcome or execution of those causes which he comprehends “in one indivisible present”.<sup>24</sup> This knowledge, which could not be known by any science, may be made available to the prophet through divine intervention.

### **Miracles**

Thomas discusses miracles, in the *Summa contra gentiles* and also in the *Summa theologiae*.<sup>25</sup> He defines them as “works done by God outside the order usually observed in things”.<sup>26</sup> Playing with the Latin etymology he says that we are astonished “when we see an effect without knowing the cause”.<sup>27</sup> He is open to the fact that some things

seem wondrous simply because we do not know their causes and that people can delude us by manipulating appearances. Miracles, however, although they may be effected through intermediaries, are done by the power of God alone. Their purpose is to confirm the Word and to make it credible through sensible effects.<sup>28</sup> Thomas distinguishes three orders of miracle: those whereby God does something that nature can never do, for example, that the sun recede or the seas part; those whereby God does something that nature can do but in a contrary order, such as bringing the dead back to life; and those whereby God does something that could be done “by the operation of nature, but without the operation of natural principles”.<sup>29</sup>

### **Human Nature and its Destiny**

#### **“The End of Man”**

A few scattered references at the end of Book III of the *Summa contra gentiles*<sup>30</sup> direct one back to earlier discussions in that book about what is often called “man’s last end” or the nature of ultimate happiness or “man’s supernatural end”.<sup>31</sup> Early chapters of the book develop the argument that

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ignoramus.” *Summa contra gentiles* III, 101; Maretti edition, vol. III, p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> *Summa theologiae* II-II 178, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* III, 101; trans. p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* III, 147-150.

<sup>31</sup> Chapters 17-25 deal with God as the end of physical and intellectual things; Chapters 26 -48 deal with what ultimate happiness is not; Chapters 49-63 deal with the vision of God as ultimate happiness. An alternate discussion is found in *Summa theologiae* I-II qq. 1-5. There is a significant secondary literature on this question. See Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967). This book in its original French edition generated considerable discussion. See William R O’Connor, “Some Historical Factors in the Development of the Concept of Human Finality”, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 23 (1949): 15-35; Gerard Smith, “The Natural End of Man”, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 23 (1949): 47-61; Anton Pegis, “Nature and Spirit: Some Reflections on the Problem of the End of Man”, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 23 (1949): 62-79; Vincent E. Smith, “Philosophy and the Unity of Man’s Ultimate End”, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 27 (1953): 60-84; Anton C. Pegis, “Creation and Beatitude in the Summa Contra Gentiles of St. Thomas Aquinas”, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 29 (1955): 52-62;

<sup>22</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 3; trans. p. 119. In *De veritate* 12, 8 et ad 3, Thomas further claims that it is proper to the angels as part of spiritual creation to mediate in the formation of species in the imaginative power. When this action is moved by God so that the angels are simply instruments, the prophecy is supernatural. If, however, angels in their own right move the imagination, this is natural prophecy.

<sup>23</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 7; trans. p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> *De veritate*, 12, 12; trans. p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* III, 101-103; trans. pp. 60-66; and *Summa theologiae* II-II q. 178. He uses the term “supernatural” in the second work but not in the former where he uses phrases like “outside the usual order”. See also *De potentia Dei* q. 6, aa. 1-10, where he uses the term “supernatural” only once.

<sup>26</sup> SCG II, 101; trans. p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> “... *miracula dici solent: admiramur enim aliquid cum, effectum videntes, causam*

every agent acts for an end and that this end is some kind of good. Further considerations lead Thomas to the conclusions that the end of everything is a good and that every created being is ordered to one end, which is God. Creatures become like God, says Thomas, by imitating the divine goodness each according to its own measure.<sup>32</sup> This measure includes both the attainment of a being's substantial goodness and the attainment of the perfections of its proper operations.

In Chapter 25, Thomas turns to the consideration of intellectual or spiritual creatures. These, he says, attain the likeness of God "in a more special way, that is, through their proper operation of understanding Him". The end, therefore, of an intellectual creature is to understand God. Thomas argues that the proper operation of an intellectual being is understanding and that the highest act of understanding will be in grasping the most perfect thing, namely, God. He entertains the objection that the ultimate end of an intellectual creature might be simply to understand its own highest object but answers that even the lowest of things tend to God, so that the human intellect must also tend to God. Thomas further argues that there is a natural desire in all human beings to know causes. This desire will not be satisfied until it finds the first cause, which is God. Thomas associates this view with that of Aristotle in *Ethics X* according to which ultimate felicity is found in the contemplation of the highest objects of contemplation. He also quotes Matthew 5: 8, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God".

So far Thomas has argued that the end of human life is to know God. He seems to found this in a natural desire. The next question concerns the manner of that knowledge. He rejects the kind of general and confused knowledge that most have about there being a God.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, he rejects the knowledge of God had through demonstration and that had through faith. Each of these is in some way limited and defective and therefore unable to terminate desire. By Chapter 50, Thomas argues that the natural desire to know God cannot be satisfied by the kind of natural knowledge that is available to us. The desire to know terminates not in the knowledge that something is the cause, but in a knowledge of what that cause is.

The kind of knowledge that constitutes the ultimate happiness of any intellectual creature is, according to Thomas, direct knowledge of the essence of God. In this knowledge, the essence of God becomes the form actuating the intellect to understand. Such knowledge is, however, beyond

the power of any created being and so occurs only in consequence of divine action. Thomas refers to this act as divine light and later as supernatural light or power.<sup>34</sup> Later in the book, Thomas argues that human beings need supernatural assistance in order to pursue their supernatural end, which surpasses their natural faculties. This help is given as a supernatural form or perfection by which Thomas means the infused virtues.<sup>35</sup>

### **Infused Virtue**

By the infused virtues, Thomas means the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and other infused virtues which parallel the usual scheme of natural or acquired moral and intellectual virtues.<sup>36</sup> Hence, for instance, we find a distinction between natural fortitude and infused or supernatural fortitude.<sup>37</sup> In the *Summa theologiae* Thomas argues separately for the existence of the theological virtues and of the other infused virtues.

In the first case, he points out that human beings are perfected by virtue, which is therefore a kind of principle directing them to happiness. He then distinguishes two kinds of happiness - natural happiness, which is achieved by means of natural principles, and a happiness that surpasses human nature and therefore the capacity of human nature to achieve it. This supernatural happiness is achieved by principles that are received directly from God. They are called the "theological virtues" and for three reasons: first, they direct us to God; second, they are infused by God alone; third, they are known only through revelation.<sup>38</sup>

Thomas's argument for other infused virtues is rather brief. "Effects", he says, "must be proportionate to their causes and principles". The virtues that we acquire by our actions follow on natural principles within us. Similarly, the theological virtues are principles directing our action to a supernatural end. We need other habits from God that have a due proportion to the theological virtues.<sup>39</sup> It is fair to ask what might be meant here by principles. In other discussions, Thomas distinguishes between principles that belong to the species and those that belong to an individual. For instance, it belongs to the species to know the principles of reason and to will good. In individuals, on the other hand, a particular

<sup>34</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* III, 52-57.

<sup>35</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* III, 147-150.

<sup>36</sup> *Summa theologiae* I-II 63, 3.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of this see Lee H. Yearley, "The Nature-Grace Question in the Context of Fortitude", *The Thomist* 35/4 (1971): 557-580.

<sup>38</sup> *Summa theologiae* I-II 62, 1. For derivation of these virtues, namely, faith, hope and charity, see 62, 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Summa theologiae* I-II 63, 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* III, 20; trans. p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* III, 38.

temperament gives them aptitudes for specific moral or intellectual virtues. He calls these the nursery of the acquired habits or virtues.<sup>40</sup> The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, therefore, can be seen as an impetus towards a whole life that is lived in relation to God as revealed, in which all activity takes on new dimensions and failure is recognised as sin rather than merely as wrong-doing.

### **Creation of Human Souls**

In another discussion, Thomas gives grounds for why a human being might be subject to supernatural perfections. “The rational soul”, he says “which is immediately created by God, exceeds the capacity of its material receiver.”<sup>41</sup> In the generation of animals, the form or soul is educed by the matter. An intellectual or spiritual soul, on the other hand, transcends matter and is subsistent in the sense that it has an operation apart from the body.<sup>42</sup> Such a soul must be created directly by God, and so has in it a capacity that exceeds that of simply bodily being, though as incorporated it is the lowest of the spiritual creatures. Thomas does not call this action supernatural. On the other, any other direct intervention by God in nature is supernatural and is rejected by Thomas except in the case of things like miracles.<sup>43</sup>

### **Conclusion: “Supernatural”**

What then, does Thomas mean by “supernatural”? The term is used only as an adjective or infrequently as an adverb and then by way of distinction. It means that some power or effect or agent or gift or end or some such is not natural and that it is outside the order of nature on account of direct divine intervention. Thomas is clear, however, that God does not normally intervene in the workings of nature so that the supernatural is not a kind of explanation for things we do not understand. Supernatural events such as prophecy and miracles occur only for the sake of salvation and matters such as the nature of Christ and the sacraments are part of the order of salvation, the free gift of a personal God, who is distinct from the created universe.

While, however, Thomas excludes supernatural explanations for the workings of nature, he does

place human beings in a privileged position by reason of their spiritual nature. They long for more than they can know naturally and are satisfied only by union with God, and divine agency is active in their generation.

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<sup>40</sup> *Summa theologiae* I-II 63, 1; 51,1.

<sup>41</sup> *De virtutibus in communi* a. 10; trans. p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> *Summa theologiae* I 118, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *De potentia Dei* q. 3, aa. 1- 12 deal with creation.

In art. 8, Thomas rejects continuing creative intervention in nature by God, and in art. 11, he rejects supernatural agency in the generation of vegetative forms. In art. 9, on the other hand, he argues that a human soul cannot be transmitted through semen and so must be created.

## The Spiritual and the Supernatural according to Thomas Aquinas

### Outline and Major References

Introduction

Matters Strictly in the Order of Faith

*Christ*

*Summae theologiae* III qq. 1- 59.

*Eucharist*

*Summae theologiae* III qq. 73 - 88.

*Grace*

*Summa theologiae* I-II qq. 109-114.

Phenomena Viewed through Faith

*Prophecy*

*De veritate* q. 12.

*Summa theologiae* II-II qq. 171 - 175.

*Miracles*

*Summa contra gentiles* III, 101 - 103.

*Summa theologiae* II-II q. 178.

*De potentia Dei* q. 6.

Human Nature and Its Destiny

*"The End of Man"*

*Summa contra gentiles* III 17 - 63; 147 - 150.

*Summa theologiae* I-II qq. 1-5.

*Infused Virtue*

*Summa theologiae* I-II qq. 62 - 63.

*De virtutibus in communis* a. 10.

*Creation of Human Souls*

*De virtutibus in communi* a. 10.

*De potentia Dei* q. 3, aa. 1 - 12; esp. aa. 8, 9, 11.

Conclusion: "Supernatural

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Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 2, 2 (excerpt).

Note, therefore, that a thing is perfect in two ways. First, it is perfect with respect to the perfection of its act of existence, which belongs to it according to its own species. But, since the specific act of existence of one thing is distinct from the specific act of existence of another, in every created thing of this kind, the perfection falls short of absolute perfection to the extent that that perfection is found in other species. Consequently, the perfection of each individual thing considered in itself is imperfect, being a part of the perfection of the entire universe, which arises from the sum total of the perfections of all individual things.

In order that there might be some remedy for this imperfection, another kind of perfection is to be found in created things. It consists in this, that the perfection belonging to one thing is found in another. This is the perfection of a knower in so far as he knows; for something is known by a knower by reason of the fact that the thing known is, in some fashion, in the possession of the knower. Hence, it is said in *The Soul* that the soul is, "in some manner, all things," since its nature is such that it can know all things. In this way it is possible for the perfection of the entire universe to exist in one thing. The ultimate perfection which the soul can attain, therefore, is, according to the philosophers, to have delineated in it the entire order and causes of the universe. This they held to be the ultimate end of man. We, however, hold that it consists in the vision of God; for, as Gregory says: "What is there that they do not see who see Him who sees all things?"