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Accommodating Ambiguity Within Aquinas' Philosophy Of Truth

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Abstract

To what extent can Aquinas' philosophy of truth accommodate ambiguity? If an ambiguous object is that which exhibits multiple conflicting meanings, and truth, as 'the conformity of thing and intellect', has its source and purpose in the divine, does the ambiguous lead us away from God? If so, how do we square this with the experience of the ambiguous, such as in art, that appears to draw us towards the divine? The paper explores this aporia by an analysis of the first two questions of *De Veritate* in conversation with Feser's *Scholastic Metaphysics* and Pickstock's *Truth in Aquinas*. Drawing on these three sources, truth is posited as a *translation* of being. However, it becomes clear that any translation is imperfect, given the difference between the medium of the existence of the thing and the medium of truth in the intellect. Hence, multiple, sometimes contradictory, propositions are needed in order to express the being of the thing. Moreover, it is shown how the ambiguous can prompt recursive returning to the singular, drawing us beyond merely identifying 'what' a thing is, and beyond propositions, to share in the divine actualization of existence.

Keywords

Aquinas, ambiguity, truth, *esse*, singular, *De Veritate*, existence, being

Introduction

To what extent can Aquinas' philosophy of truth accommodate ambiguity? If an ambiguous object is that which exhibits multiple conflicting meanings, and truth, as 'the conformity of thing and intellect', has its source and purpose in the divine, does the ambiguous lead us away from God?[1] If so, how do we square this with the experience of the

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.1 co.

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ambiguous, such as in art, that appears to draw us towards the divine? The paper explores this aporia by an analysis of the first two questions of *De Veritate* in conversation with Feser's *Scholastic Metaphysics* and Pickstock's 'Truth and Correspondence' in *Truth in Aquinas.*[2] Drawing on these three sources, truth is posited as a *translation* of being. However, it becomes clear that any translation is imperfect, given the difference between the medium of the existence of the thing and the medium of truth in the intellect. Hence, multiple, sometimes contradictory propositions are needed in order to express the being of the thing in the intellect. Moreover, it is shown how the ambiguous can prompt recursive returning to the singular instance of the thing itself because the ambiguous cannot be straightforwardly categorised into *species*. In this way, the ambiguous encourages us to consider the singular thing before us that God brings into being. Thus, the ambiguous can draw us beyond merely identifying 'what' a thing is, and beyond propositions, to share in the divine actualization of existence.

Truth and ambiguity

As Aquinas describes in *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*[3], truth is the adequation, the agreement, of being to the intellect.[4] Hence, truth resides in the intellect as an imposition of things on the intellect. In parallel, a relationship of intellect to the thing causes a true or false judgement of the essence and being of the thing.[5] More fundamentally, a thing is also said to be true with respect to the divine intellect as the measure of the fulfilment of the thing to its final cause.[6] So, as the intellect senses and comprehends, truth flows from the divine intellect, through creation and is impressed into the human intellect. Thereupon, it returns from the human intellect to creation and towards Creator as speculation and judgment. This participation of the human intellect in divine truth is our 'mind's end'; through the adequation of being to

[2] Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction,* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014). Catherine Pickstock, 'Truth and Correspondence', in John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London : Routledge, 2001), p. 7.

[3] Henceforth *De Veritate.* Note that all question articles mentioned in the body of the text refer to the translation referenced in footnote 1, unless otherwise stated.

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co.

[5] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.1 co, Q.1 a.2 co.

[6] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co. Additionally, for Aquinas, God is also efficient and exemplar cause, but not material cause. For a summary, see the introduction to each of the four chapters on causation in: Andrew Davison*, Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 13-14, 65-66, 84-85, 113-115.

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intellect we both know and are known.[7] It seems to follow that the more sure and accurate we are about how things are, the closer we draw to the divine intellect and the better we fulfil our end.

I suggest that ambiguity poses a unique challenge to this latter proposition. It seems not uncommon to experience a movement towards God through ambiguous events and objects. For example, in Giotto's *Noli me tangere,* the body position of the risen Christ is ambiguously skewed (see Figure 1).[8] The proposition in the intellect that Christ is turning away 'resolves', 'lands' or 'fixes' the ambiguity into something that can be argued is true, giving us this aspect of the painting in a format we can wrestle with intellectually. We can also say that Christ is turning towards Mary, and thus wrestle with this contrary proposition. The ambiguity is captured by saying both are true. Indeed, ambiguity is distinct from complexity in that conflicting positions must be combined to be communicative of truth and cannot be collapsed by further thought. Yet, in the conversion of the object into proposition, something is lost of the essence of the painting; both propositions, even taken together, still do not fully describe the painting.[9] Neither do they fully capture how the painting communicates the shock of the Resurrection; the new relationship of Christ to Mary (and thus to us); nor the divinity and humanity of Christ. In fact, regardless of how many propositions one creates about the painting, even a whole book's worth, the truth received in reading the words is still different from the truth received from viewing the painting itself.

[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co.

[8] Giotto di Bondone, 'Noli me tangere,' public domain via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_-_Scrovegni_-_-37-_-_Resurrection_(Noli_me_tangere).jpgGiotto. For an extended discussion of gesture in Giotto's work see: Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, Cambridge Studies in the History of Art, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[9] 'Conflicting' does not necessarily mean opposite. To conflict is for two (or more) things to fight, or strike against one another. Thus, two or more statements are such that they are set against one another, either because are phrased in such a way that they both claim priority, or they both claim exclusivity, or appear mutually exclusive. Note that the emphasis is on what the intellect *perceives* as conflict. It is possible for conflict to arise through one way/method of considering the object (a particular hermeneutic), whilst a different hermeneutic may not produce the conflict. For example, the figure of Christ in the Giotto painting is considered in terms of the painting process then one half of the figure is painted one way and the other half painted pointing in the other direction – there is no conflict in understanding *how* this is done. Nonetheless, the conflict still arises when the painting is viewed as single figure (as intended). This is not the same as 'complexity', where the ambiguity disappears with further thought or information *within the valid hermeneutic.* Additionally, whilst I have described the two statements as conflicting, they are not logical opposites. i.e. if 'Christ is turning away from Mary' is Q, then 'Christ is turning towards Mary' is P. Importantly, $P \neq \neg Q$ which would be 'Christ is not turning away from Mary'. Thus, Thus, 'Q&P is true', is valid, if ambiguous, rather than invalid or paradoxical. The linguistic ambiguity may stem from the relationship between 'away' and 'towards' as semantically opposite, even if not logically opposite.

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Figure 1. Section of 'Noli me tangere', Giotto di Bondone, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Writers on Thomistic metaphysics tend to favour simple examples of 'things' in their explanations: balls, trees, drawn shapes, etc.[10] Yet, the contemplation of a rubber ball is not commonly reported as a route to God. Not that it isn't possible to find God in a rubber ball, I only suggest that it isn't the general experience of most Christians. Our churches, after all, are full of art, our worship full of liturgy and music.

[10] For examples see: Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction,* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), pp. 35, 76, 241; John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 7.

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Thus, my argument is premised on ambiguity being acknowledged, at least as a minimum, as one of a collection of attributes that intensify our knowing and being known. Additionally, it is possible for many things to exhibit ambiguity, including art, music, liturgy and Sacrament. However, art, liturgy, etc, also exhibit many other attributes, and do not *always* exhibit ambiguity. Therefore, I do not claim that ambiguity is the only or best starting place for a discussion of why some things draw us to God. Clearly, things that draw us to God may or may not exhibit ambiguity. The paper starts with ambiguity because (1) it appears to conflict with Aquinas' definition of truth and is therefore interesting, (2) it is one of a number of attributes of things that appear to draw us to God and (3) by extracting out the specific attribute of ambiguity as a new place to start for enquiry, it might be possible to uncover new insights. In other words, is there something proper to ambiguity that resolves the aporia? As will become clear, choosing this starting point does have implications for other attributes of things that appear to draw us to God.

Ambiguity in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is defined as a 'sign with multiple meanings'.[11] Yet, as that entry shows, ambiguity in philosophy is mostly discussed with reference to ambiguous language. For example, the sentence 'there is a bat in my room' is ambiguous as 'bat' has more than one meaning.[12] However, the object in question isn't ambiguous, only the sign (the word 'bat'), which requires additional information, or the object itself, to resolve the ambiguity. Conversely, objects and events can themselves be signs with more than one meaning in that they refer or gesture towards more than one propositional truth. Instead of the truth of an ambiguous word, such as 'bat', resolving in the sensible object, the truth of an ambiguous object or event resolves in the intellectual proposition. The ambiguity originates from the possibility of combining multiple intellectual propositions; multiple meanings that appear to be at least partially mutually exclusive or contradictory, or have debatable priority over each other, yet need to be held in tension together.

The 'fixing' of meaning into a proposition seems to aid understanding, giving our intellect truth in a cognisable format. By generating truth as a proposition in the intellect it is possible to communicate, debate and analyse the truth statement. For the ambiguous, multiple

[11] Adam Sennet, 'Ambiguity', in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), accessed February 24, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/ambiguity/.

[12] Adam Sennet, 'Ambiguity', in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), accessed February 24, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/ambiguity/#TypeAmbi, section 3; Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction,* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), p. 254.

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contradictory propositions may result. At the same time, the multiple meanings fail to fully express the object as experienced. How do such ambiguous signs fit within a philosophy of truth that, on the surface, appears to elevate distinct judgments of truth/falsity above confliction and multiplicity? How can the thing said to be in agreement with the intellect if the ambiguous thing has multiple meanings that jostle for attention? At this point it would be possible to reach for other philosophies of truth, of idealism or pragmatism, but this would be to step outside Thomism.[13] Before dismissing Thomist truth it is worth pushing a little deeper to see how this might be resolved: can Aquinas help us think about ambiguity, whether or not this was his original concern?

Act and potency

A possible solution might be to consider the multiple meanings of an ambiguous thing as multiple potencies of the object. Edward Feser, in *Scholastic Metaphysics,* draws the many themes of Thomistic metaphysics from the centrality of act and potency.[14] Any 'thing' is a mixture of act and potency.[15] As act, the Giotto painting *is* in certain and specific ways that have been actualised in form and matter, such as the colours and shape, the figures and subject. It is also an *operative* act in that, intrinsic to the nature of art, is the power to communicate - the painting has the power to operate on the intellect.[16] This power is the ability to cause propositions, meanings, in the intellect. Even art that is never seen or heard carries causal potential for meaning; artwork, in the act of existing, intrinsically has the power to cause meaning. This is the act of the painting, not just its colour, shape, etc, but that it has intrinsic power to cause meaning. Whilst 'power to cause meaning' may seem entirely abstract, this operative power remains connected to the attributes of the painting. The painting exists in a certain and specific way, with particular attributes, from which meaning will arise. Accordingly, it does not have the power to cause *any* meaning. On the contrary, the potential meanings are already in the painting (or it wouldn't be operative act, it would have no power), but what those meanings are (their content) remains potential in the painting until actualised in the intellect. This is the potency of the painting: the multiple potential

[13] For a summary of alternative positions and their relation to Thomism see: John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. i-ii; Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden (Ma.): Blackwell, 2008), pp. 18-34.

[14] Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction,* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), p. 31.

[15] Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction,* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), pp. 32-3.

[16] Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction,* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), p. 41.

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meanings that may arise from it. As such, a painting is both operative act and potential, yet the potential only arises out of the operative act; therefore, together, both are the truth of painting. Consequently, the multiple meanings in the ambiguous thing could be considered the multiple potencies of the object.[17] This is different from saying that the meaning of the painting is only made by the mind, as one might outside of Thomism. Because all things are act AND potency, there are unactualised multiple potential meanings in the unobserved painting. When we consider the Giotto painting, we can say it is true that the painting has the potency of Christ turning away AND the potency of turning towards. Accordingly, multiple contradictory meanings could be true because they arise from multiple potential meanings, latent in the object.

It is possible to critique this by arguing that the content of meaning (truth in the intellect) is disconnected from the painting's meaning-making power. Alternatively, it could be argued that the power to cause meaning is not connected to the specific form and matter of the painting. However, either line of argument would break the connection between being and truth that Aquinas rests his definition of truth upon. Equally, it could be argued that a *single* potential resides in the painting, resulting in a single meaning, thus questioning the initial definition of ambiguity. However, any alternative would have to account for the *fact* of multiple meanings in the intellect. For some objects multiple meanings *are* held in tension in the intellect, and doing so 'feels' more truthful than to decide that one meaning is definitive. Maybe the intellect (or some intellects) are insufficiently able to work out the definitive meaning, but this doesn't account for existence of the experience of holding multiple meanings or that this experience appears in some cases to draw us towards the divine.

However, the multiple-potencies solution can be critiqued within Thomism and the definition of ambiguity retained. Describing ambiguous things by their being-in-potency sits uncomfortably as a lens, given that act and potency are not the primary driving concepts in the philosophy of truth in *De Veritate*. Instead, act and potency share more fundamentally in the divine act of being. Aquinas explains that natural things are analogically 'placed between two intellects', the divine and the human. Therefore, things are true primarily by means of the one truth, 'the truth of the divine intellect'.[18] In addition, Aquinas goes on in his reply to Q.1 a.2 to say that a thing is true so far as it fulfils

[17] As Feser points out, potency imposes limits, so the interpretation of a painting isn't unlimited. Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction,* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), p. 91.

[18] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co and Q.1 a.4 co.

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its divine end.[19] As such, the truth proposition, the causing of 'a true estimate about itself' in the intellect, is also an estimate of its divine purpose. This is problematic for the proposal that ambiguous things have multiple potential meanings. It might be possible to argue that the purpose is contained in the being-in-act of the thing and not in the being-in-potency, e.g., the purpose of the painting is to be a painting of specific colour, shape, etc, not the purpose to be a painting that means X, Y, or Z. However, Aquinas says the judgment is a conformity of *being* to the intellect, not potency separated from act. Things have being because they participate in the subsistent act of being; the being of things shares in the divine being. If divine being is source and purpose of being-in-act *and* being-in-potency, the being-in-potency of the thing presupposes final cause, such that *which* potency is actualised is not of arbitrary importance, and the problem of ambiguity remains.

The transcendental circle

Catherine Pickstock accurately captures the way that the truth of things for Aquinas is the fulfilment of the thing according to its appointed nature and end.[20] Pickstock goes on to say that this nature and end is the thing imitating God. Therefore, the intellect does not know the thing as act and potency but, 'only insofar as one meaningfully grasps it as imitating God. Pickstock carefully balances the realist and idealist aspects of Aquinas' philosophy of truth by emphasising the convertibility of the transcendentals: Being, Good and Truth.[21] Following Aquinas in his replies to Q.1 a.2 and a.1, the True expresses the movement of the intellect in knowing Being (through things) and once known, the Good expresses the movement of desire back towards Being.[22] Hence, the transcendentals form an aesthetic and dynamic circle. This movement is a helpful addition to our understanding of ambiguity. It articulates our desire to know the ambiguous object or event and the dissatisfaction as the intellect sifts the possible in the ambiguous. Furthermore, the movement of the intellect in knowing receives more than the facticity or quiddities of the thing.[23] This is because human truth, is sourced, sustained, and purposed by and from divine truth. Likewise, the being

[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co.

[20] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 8.

[21] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 5-9.

[22] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co.

[23] As Aquinas points out in Q.1 a.3 co. Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.3 co.

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of a thing is from and for divine being.[24] So, on the one side there is the being of the thing participating in the divine being, and on the other side our knowing participating in the divine knowing. In the simplicity of God, God's knowing is the same as God's being: the act of knowing can in no way be separated out from the divine being, nor a portion removed. Consequently, any human act of knowing must in a real sense participate in the divine being.[25] Likewise, the being of the thing also participates in the divine knowing. Thus, in this movement of the intellect between being, truth and good, both the knower and the thing known participate in the divine source of Being, Truth, and Good. For Pickstock, therefore, knowledge through the convertibility of Being, Truth and Good is a participation in 'God's perpetual return to Himself' and thus more than facticity.[26]

Whilst the transcendental circle may help explain the recursive meaning-making that ambiguous things cause, it also strengthens the previous critique of the multiple-potencies proposition. Pickstock's prioritising of divine being through the Transcendental circle only adds to the implication of any judgement of truth from multiple meanings. Surely what is judged as true has to be Truth without contradiction? If there are two conflicting truths stated, even if recursively, how are they both from a single being of the thing, participating in a single divine Being? I suggest that this critique doesn't apply if truth and being are held as distinct, even if convertible. If truth is not identical to being, any conversion of being (of a thing) to truth (in the intellect) implies that some difference results from the movement from being to truth. If differentiation between being and truth is possible (i.e., they are not identical), are multiple truths from a single being possible? To investigate this, in the next two paragraphs I will back up my claim to the non-identical convertibility of being and truth by first looking at how Aquinas uses the difference between being and truth; secondly, I return to Pickstock's description of the transcendental circle in more detail to show that being and truth can additionally be differentiated teleologically. Having reinforced the non-identical convertibility of being and truth, I will summarise how this might point to a solution to the ambiguity-truth aporia that is the topic of this paper. The final section of the paper will examine the proposed solution and some potential challenges to it.

Firstly, can we say that Aquinas does make a distinction between truth and being? In Q.1 a.1 he says that truth *adds* to being, thus is not

[24] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.2 a.5 co.

[25] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.2 a.11 co.

[26] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 10.

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identical with it. Then, in Q.1 a.2 and again in Q.1 a.4, he explains that truth is properly in the intellect (divine and human) and only by association in things. He gives the example of the predication of *healthy* to an animal and to medicine.[27] Accordingly, truth is in the intellect and only analogically in things. This can be seen clearly in Q.1 a.2 co, in particular in his hypothetical example: 'if, by an impossible supposition, intellect did not exist and things did continue to exist, then the essentials of truth would in no way remain'.[28] Hence, the description of truth and being as in 'conformity' (in Q.1 a.1 co) should not be mistaken for 'identical', for the conversion is only in the intellect. The truth of a thing is in the intellect, and being of a thing is not. So if a thing is said to be true, there is a conformity of its being (outside the intellect) and its truth (in the intellect).[29] Aquinas also makes clear he is following Aristotle in positing the convertibility of the transcendentals, both in his reply to Q.1 a.2 and in his answers to difficulties in this question where he explains that true *can be converted* with being. Bringing together the convertibility of the transcendentals, with the assertion that despite this, truth and being are not identical, truth could be described as the *expression* of being in the intellect: **truth is being, translated into the intellect.**[30]. Truth as such is neither the flat epistemological correspondence of 'what is' to the thing, nor a disconnected idea, but a real relation expressed by the conversion of being to truth within the intellect.

Secondly, Pickstock doesn't conflate being and truth in the structure of her argument, however, I suggest there is more to be said out of the first chapter of *Truth in Aquinas* if the distinction between truth and being is pressed a little. Specifically, in the circle of Being, Good, and Truth, an object that is not a knower has Being and Good but it is only known; it doesn't *know.*[31] As such, truth in the thing is only by association or relationship; its truth resides in the divine and human intellect and not in itself.[32] Thus, the thing does not know the truth of itself;

[27] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.4 co, Q.1 a.2 co.

[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co.

[29] I hesitate to say 'being, in creation', or 'in the world' or 'in reality', for all these have the problem that the intellect is also 'in creation'. Assume therefore that my use of 'being' implies that which is in creation but not in the intellect of the subject.

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co and ad.1.

[31] Pickstock uses 'Being', 'Life' and 'Knowledge' as subtly nuanced alternatives to 'Being', 'Good' and 'Truth'. I have used the first for consistency throughout the paper as, although they are slightly different, it doesn't affect what I argue from the propositions in Pickstock's chapter. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 5-10.

[32] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co.

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instead it is returned to its source, the divine being, by being known by God. Whilst Pickstock doesn't explore this distinction specifically, the consequence is clear in the rest of the chapter: the being of things is fulfilled in being known.[33] In contrast, the human intellect *is* also a knower.[34] The human intellect in knowing, participates in the divine knowing that fulfils the being of the thing: knowing is 'catching the [thing] on its way back to God'.[35] There is therefore an asymmetry to the purpose of things and the purpose of the intellect: things are fulfilled in being known and the intellect is fulfilled in being known *and* in knowing.[36] This asymmetry is directly related to the asymmetry of truth as primarily in the intellect and secondarily in things. It is the participation of the intellect in knowing that means that truth resides in the intellect, and this also fulfils its purpose as knower. Therefore, this additional teleological difference of things and intellect reinforces the claim that being and truth are distinct, even if convertible.

To summarise, whilst Being and Truth are one in God, for things known by the intellect they are convertible but not identical. The divine knowing is a knowing of the being of the thing and is a whole knowing and identical to Truth in the divine intellect. In comparison, in the human intellect there is movement from one to another: being is converted or *translated* into truth in the human intellect. Being becomes truth in the intellect, but is not identical to it. For an ambiguous object, it could therefore be suggested that the translation of the being of the thing to the truth in the intellect could produce different expressions of the truth of the thing each time the translation occurs. Potentially, if truth is not identical to being, multiple truths in the intellect may be possible from the same being. The intellect can consider different truths of the same thing, but as an ambiguous thing, it is impossible through the translation process to 'resolve' or 'fix' it into a proposition that accurately and fully captures the being of the thing. Nonetheless, the truth proposition remain a conversion from being, so a direct connection between truth

[33] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

[34] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.2 co.

[35] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas,* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 10.

[36] There is also the unique situation of an intellect knowing another intellect, which I will not explore further, except to point those who are interested to both Johannes Hoff and Jean Luc Marion's discussions of Nicholas de Cusa's icon demonstration in *De visione Dei.* Jean Luc Marion, 'Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen: Nicholas of Cusa's Contribution in De Visione Dei', *The Journal of Religion* 96 3 (2016), pp. 329-31. Johannes Hoff, 'The Visibility of the Invisible: From Nicholas of Cusa to Late Modernity and Beyond', in Louise Nelstrop, and Simon D. Podmore, eds, *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence*, (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Pub. Company, 2013), p. 51.

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and being remains and the proposition cannot be said to be merely an idea.

Having postulated a solution that retains Aquinas' rich ontological truth but allows for multiple truth propositions about a single ambiguous thing, I will explore this proposition and some potential problems in more detail with a further two sections. Firstly, what might be meant by *translation* of being (of the thing) to truth (in the intellect); secondly, if the translation thesis is accepted, does this help us understand why the ambiguous might draw us towards the divine (i.e., is there a difference between the ambiguous and the straight-forward)?

(1) Translation

'Translation' is an imperfect analogy that requires nuancing. When translating languages, there is no sense of dependency of one language on another as there is with the translation of being to truth, i.e., one language is not derived from another. 'Conversion' is a better analogy from the perspective of dependence, as the conversion of, for example, one type of energy to another captures the dependency of truth on being. However, conversion implies that the initial state is replaced by the final state; obviously this is not the case for things – paintings don't disappear when we think about them. Interestingly, there *is* a dependency model of translation that could prove fruitful. Drawing on Umberto Eco's *Experiences in Translation*, Arianna Fabbricatore explores the translation of dance to written choreography. She describes what is lost in the translation of a dance into the choreographic notation of the dance using the concept of entropy.[37] Entropy is the 'inevitable losses of meaning' when one form of 'language' is translated into another. Her typology of entropy includes losses caused 'naturally' (by interpretation) and losses through 'voids': that which is not in (potentially cannot be in) the text but is necessarily instantiated in dance. Fabbricatore goes on to say that the concept of 'voids' implies a limited range of possibilities. The limits are imposed by the different *media* of text and dance. Similarly, truth in the intellect has voids necessitated by the limits of the intellect: the Giotto painting cannot materially exist in the intellect, but is given in a non-material mode or form.

[37] There is also the unique situation of an intellect knowing another intellect, which I will not explore further, except to point those who are interested to Johannes Hoff, Dominic White and Jean Luc Marion's discussions of Nicholas de Cusa's icon demonstration in *De visione Dei*. Jean Luc Marion, 'Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen: Nicholas of Cusa's Contribution in De Visione Dei', *The Journal of Religion* 96 3 (2016), pp. 329-31. Johannes Hoff, 'The Visibility of the Invisible: From Nicholas of Cusa to Late Modernity and Beyond', in Louise Nelstrop, and Simon D. Podmore, eds, *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence*, (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Pub. Company, 2013), p. 51. Dominic White, *How Do I Look?: Theology in the Age of the Selfie*, (London: SCM Press, 2020), pp. 94-100.

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Thus, the translation occurs from the being of the painting to the mode of expression possible in the intellect, given the different medium of the intellect. The resulting entropy (both through interpretation and voids) explains how truth in the intellect cannot possibly capture the being of the painting because they have fundamentally different limits of possible expression. Instead, we attempt to get closer to the being of the painting by deploying multiple truth propositions. The intellect (in knowing) and the thing (in existing) have different limits of expression, different conditions of possibility, different ways of appearing and subsisting.[38] Being and truth are conditioned by these different modes of existing such that translation unavoidably involves losses or voids due to interpretation and limit.

Importantly, it is not that the ambiguous thing contains multiple meanings, in the sense of having a number of discrete meanings that can be drawn from it. In this way, the translation model differs from the multiple potencies solution posited and refuted at the beginning of the paper. To understand this, consider a sculpture of an apple and a drawing of an apple – they cannot be identical, even if they are of the same apple. Moreover, if, say, multiple drawings are made of the apple, the drawings were not already 'in' the apple, they are not part or function. But they are 'of' the apple: an expression in a different medium. Thus, there are not multiple meanings 'in' the being of the thing, it is unitary *as being* in that it exists *as it is*. However, in translation to truth in the intellect the unity, the being of the thing, has to be expressed in the medium possible in the intellect. Given that the mediums are different, the truth in the intellect has voids: there are entropic losses in the translation. It therefore appears that multiple meanings are possible, because a second translation, from the same unity of being, has different voids. In the case of ambiguity, the unity of the being of the thing maybe impossible to replicate in the medium of the intellect. This results in the entropic process throwing up quite different, even opposite truths.[39]

(2) Actualisation of existence

So far, I have argued that multiple truths from the ambiguous thing are still truths of the thing and that multiple truths may be necessary to better know the being of the thing. However, the other part of the ambiguity-truth aporia concerns why the ambiguous can

[38] Aquinas makes this clear in Q.2 a.6 co: 'Hence, all cognition is necessarily determined by the *limitation of the form* in the knower'. Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.2 a.6 co, [my emphasis].

[39] The question of how and why the entropic process throws up different truth propositions (e.g., is a non-determinable, and possibly exhibits hysteresis), opens up a larger area of enquiry that will be the subject of a further paper.

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appear to draw us towards God. How does the ambiguous compare to the straight-forward? Why does it intuitively feel like ambiguous things, about which multiple meanings can be generated, draw us to God more than balls or trees? In this section I will argue that the generation in the intellect of the multiple truths of the ambiguous are a sharing in the actualization of existence, and thus the ambiguous draws us towards God to a greater extent than the straight-forward.

The concept of being can be nuanced, more than just 'thing' but as 'act-of-being'. Aquinas does use being in this way, using the term *esse*.[40] As an *act*, the being of the thing (*esse*) is not merely the form and matter of the thing, but the action of existing. God actualises God's own existence, but creation has its *esse* from God by participation.[41] God brings things into existence, instantiates things, *gives* them being, actualises their existence. This actualisation of existence is identical to God's knowing of things. In other words, God's knowing of the thing is his creation and sustaining of the thing. Divine actualisation of existence can be brought together with the concept of participation in divine knowing that has been gained from Pickstock. As previously stated, our knowing, the truth we have of the thing, can only know by sharing in the knowing, the Truth, in God. Furthermore, because divine knowing is identical with the divine actualisation of existence, our knowing shares in the knowing that brings all things into being. As a result, when we generate a truth proposition in the intellect, it is not a knowing that proposes or makes statements at a objective distance, but a knowing that actualises existence. As Andrew Davison cautions in *Participation in God,* participatory theology must keep the emphasis of similitude with God in balance with the gulf between God and creation.[42] Indeed, it is not that our knowing does any of the work of bringing things into being, but that the divine knowing that actualises existence is the only knowing by which we can know.[43] That is, the knowing of the thing is a knowing with and through the divine act which sustains and actualises

[40] Notwithstanding that there is debate about the multiple ways that Aquinas deploys *esse* (as act-of-being or as the fact of existing). For examples that cover several positions, see: Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden (Ma.): Blackwell, 2008), pp. 73-96; John F. X. Knasas, 'The Analytical Thomist and the Paradoxical Aquinas: Some Reflections on Kerr's Aquinas's Way to God', *Annals of Philosophy* 67 4 (2019), pp. 71–88.

[41] For examples of Aquinas' explanation that things have being by participation see: S.T. I 4.3, ad.3, S.T. I 45.5 ad.1. See also John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being,* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), pp. 120-121 and Andrew Davison*, Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 68-83.

[42] Andrew Davison*, Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 80-81.

[43] S.T. I 4.1 co, ad.2 and ad.3.

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it. As Aquinas puts it in his threefold definition of truth, truth is 'that which manifests and proclaims existence'.[44]

Moreover, I propose that things which are more difficult to define simply encourage the intellect to share in the act-of-being (the actualisation of existence) more than the non-ambiguous. To unpack this further, I will draw on Aquinas' complex modelling of intellection of things in his reply to Q.2 a.6. Here he continues his exploration of the relationship of the *phantasm* (which appears to be the mental knowledge/image of the thing in the intellect[45]) to the *species* of the thing (the category of thing by which it is known what nature it is) to the singular (the instantiation of one example of the *species* that is in view). In this question, Aquinas separates the judgement of *species* from the knowledge of singulars. *Species* are known directly by applying the intellect to 'the thing whose *phantasm* is presented'; singulars are known by applying the intellect 'to a knowledge of the *phantasm* itself'.[46] Knowledge of the singular requires intention over and above knowledge of *species*. This can be seen in two ways: temporally and by the effort required. Aquinas places the knowledge of singulars temporally after knowledge of species, both by the order in which they are written but also by clear chronological 'our intellect also *returns* to'. Additionally,

[44] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.1 co. Truth in the intellect as a participation in the actualisation of existence is not as radical as might first be assumed. It is well established that language has the power to bring things into being; to make a concept, politic, technology, disease, or even a group of people *real* and *possible*. While I won't enter a long empirical reinforcement of this minor point, I suspect that a lot of truth-making brings more into being than merely the statement of truth itself. If you accept the conclusion that knowing is a participation in the divine actualisation of existence, it shouldn't be surprising to find echoes of 'bringing into being' in human knowing. See, for example Austin's speech-acts, (John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. by J. O. Urmson, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.4). Note also that conceptual non-existence is particularly a problem for marginalised groups in society – before the needs and rights of the group can be argued for, they have to first become present to others as a category, as an identifiable group.

[45] What Aquinas means by *phantasm* is complex, it is more than sense data but also not a proposition. He says that the *phantasm* is that which is given to the intellect through which it knows the species, similar to the way the sensible object impresses onto sense. E.g., like the smell of burning toast, the smell impresses upon the senses before one then considers that the toast is burning. Likewise, the *phantasm* of the burnt toast appears to the mind as the object of intellection. This is more than just vision, which would be another sense (he calls the mental impression through sense the 'likeness in sense') it is all that makes the intellect able to judge the *species,* that which makes possible the judgement that it is toast and that it is burning. This he calls 'the likeness *in the intellect'* or *phantasm*. Aquinas implies by his last sentence in the reply to this question that this *phantasm* is produced by the imagination, thus also separating it from that which is produced by the senses. Yet, the *phantasm* is still prior to the judgement of species and is an image of the singular. By introducing the concept of the *phantasm* he has shown how the intellect can know singulars. Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.2 a.6 co.

[46] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.2 a.6 co.

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knowledge of the singular through the *phantasm* is more complex than that of species. Aquinas states it requires a threefold turning: to the nature of the act of knowing, to the nature of the *species* and to the nature of the *phantasm*.[47] This extra work required in knowing the singular, that is separable and subsequent to the knowledge of *species*, implies that it is possible to know the *species* of a thing but not to know it as singular. This is the difference between knowing we have seen 'a bat' and knowing we have seen 'the bat', i.e., a specific, singular bat. If the intellect makes only a judgement of *species,* it need not necessarily do the extra work of turning to the *phantasm* of the bat to see the singular bat – this particular bat.

If we have seen 'a bat' have we truth? Has the being of what we have seen been translated into truth in the intellect? Surely, what we know from seeing 'a bat' is that bats in general exist? Possibly, we can say other true things, such as 'bats fly in this area', but this is moving away from the being of the thing itself to its secondary predicates. It is by singulars that things have being. The act-of-being is of a particular thing; it is the idea of a thing instantiated in the medium (material) of creation. For a thing to have being it must be concretely *there,* thus must be singular. Unless we take the time to know 'the bat' we do not have truth in the intellect of the thing itself, only the confirmation of an idea we already had. For us to share in the actualisation of existence through the translation of being to truth in the intellect, the singular must be known. That is not to say that everything about the bat has to be known, but only that the singularity of the bat must be alighted upon, even briefly, through this subsequent turning to the *phantasm* that Aquinas describes. To share in the divine actualisation of existence, the intellect must turn to the singular over and above the *species.* However, as the description of Q.2 a.6 co has shown, the intellect can extract the *species* and fail to turn back to the *phantasm.* Ambiguity encourages this subsequent turn of the intellect to the singular because it refuses to provide the intellect with a straightforward *species*. If we do not immediately know how to categorise the thing, we have to return to the *phantasm* to look again at what it might mean. Only in doing so, do we share in the divine actualisation of existence of the thing because the act-of-being cannot be given to the intellect as *species*, only as singular. Of course, it is possible to consider something straightforward such as a bat, and to take the time to consider the specific bat. In this case, the being of the bat *would* be translated into truth in the intellect. However it requires the intention to really look at the singular. How often do we only consider only the *species* of the things around us as we go about our daily lives? In comparison, the ambiguous encourages the

[47] Thomas Aquinas, *Truth,* trans. Robert W. Mulligan, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1994), Q.1 a.1 co.

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secondary turn and therefore the sharing in the divine bringing into being of things themselves.

It is not bats, rubber balls or even paintings as *concepts* which stretch us toward God but the spatial and temporal particular: not *that* trees exist but 'that *this* tree *is'*. Ambiguity helps get us beyond 'whatness' to recognise the being of thing instantiated: the act-of-being, manifest. The mechanism for this is that the truth in the intellect is rendered in such a different medium compared to the being of the thing, the voids in translation are so significant, that we are dissatisfied with any single truth proposition that cannot tell us what it means. Consequently, we to return to reconsider the thing, forming multiple even recursive truth propositions. Hence, the ambiguity in Giotto's painting of the risen Christ brings us to contemplate the singular act-of-being of the painting through which we participate in the divine actualisation of all things.

Conclusion

The brief discussion of the Giotto painting with which the paper began, although not definitive, provides an example of how the ambiguous can draw us towards the divine. Within Thomistic metaphysics this leads to a puzzle where our experience of the ambiguous appears to deviate from the Thomistic systematic metaphysics: on one side - truth is a participating in divine knowing, a conformity of thing and intellect, but on the other - the ambiguous, about which truth seems impossible to determine, appears to draw us heavenward. Initially, the paper explores whether the aporia could be solved by defining the ambiguous as having multiple potencies – a collection of possible meanings in the thing. This suggestion is refuted based on Aquinas' description of truth as the conformity to being, and of being as sourced and purposed in God. The arbitrariness and disconnection of multiple potency with the divine purpose results in it being discounted as a solution. Instead, the paper uses Pickstock's analysis of how the convertibility of the transcendentals forms a backdrop to Aquinas' thought in *De Veritate* to propose a model of entropic translation of being to truth. This move has the advantage that it does double-time as a solution: explaining both the need for multiple truth propositions and the mechanism for why the ambiguous appears to draw us to the divine.

When any thing is observed and comprehended, truth could be considered as a process of translating the being of the thing to truth in the intellect. Given the different media of being (existence) and truth (intellect), there are voids in the translation. For things that are straightforward, such voids do not prevent the intellect in making a judgement of what it is (*species*). Consequently, the singular can be passed over, because the *species* is obvious. When faced with that which is

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ambiguous our desire for truth, and for fixing it propositionally, moves from proposition to proposition, whilst never quite being satisfied we have arrived. It isn't that propositions are superfluous, but with each move we are accosted again by the object with a different proposition, each one changing our relationship, understanding and orientation to the thing. Yet in doing so, we must turn again and again to the contemplation of the singular. An ambiguous singular that refuses to provide us with the illusory certainty of *species*. Instead, through our recursive returning to the thing itself, we share in God's bringing of all things into being. Truth in the intellect is only possible as a participation in the divine knowing, divine bringing into being of singular things. It is less like our 'catching the thing on its way back to God', and more that the thing is catching us and sweeping us back to God.[48] Still, such participatory analogies must be held alongside the knowledge that the divine Being is so radically different from a proposition, that the fact we can know at all seems an act of grace.

This paper, as is the nature of papers, sets out to show systematically how the ambiguous is not only accommodated by Aquinas' philosophy of truth, but proposes that the recursive turning over of propositions about the singular shines forth with a light that illuminates the divine Being that brings all beings into existence. Yet, given that the paper proposes that being cannot be fully expressed in propositions, this proposition itself cannot be fully disclosive of the paper's answer. The paper can only hold in tension, and in grace, the surety of that illumination and the radical difference of the proposition from the divine being it reaches towards.

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