

## PLATO AND AQUINAS: A CONTEMPORARY STUDY

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### **Abstract**

*The present research study is intended to investigate and encapsulate the philosophical influence of Plato on Thomas Aquinas. Although it is perceived that Thomas Aquinas is influenced by Aristotle to a major extent. The very context of the medieval period in the history of philosophy gives a vivid picture that there was path-breaking change. The availability of various translations during this period proved to be very influential. Thomas Aquinas who belonged to this period was influenced by many such philosophies. Although during this period the philosophy was dominated by the Platonic-Augustine model and Aquinas belonged to this period was well versed with this model of philosophy. This research paper is intended to unearth the various elements of Platonic philosophy which were incorporated, synthesized, and evaluated in the philosophy of Aquinas from a contemporary perspective.*

### **Keywords**

*Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Medieval Philosophy, History of Philosophy, Neo-Platonism, Scholasticism, Comparative Studies in Philosophy, Analytical Philosophy, Christian Philosophy.*

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## **Introduction**

This research paper is intended to understand the philosophical influence of Plato on Thomas Aquinas. It requires understanding the philosophical context of the philosophical continuity in the history of philosophy. This gives a vivid picture of philosophical succession of thought. This also leads to explore the possibility as to how Aquinas gained the philosophical influence from Plato. This is very obvious by the medieval period as well as the background of Aquinas philosophical education. The influences of Dominicans and their guidance to various philosophies of the then period which played a crucial role in exposing Aquinas to the perennial tradition of platonic thought. R. J. Henle quotes A. N. Whitehead and presents: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. Whatever one may think of the accuracy of this remark, it does bear witness to the fact that Plato, in some way or other, is present in every Western philosophical discussion. Everyone recognizes in Plato an intellectual ancestor."<sup>1</sup> It is almost inevitable to accept the fact that the perennial tradition of platonic philosophy can be found in almost all the successors. Aquinas was well aware of the dominant tradition of the Platonic-Augustinian model of Christian Philosophy.

Although Aquinas was quite aware of the changing scenario and also was very much part of the reformation process, saw the ultimate coalition in the Christian faith. "The Christian tradition of the West, with little benefit of original writings either of Plato or of Aristotle, ever-growing in complexity, brought Christian Platonism to the twelfth century and to its historic juncture with Arabian thought and the Aristotelian crisis of the thirteenth century."<sup>2</sup> Thus, this brings to a transformative stage where platonic philosophy was critically examined through various religious traditions and interpretations. Platonic thought continues to take new forms and interpretations and develop further as Neo-Platonic philosophy and influence every philosophy and philosopher. One cannot deny the influence of platonic philosophy in most philosophies, especially in Aquinas philosophy.

## **Incorporative Elements**

Although the medieval period saw the rise of many philosophical traditions through the availability of the various translations. This gave rise to the new philosophical interpretations and development of varied interest in the platonic philosophy. Aquinas on the other hand was well aware of the platonic philosophy and was in a position to choose and infuse platonic philosophy in an appropriate context. "An additional complication was introduced when Christianity, becoming an embracing movement, began to enter the classical culture. They, of all the non-

Christians, are closest to us, said Saint Augustine, and placed thus his formidable authority behind the Christian Platonic tradition.”<sup>23</sup> Aquinas was already exposed to the platonic philosophy through the thought of Augustine who was in turn influenced by the platonic philosophy and infused it into Christianity. Augustine was the proponent of the Platonic-Augustinian model of Christianity because of the growing controversies in the theological interests of the church. Augustine saw the potentiality of the platonic philosophy which would respond to all the challenges posed by the context.

Aquinas was well aware of these controversies and theological debates and knew the validity and depth of platonic thought.”His most influential early sources of Platonism were Aristotle and Augustine; he probably read almost nothing by Plato except what was quoted by others. For Aquinas, Augustine, as well as Dionysius, followed Plato as far as Catholic faith allowed.”<sup>24</sup> Although Aquinas’s sources of Platonic thought as observed is the secondary, one tends to look from the eyes of the one who interprets the texts according to one’s own background and understanding. It may be true, as one observes that the Platonic thought dominated the early philosophical formation of most of the scholars and it of course gives a strong basis for philosophic formation. Aquinas too was in this similar philosophical formation pattern. Aquinas was influenced by Platonic thought as its most popular and influential interpreter was Augustine and to a major extent Aristotelian corpus.

One of the most remarkable syntheses of Platonic and Aristotelian thought can be found in the thought of Aquinas. “In judging Aquinas’s Platonism, we must remember how Neoplatonic his Aristotle was because Aquinas inherited the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle at which the Neoplatonist’s and Arabic Peripatetics aimed.”<sup>25</sup> Aquinas was sympathetic to platonic thought as that was the basis of catholic understanding. Aquinas did not make an abrupt shift from Platonic thought instead wherever it was convenient and wherever it was challenged Aquinas accommodated changes. Thus, paving a gradual development and synthesis of a Platonic and Aristotelian thought. One can even go to the extent of saying that Aquinas adopted a Platonic Aristotle to solve the inconsistencies and challenges set forth in the changing contextual realms. Neo-Platonists who strongly believed in the ever-continuing tradition of platonic thought and would also look forward towards a common ground rather than simple and total negation. Thus, from a critical and constructive purpose, the attempt which Aquinas preferred would bring an expected middle ground for both these philosophies to co-exist.

Does this bring to an important juncture as to why and how does Aquinas was influenced by Plato? This is an important question that gives a valid picture of

the need and necessity of Plato to Aquinas. To a certain extent, it was important for Aquinas to understand and have a thorough knowledge of platonic philosophy as it was then accepted in the Catholic circles. Thus, this gives idea that Aquinas was indeed well acquainted with the Platonic corpus. “Aquinas greatly prized the Neoplatonic, as well as the Peripatetic, commentaries and paraphrases he gradually acquired, because they enabled getting to the Hellenic sources.”<sup>6</sup> For Aquinas, it was very obvious that he was thoroughly impressed by this available literature. Especially the Neoplatonic thought clearly posed a greater promise in the academic circles. This gave Aquinas a complete view of the platonic thought and other peripatetic corpus to be viewed as eligible for philosophical exploration. Aquinas was sensitive and gave much importance to Platonic thought. Thus, the incorporation of elements of Platonic philosophy can be found in various perspectives in Aquinas philosophy.

### **Synthesizing Elements**

One of the most popular titles which are referred to Aquinas is the ‘Master Synthesizer’. Most of the critical scholars refer to Aquinas as master synthesizer. It is important to address this question here as to why he was called such an intriguing name is because Aquinas had the ability to adapt and synthesize not by mere reproduction of the text or philosophies but he was really a master who understands the depth, intensity, and the original context of the philosophy. This gives him the ability to interpret, present and transform any given philosophy to the context. Charles R. Hess clearly defines the very term synthesis according to the perspective of Aquinas, “The term (synthesis) indicates that Thomas took the insights of Plato and Aristotle which he saw as explaining our human experience and developed, corrected and organized them in a complete and logical system.”<sup>7</sup> This entails that Aquinas was truly a master philosopher who not only observe the philosophy and its roots but he also goes to the extent of analyzing the any given philosophy. The concept of analytical perspective can be clearly understood in the philosophy of Aquinas. Aquinas not only understands the philosopher and his philosophy but also takes the interest of finding the inconsistencies and sort out the inconsistencies and further develop it with a new perspective. Thus, the very title of synthesizer has been redefined while referring it to Aquinas. This becomes an art and a philosophy, above all mastery in Aquinas.

Plato portrayed many elements which needed to be clarified according to the changing contexts. Sometimes an additional definition is needed to understand certain texts. The best example is the philosophical notion of participation presented by Charles R. Hess “At first, following Socrates, Plato was interested only in the

moral ideas of justice and good; such as men (sic) and animals. He spoke of these ideas as being separate from the material world of the senses. He held that individual things participate in these ideas. A just law participates in ideal justice and an individual man (sic) participates in the ideal man. In his works that are extant, Plato did not seem to explain to his satisfaction the nature of this participation.”<sup>8</sup>It is obvious to find that the very thought process presented here could be one of the finest examples of certain aspects of Plato that need further clarification. Aquinas becomes an important philosopher of the middle ages who addressed the issue of continuing the philosophical tradition of Plato. Although many of the Neo-Platonists might not have a similar perspective but on the other hand when observed critically Aquinas to a major extent continued the spirit of Platonic tradition in a fresh perspective.

This brings towards the philosophical connection between Plato and Aquinas and obviously it refers that there was a strong bond in the writings of Aquinas. There are many scholars who especially believe in the philosophy of Participation according to Plato, R. J. Henley quotes Little “But whether wittingly or unwittingly, he [Saint Thomas] taught a Platonic doctrine rejected by Aristotle when he taught participation.”<sup>9</sup> This notion also leads towards the perspective that although Aquinas was also sympathetic towards Platonic thought. Many scholars would agree on the fact that as discussed earlier that the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas has the influence of Platonic philosophical tradition as Aquinas himself has synthesized some of the aspects of platonic philosophy, especially participation.

In his review, W. Norris Clarke comes to the conclusion that “The second aspect that has emerged into the forefront of investigation is the less obvious but no less dispensable role of certain Platonic-or more accurately Neoplatonic-elements in the philosophical synthesis of St. Thomas.”<sup>10</sup> This brings to the notion that Aquinas was a philosopher who was able to synthesize and demystify certain aspects which are crucial for ecclesial purposes. This gives the vivid picture of the Aquinas who is able to synthesize the best of every philosopher and bring about a radical outcome. Wayne J. Hankey States that”For him Platonism belongs within a providentially ordered progressive development of philosophy, enabling it to serve Christian sacred doctrine.”<sup>11</sup> The very outlook presents a search for a new perspective and fresh thought process especially not expressing old thoughts in a new way but a whole new view and understanding the existing philosophy according to the contextual reality. Aquinas believed that Platonic thought had the potential to become and to reflect in contextual demands and reality. Although to a certain extent the primary focus was on how best the platonic thought could be utilized to serve the purpose of the Christian faith.

### **Evaluative Elements**

When one delves further to evaluate the extent to which Aquinas was influenced, incorporated, or synthesized Platonic thought it leads to one of the foundational elements in understanding the very context. Although one could infer through the philosophical succession of thought processes that dominated the then context and gauge the extent of the influence but it is important to understand the reasons for these developments from an evaluative perspective. Anton Charles Pegis rightly states that:

“Hence, the attitudes which thirteenth-century thinkers adopted towards Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes, not to mention a host of other Greek and Arabian philosophers, were an index of their view on the nature of philosophy itself. The different philosophical movements that dominated the thirteenth century are not simply historical phenomena, more or less accidental to the nature of philosophy; they are the channels through which medieval thinkers expressed their convictions as to the nature and place of philosophy within a Christian world.<sup>12</sup>

It is very obvious from the above statement that the Aquinas and others who were deeply engaged in the context were overwhelmed by the influx of the various philosophies encountering each other in this crucial period. It is also pivotal to note that although that this influx created a situation where one could not hold on to a particular perspective. But, this did not create any sort of philosophical discontinuity rather the philosophers like Aquinas chose this to be the apt environment to present their perspective based on their influences. It is important to note that this period cannot be treated as a philosophical continuation rather it was treated to be new reality that cannot be avoided.

It is also necessary to evaluate how far that this process of evaluation existed and between whom this continued. Although it is obvious to find that the changing context always expects reformation from the existing conditions. A similar expectation was expected in terms of the ecclesial circles. This change was expected from the Plato and the need arise to incorporate a new trend towards Aristotle. R. J. clearly states that although there was a constant tension but it was never successful: “The opposition of Aristotle and Plato became a constant theme of commentators and thinkers. The strife between the two great Greeks was a disturbing fact and there have always been men who tried to reconcile Plato and Aristotle, to smooth away their differences and to unite their doctrines in a common fund of truth. But the disturbing specter of this original opposition has never been successfully exorcised from the philosophical tradition.”<sup>13</sup>The age-old rivalries between Plato-Aristotle continued to re-ignite and began to involve in the never-ending debates by all the

leading philosophers during the medieval time. There were numerous attempts to incorporate, synthesize and evaluate both the classic philosophers. Aquinas may be an exception, to bring to the notion that he successfully utilized the best of both the philosophers. In Aquinas, one finds the culmination of ancient philosophy and also the birth of medieval philosophy. This leads to understanding that although there were many attempts to have clarity or clear perspective on both the philosophers, it was Aquinas who chose wisely, presented appropriately, and evaluated meaningfully. At this juncture, it is important to undertake versions of the evaluation made by important philosophers. Bertrand Russell leads towards an important evaluation:

“Aquinas, unlike his predecessors, had a really competent knowledge of Aristotle. His friend William of Moerbeke provided him with translations from the Greek, and he himself wrote commentaries. Until his time, men’s notions of Aristotle had been obscured by Neoplatonic accretions. He, however, followed the genuine Aristotle, and disliked Platonism, even as it appears in Saint Augustine. He succeeded in persuading the Church that Aristotle’s system was to be preferred to Plato’s as the basis of Christian philosophy, and that Mohammedans and Christian Averroists had misinterpreted Aristotle.”<sup>14</sup>

An important aspect of evaluation brings towards an understanding that although Aquinas was sympathetic towards Platonic philosophy and also Platonic-Augustinian Model of Christianity, it is important to note that he made a crucial evaluation towards the philosophical corpus of Plato. He had firsthand knowledge of the translations available during this period. This is very obvious that his teacher Albert the great exposed him to a variety of philosophical trends. He had been well versed with the latest trends and was extensively taught about the consistencies and inconsistencies of Platonic philosophy. To move further it is not fancy to say that he attempted to modify certain texts which would be suitable to the rising needs. This is an important aspect that seems to be a powerful notion in leading the ecclesial circles towards change and reformation. This brings to the understanding that Aquinas paved the right path in understanding Platonic philosophy by choosing the way of evaluation. Although the available translations presented platonic thought in a subtle way but it was the responsibility of Aquinas to draw a new avenue to the ecclesial circles. It is obvious to believe that he made the best use of the available resources and helped the ecclesial circles towards a smooth transition.

Nevertheless, Platonic philosophy continued to influence not during the medieval period but also during the later periods.”The Platonic tradition lived on through the resulting crisis and maintained its continuity down to the Renaissance.”<sup>15</sup> It was due to the constant engagement with the platonic texts the tradition of platonic

influence continued not only on Aquinas but also amongst various other philosophers during the subsequent periods. The most important connection, contribution, and confluence can be traced in the writings of Aquinas as he made the best use of the available resources and continued the tradition of the development in the history of philosophy. It is interesting to note that there is definitely the element of Aquinas philosophical evaluation that led to the emergence of new philosophical trends independent of philosophical influence. Thus, the history of philosophy tends to accommodate these versions of incorporation, synthesis, and evaluation in the study of Plato and Aquinas.

### **Conclusion**

Wayne J. Hankey states that “We can conclude that Thomas writes the history of philosophy by drawing the Platonists and the Aristotelians into a single argument in which they complement and correct each other. The principle of this correction is the Christian faith, which philosophy ultimately serves.”<sup>16</sup> It is indeed in the initial stages of Aquinas understanding one can obviously find that the attempt which was attempted proved to be extremely successful. To use both these philosophies according to the rising needs and contextual challenges. To a certain extent, Aquinas was successful in finding a middle ground or an interpretation that solved the great dichotomies between Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. One also observes that platonic philosophy directly reflects in many writings of Aquinas especially in ‘*Summa Theologia*’ and ‘*On Spiritual Creatures, On Separate Substances*. For the reason that the outlook was to present as to serve the interest of Christian faith, this may look quite vivid but when we look deeper into ideas perspectives, and belief systems especially the medieval contextual reality one tends to get a different picture.

Ultimately, this study is an attempt to understand the philosophical influence of Plato on Aquinas, here one can find various elements of incorporation, synthesis, and evaluation. This does not limit in any way further opinions on the subject matter but rather this study opens up new avenues of philosophical exploration. There are many attempts in this subject matter but most of the studies either deny or subscribe to the influence of Plato and Aquinas. Nevertheless, R. J. Henly rightly points out two important factors still remain challenging, “The conclusions of these studies as well as the judgments, previously referred to, of historians and scholars, rest ultimately upon two decisive considerations: (1) a determination of the nature and meaning of Platonism and (2) a determination of the meaning of the relevant Thomistic texts. No estimate of the permanent contribution of these studies can be made except in the light of a full-scale exegesis of the relevant texts.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, exegetical studies can definitely bring towards a proper conclusion but from a



philosophical perspective does it truly necessary when the very nature of philosophy tends to be engagement with subject matter which leads towards new avenues of discerning.

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