

Thomas Aquinas and the Post-Truth Condition: Some Pointers on The Angelic Doctor's Relevance Today

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Abstract: How should we confront the postmodern and post-truth culture? A critic of this era presents two criteria for addressing postmodernity and post-truth. First, he suggests that one should embrace tolerance toward differing opinions without necessarily compromising one's deeply held beliefs. Second, he argues that individuals ought to be innovative in defending their convictions in a way that actively involves others in understanding their significance. This article demonstrates that the study of Thomas Aquinas meets these two criteria. Thus, it asserts that the study and example of Thomas Aquinas, contrary to some viewpoints, remain relevant and can engage with the postmodern and post-truth mentality.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, postmodern, post-truth, diversity, reality, truth, meaning

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Introduction

In the past, whenever a crisis of thought arose that threatened the deeply held values sustaining human institutions, ecclesiastical leaders entrusted with safeguarding the integrity of human communities consistently sought guidance from the teachings and example of Thomas Aquinas. For illustration, two figures can be cited as examples.¹ In 1879, Pope Leo XIII, addressing the challenge that modernism poses to the intellectual formation of youth, whom he regarded as the hope of the Church, suggested a return to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas.² In a similar vein, Pope John Paul II, in 1998, addressed the modernist mindset that relies solely on reason while neglecting the importance of faith. He highlighted the significance of Thomistic teaching in preserving the correct doctrine of truth for proper living.³

Two observations can be made about the abovementioned papal pronouncements. First, although the promotion of the study of the teaching of the angelic doctor primarily referred to the intellectual formation of those who would become priests, it also mentions that acquaintance of the teaching of the Dominican master is of great benefit for “both the clergy and the laity”⁴ since he was an “authentic model for all those who seek the truth.”⁵ Second, they have addressed specific issues that emerged from the social and intellectual climate of those times, which raises the question: How would Thomas Aquinas’s teaching resonate with this generation? It’s important to note that the conditions of the past differ significantly from the tone of present society. While the teachings and example of Thomas Aquinas may have been relevant in previous eras, they might no longer be suitable for addressing the challenges unique to this age.

¹ For a complete list of the magisterial pronouncement on the relevance of St. Thomas Aquinas, see Kelly Bowring, S.Th.D., *To Hold and Teach the Catholic Faith, The Faithful Exposition of the Sacred Doctrine* (New York: St. Pauls, 2006), 143-199.

² “This point is vital, that Bishops expend every effort to see that young men destined to be the hope of the Church should be imbued with the holy and heavenly doctrine of the Angelic Doctor. In those places where young men have devoted themselves to the patronage and doctrine of St. Thomas, true wisdom will flourish, drawn as it is from solid principles and explained by reason in an orderly fashion ... Theology proceeding correctly and well according to the plan and method of Aquinas is in accordance with our command. Every day, we become more clearly aware how powerfully Sacred Doctrine taught by its master and patron, Thomas, affords the greatest possible utility for both clergy and laity” (Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, 14).

³ “[T]he Magisterium has repeatedly acclaimed the merits of Saint Thomas’ thought and made him the guide and model for theological studies ... The Magisterium’s intention has always been to show how Saint Thomas is an authentic model for all who seek the truth. In his thinking, the demands of reason and the power of faith found the most elevated synthesis ever attained by human thought, for he could defend the radical newness introduced by Revelation without ever demeaning the venture proper to reason” (John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 44).

⁴ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, 14.

⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 44.

In the academic conference organized to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*,⁶ one of the papal documents alluded to above, a participant addressed to one of the plenary speakers a query whether Thomists can dialogue with the advocates of postmodernity. The speaker's reply was negative, asserting that the postmodern mind perceives truth and reality differently and will not accept Thomas Aquinas. However, this is not my stance in this paper. Here, I will discuss how the study of Thomas Aquinas's work can still be relevant in the current context, despite its challenges. I will demonstrate this through the three issues that will be addressed in this study: (1) How to describe the condition of the present age, referred to by social scientists as post-modernity, whose epistemological framework paves the way for the post-truth movement?; (2) How would Thomas Aquinas cope when considered in the light of the postmodern and post-truth mindset? and; (3) Why is the teaching of Thomas Aquinas the more viable intellectual culture to adopt among the many options proposed in this postmodern and post-truth era?

The Postmodern Condition and the Post-Truth Phenomenon

How can we describe contemporary society? Many refer to the present time as the postmodern era, literally the period following the modern era. To understand the postmodern era, we need to first describe what the modern era is. The modern era began in the 16th century with the rise of modern science and the technological advancements that it brought about. Several characteristics of modern society can be identified.⁷ However, the one feature of modernity that has direct relevance to this treatise concerns the theory of the acquisition of knowledge and the determination of what is true. Modernity discusses truth in terms of what empirical science establishes as true. Knowledge, in this regard, is derived from empirical science and rational thinking, which excludes the dimension of faith and the long-held traditions of society. Truth and reality are explained solely through scientific observation and logical reasoning. Other truth claims that do not meet these criteria are reduced to mere opinions or dismissed as superstitions. The agenda of modernity served a normalizing function from its emergence in the 16th century until the middle of

⁶ Co-organized by University of Santo Tomas's Ecclesiastical Faculties and Center for Religious Studies and Ethics, held in Thomas Aquinas Research Center Auditorium, on Feb. 27-28, 2019.

⁷ For instance, the phenomenon of urbanization propelled by technological progress; the migration of people from the rural settings to the city center to take advantage of the benefits and services that the modern city offers; and the existence of a powerful central government or bureaucratic state which creates and implements policies to maintain the integrity of the city, and which dictates upon the people the values that are to be upheld to perpetuate the enjoyed industrial progress (See Karl Thompson, "From Modernity to Postmodernity," April 9, 2016 in <https://revisesociology.com/2016/04/09/from-modernity-to-post-modernity/>, accessed on June 4, 2019).

the previous century, facilitated by a strong bureaucratic government and elitist professional and academic institutions that safeguarded and promoted modernist ideologies.

Modernity espoused universalist principles perpetuated by the machinations of institutions in technologically advanced and economically affluent countries that dictated world affairs, as well as by the elitist scientific community that determined what constitutes true or false knowledge in the realms of academia and scholarship. Residues of modernist tendencies can still be observed today. For example, if one desires for their affiliated academic institution to be included among the globally ranked centers of learning, it is necessary to submit its entire academic program to international accrediting bodies for scrutiny and evaluation. These accrediting bodies impose their criteria for the standard of quality education, which were created and developed by individuals educated within a Western and modern mindset. This practice is what postmodernism reacts against. The postmodern movement challenges the assumptions of those who promote and impose a single metanarrative applicable to all, insisting that truth or quality can also be found in the periphery of the assumed center of modern civilization.⁸

Just as the modern era broke into the scene to protest the influence of classical culture enshrined in the traditions of the ancients,⁹ the postmodern era came about as a reaction to the influence of the value systems that came out of the age of modernity. How is postmodernism described in contemporary scholarship? One description of postmodernity is as follows:

Postmodernism is a broad movement that developed in the mid-to-late 20th century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism and that marked a departure from modernism ... Postmodernism is generally defined by an attitude of skepticism, irony, or rejection toward the meta-narratives and ideologies of modernism ... Consequently, common targets of postmodern critique include universalist notions of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, language, and social progress ... Accordingly, postmodern thought is broadly characterized by tendencies to self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence.¹⁰

⁸ Ethan Kleinberg, "Pandering to the Timid: The Truth About the Post-Truth," <https://historyandtheory.org/theoryrevolt-kleinberg>.

⁹ Cf. Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," in *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 5.

¹⁰ Union of International Associations (UIA), "The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential: Postmodernism," in <http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/136818>, accessed on June 22, 2019.

Postmodernism, as the above-quoted text reveals, reacts to the tendency of modernism to cultivate and promote grand narratives as normative in interpreting reality. Against this modern tendency to universalize, “postmodern thinkers frequently call attention to the contingent or socially-conditioned nature of knowledge claims and value systems, situating them as products of particular political, historical, or cultural discourses and hierarchies.”¹¹ This new attitude allows for ‘diversity’ and ‘hybridity’ to emerge, thereby becoming the recognizable features of postmodern society.

The resulting ‘diversity’ flows from this newfound impetus that emboldens various individuals or groups to assert their intellectual and cultural outlooks as valid forms of living and appraising reality. There is no one dominant culture or perspective of reality, as it was in the modern era, that is looked up to by many, if not all, having been endorsed, or even at times, hegemonically imposed by elitist institutions that have the power and resources to apply pressure on other cultures or schools of thought. Similarly, the mark of ‘hybridity’ is a by-product of the mixture of two or more different cultures or personal convictions (for example, from ethnicity, the children of multinational parents are growing in number; in terms of personal convictions, many are combining different belief systems as a Christian Buddhist/Confucian, etc.). All these are possible since, in the postmodern environment, the choice of life course or even identity is not shaped by social class, gender, ethnicity, religion, or educational background,¹² unlike during the modern era, where one could not break out of the predefined categorizations prescribed by the ruling class in the society (e.g., gender and race had predefined roles in the society).¹³

Furthermore, the postmodern attitude, which refutes as a criterion of truth the authority of science (and of faith, which modernity likewise denies) and tolerates the existence of a diversity of cognitions, gives birth to the ‘post-truth’ phenomenon.¹⁴

¹¹ UIA, “The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential: Postmodernism.”

¹² Kleinberg, “Pandering to the Timid,” 2.

¹³ The mark of ‘diversity and hybridity’ that characterizes postmodern society has been reinforced by the advent of two other social phenomena, namely, the fact of globalization and the vast usage of social media. Globalization has shrunk the world by interconnecting different societies. It opens up the flow of information and ideas, making them available for everyone to access. Such allows the people to adopt certain perspectives of reality upon which are based their preferred identity and belief systems. Moreover, the extensive use of the social media does not only provide individuals and groups access to unlimited ideas and viewpoints which inform their own consciousness to reinforce their preferred convictions, but it also offers them the opportunity to launch their own agenda to persuade others to join them and adopt their own position (e.g., propaganda or commercials shown on the web to reach as many people as possible, also vlogs of people that promote one side of a certain social issue).

¹⁴ Some scholars make a distinction between postmodern theory and the post-truth phenomenon on the assumption that the former values truth, even as it critiques how truth is determined, “while the latter sets aside truth as it is more interested in truth as fabricated (See, Kleinberg, “Pandering the

One critic explains this connection on the basis that postmodern theorists advocate “a style of thought that extravagantly, challengingly, or ... irresponsibly denies the possibility of truth altogether, waves its importance aside, or claims that all truth is relative or suffers from other such disadvantage.”¹⁵ According to this, truth is no longer seen as an objective reality that needs to be discovered and whose authority needs to be demonstrated with an appeal to reason/science (modernist view), or faith and reason/science (Catholic position). Instead, truth is something that is created by people. The assistance of social media technology reinforces this tendency to fabricate truth through which the proffered perspective is communicated to the broader public more rapidly and, at times, more convincingly, especially when the people are not critical of it. Accordingly, a worldwide example of this was the US and its allies’ campaign to declare war on Iraq at the dawn of the 21st century based on the claim that Saddam Hussein, the then-dictator of the region, had weapons of mass destruction. The US, which led this war, created an elaborate scheme and sold it to its allies and the public to win over their support.¹⁶

This reflects the condition of contemporary society, which is marked by competing viewpoints, each regarded by its proponents as both true and valid. However, it would be misleading to assert that the authority of truth has been disregarded in the postmodern and post-truth era, as some critics suggest. On the contrary, one could argue that this era still values truth. The difference lies in the standards for determining the validity of truth claims. Today, these standards rely less on how closely they align with objective reality and more on the meanings that people derive from them. Generally, current generations accept specific propositions because they align with pre-existing beliefs that support their preferred lifestyles and grant them a sense of authority. Nevertheless, it does not change the fact that propositions are accepted by this generation because they find some validity in what they represent. In postmodernity, truth still holds compelling power; otherwise, those who exploited the inherent post-truth tendencies—such as those who campaigned

Timid,” 1-5). This is not, however, the position that I adopt in this work. Rather, I am of the opinion that the profound longing of the postmodern theory of giving voice to the marginalized sectors of society is carried over in the attitude towards the formation of truth, as exemplified by the post-truth attitude. In this respect, I uphold the view that postmodernity and post-truth mentality are closely related, with the former being the general movement and the latter as a consequence of the former’s preference towards plurality of perspectives. In this work, then, the concepts of postmodernity and post-truth will be paired together. Hence, the phrase such as “postmodern and post-truth context” and similar formulations will be recurring in this work. However, when “postmodernity” or “postmodern context” is only mentioned, it should be regarded in such a manner that the post-truth phenomenon is implied.

¹⁵ Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era. Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: St. Martin Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁶ See Ignacio Blanco Alfonso, “Beliefs, Post-Truth and Politics,” *Doxa Comunicacion* 27 (Jul.-Dec. 2018): 425-426.

for the war in Iraq—would not have meticulously researched all the necessary steps to craft a narrative capable of winning public sympathy.

The postmodern and post-truth minds base their decisions to uphold specific truth claims not on their correspondence to what is discovered in objective reality (the classical definition of truth) but on what they perceive as true in their own eyes. While many critics of postmodern and post-truth culture focus on the tendency of this attitude to promote relativism—a perspective that prioritizes the subjective nature of experience over objective truth—I would like to highlight that, upon closer examination, this era emphasizes the importance of safeguarding each individual's freedom to determine their own truth, rather than simply being told what it is or being coerced into accepting it based on the unquestioned authority of science and/or religion, or the claims of elite political and scientific organizations. This intuitive attitude of the postmodern and post-truth generation toward truth will be utilized in this work to reintroduce the significance of the example and teachings of Thomas Aquinas.

Can Thomas Aquinas Cope with the Post-Truth Condition?

To reclaim the relevance of Thomas Aquinas's teachings today, it is essential to be open to what has been referred to as the condition of the present. The tenor of our time acknowledges diversity and hybridity stemming from the differing worldviews of individuals or groups, which should be acknowledged as the given environment in which the endeavor to reintroduce Thomas Aquinas's significance takes place. Ethan Kleinberg, in a pertinent article, has proposed two criteria with regard to appropriately confronting the postmodern and post-truth mindset in the following:

If we are going to confront post-truth, we have to be more diligent and bold in doing so, with convincing arguments that must be forged in the crucible of discussion and dissent. We must be brave enough to recognize that the previous conception of truth and facts secured by the unquestioned authority of science no longer holds.... We must innovate and form a new coalition of expert thinkers built on postmodern critique to make our case, persuade our audiences, and argue for our relevance in this new epistemological constellation.¹⁷

The above statement outlines two criteria that must be observed when addressing the postmodern and post-truth mentality: First, it suggests adopting a

¹⁷ Ethan Kleinberg, "Pandering to the Timid," 4-5.

tolerant attitude toward differing opinions without necessarily conceding one's firmly held beliefs. Second, it encourages innovative arguments for one's convictions in a way that engages others in recognizing their significance. I will follow these two criteria here to advocate for the relevance of studying Thomas Aquinas today. In this section, I will focus on and elaborate on the first criterion by examining the angelic doctor's perspective on diversity.

Thomas Aquinas has sympathy for diversity.

The affirmation of diversity in creation is a reaction to the position that reduces creation to a single reality. A monistic outlook of reality should not be sanctioned because of its problematic implications. For instance, in the understanding of reality in general, it will lead to a pantheistic view that denies the distinction between God and creation. In epistemology, it will advocate a single static conception of truth to be assented to without qualification by all. Moreover, cultural diversity will be excluded since there will only be one understanding of culture, the dominant culture of the politically powerful and technologically progressive countries, regarded as the norm for all. As expostulated above, the postmodern mind opposes this particular way of looking at reality. In the postmodern and post-truth context, "diversity and hybridity" is the order of reality. Having said so, Thomas Aquinas can be endorsed to the postmodern and post-truth natives because he likewise sustained the conviction that diversity is an inescapable condition of reality. He articulated this insight in *Summa Theologiæ* claiming:

The distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.¹⁸

Thomas Aquinas arrived at this conclusion with, as the point of departure, his faith in the all-perfect Creator who made the universe and all that is contained in it. However, this belief is not without support from rational consideration, as the mere observation of the physical world testifies to the richness of this diversity. The angelic doctor rationalized that diversity among creatures is necessary because no single

¹⁸ ST I, q.47, a.1.

creature can solely reflect the goodness of the creator. Diverse beings exist so that divine goodness might all the more be reflected in creation. So that what is lacking in one creature will be present in another. Diversity in creation becomes necessary so that divine goodness may “be more perfectly represented in various ways by things of various kinds.”¹⁹ Accordingly, such can be confirmed by a simple survey of things as they are in their natural environment:

Hence, in natural things, species seem to be arranged in degrees; as the mixed things are more perfect than the elements, and plants than minerals, and animals than plants, and men than other animals; and in each of these species is more perfect than others. Therefore, as the divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things for the sake of the perfection of the universe, so it is the cause of inequality. For the universe would not be perfect if only one grade of goodness were found in things.²⁰

Indeed, the world is stamped with diversity. Furthermore, each species of creation has differing grades of goodness. Within humankind, this diversity is most apparent. No single individual is identical to another. Even identical twins are not necessarily exactly the same, neither in their physical manifestation nor in their constitutive personality, since the perceived experiences essential in character formation are not the same for both. Plurality of viewpoints results from people distinctively formed intellectually, culturally, and socially. These differing perspectives manifest themselves in society as they are asserted and defended by their respective proponents. Such, as has been demonstrated, is the current epistemological make-up of the postmodern ecosystem.

Thomas Aquinas welcomed a variety of perspectives of reality, but, at the same time, he did not subscribe to the relativist understanding of truth, into which many postmodern thinkers and post-truth advocates fall. While he acknowledged the diversity of opinions as a form of “respect for other persons and their ideas,” he showed no “ambivalence or weakness in his conviction.”²¹ To illustrate this sympathetic attitude towards differences, on the question of whether the rites of unbelievers are to be tolerated in ST II-IIae, q.10, a.11, the angelic doctor concluded in the affirmative, but not without qualifying that the reason for doing so should solely be in view of achieving the best possible good, which he unwaveringly believed flows from the rites instituted by Jesus Christ, and not from the rites of the pagans

¹⁹ J. das Neves and D. Melé, “Ethically Cultural Diversity: Learning from Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 116 (September 2013): 771.

²⁰ ST I, q.47, a.2.

²¹ J. das Neves and D. Melé, “Ethically Cultural Diversity,” 772.

even if vestiges of truth can be found in them.²² As such, he tolerated certain practices that were at odds with what he believed to be true as they could be employed as a jumping board of discussion of truth with people who hold such rites in high regard. Still, doing so, he did not abandon his own firmly held conviction.

Thomas Aquinas deals with diversity properly.

Thomas Aquinas affirmed diversity as an inescapable condition of the world due to differences in worldviews held by individuals or groups advocating their respective perceptions of reality as valid and true. The author of the *Summa Theologiae* displayed proper respect for the existence of diversity when—dealing with the uniqueness of each situation—he asserted not only the importance of general principles, but also the individual contexts of the people over which the general principles should be applied. The interplay of these two important elements can be discerned in his teaching on the application of the natural law, as he avowed: “The general principles of the natural law cannot be applied to all men in the same way on account of the great variety of human affairs: and hence arises the diversity of positive laws among various people.”²³ Notwithstanding, he never compromised his conviction about what he knew to be true (in this regard, the existence of natural law), even when he conceded significance to the plurality of situations, the intelligibility of which needs to be carefully considered for the appropriate application of the said law.

Thomas Aquinas acknowledged the divergent situations, the circumstances of which should be considered for their evaluation, such that judgment of their consistency with what is true could be appropriately pronounced. Again, this conviction is founded on the belief in the presence of, though in varying degrees, the vestiges of good and truth in all creation, including in those things generated by created beings themselves, on account of the Creator, who is the source of all goodness and truth. The Dominican master succinctly stressed this point in the following:

As the good is in relation to things, so is the true in relation to knowledge.
Now in things it is impossible to find one that is wholly devoid of good.
Wherefore it is also impossible for any knowledge to be wholly false,

²² About this principle, Thomas Aquinas writes: “Human government is derived from the Divine government, and should imitate it. Now although God is all-powerful and supremely good, nevertheless He allows certain evils to take place in the universe, which He might prevent, lest, without them, greater goods might be forfeited, or greater evils ensue. Accordingly, in human government also, those who are in authority, rightly tolerate certain evils, lest certain goods be lost, or certain greater evils be incurred” (ST II-IIae, q.10, a.11, resp.).

²³ ST I-IIae, q.95, a.2, ad.3.

without some mixture of truth. Hence Bede says that “no teaching is so false that it never mingles truth with falsehood.”²⁴

The belief in the presence of goodness and truth in all creation as the starting point of inquiry makes the methodology of *disputatio*—widely used in academic work during the medieval period and adopted by Thomas Aquinas—significantly appropriate. It allows one to be open to the perspectives of those outside one’s tradition and learn from them, thereby enlarging one’s horizon of truth and meaning.

The medieval *disputatio*, as appropriated by Thomas Aquinas, consists of the following elements: *objectio* (objections), *sed contra* (counter-position), *respondeo* (response), and *responsio ad* (reply to) the initial objections raised on the issue under investigation. He usually commenced by gathering the objections that he could find on the issue at hand, demonstrating, by doing so, that the opinions of other people have a bearing on the subject. After which, he would offer a counter position in the *sed contra* part. Then, in articulating his mind on the issue (*respondeo*), he would not just consult sources from the Sacred Scriptures and traditional Catholic sources, but from other sources of pagan, Jewish, and Moslem origins as well. As such, it is a testament to the fact that the angelic doctor sought the truth wherever it was found, even outside of his own intellectual tradition. Finally, he would respond to the objections raised at the initial consideration of the question. Thomas Aquinas would not want to impose his position on a particular issue. Instead, he would win over his audience using sound arguments.

A contemporary scholar gives a balanced assessment of Aquinas’s preferred method: “This approach is neither relativism nor skepticism regarding the truth, but tolerance with people, carefully considering their arguments and showing one’s own reason. It is by no means imposition of one’s opinion.”²⁵ For this reason, Thomas Aquinas's example and teachings are most fitting in the present intellectual and social climate, when every point of view demands that it be taken into account and given proper consideration.

So far, I have demonstrated that Thomas Aquinas’s epistemological outlook fits well with the existence of a plurality of perspectives of reality, thereby satisfying the first of the two criteria set by Kleinberg and adopted in this work. However, I have barely touched on the second criterion, “to argue for its relevance” in this postmodern and post-truth context, and I will direct my attention to this in the next section.

²⁴ ST II-IIae, q.172, a.6, resp.

²⁵ J. das Neves and D. Melé, “Ethically Cultural Diversity,” 777.

The Relevance of Thomas Aquinas in this Post-Truth Society

The postmodern context could be likened to a shopping mall with plenty of choices of worldviews to choose from. In this context, the system developed by Thomas Aquinas is only one of the existing schools of thought alongside others. Even among the Catholics, including within the ranks of religious men and women, the teaching of the angelic doctor is no longer perceived as a must to be learned, as it was before when Pope Leo XIII canonized it as the Christian philosophy.²⁶ In this respect, if it is to be promoted once again, it is incumbent for Thomists to discourse his teaching in a manner that will address the present cultural and epistemological environment. I will argue that the postmodern and post-truth minds would welcome the teaching of the angelic doctor on two grounds. First, they would be able to accept Thomistic doctrine if they discover that it makes sense to do so, and second, they would accept it if they learn that upholding the teaching and example of Thomas Aquinas is advantageous for their flourishing and the advancement of the society in which they live.

Postmodern individuals will adopt the truth about the teaching of Thomas Aquinas if they find it meaningful.

It has been shown that plurality of perspectives is the norm in postmodern society with a post-truth mindset. One criticism of this era concerns the devaluation of the truth as objectively known—a take stemming from the supposed separation of the concept of truth from reality as it exists in the objective world. According to this, reality, as it manifests in the world, does not have a hold on the truth or the knowledge about it formed by the mind. The basis of knowledge and truth is not the objective reality, but the individuals who generate it. Truth and knowledge are no longer discovered but constructed. For this reason, in the postmodern and post-truth society, truth becomes pluralized “because it is based ... on how people across the globe depend on their emotions, feelings, cultural backgrounds, etc. to define and accept truths.”²⁷ However, this is not to say that it disregards the notion of truth altogether. Rather, as demonstrated above, in the present, people regard as true that which bears meaning in their lives.

Postmodern and post-truth natives admit to a particular proposition because they have discovered that such bears significance to their lives. It is meaning, not logical consistency or correspondence to external reality, that compels this generation to accept certain declarations as true. It should show us that the way to argue for the

²⁶ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, 14.

²⁷ Panchanan Dalai, “Post-Truth: A Historical Amnesia, or A Neo-colonial Imposition,” *Glocal Colloquies: An International Journal of World Literatures and Cultures* 3 (April 2017): 2.

relevance of the teaching of Thomas Aquinas today requires that it be presented such that this generation will realize that it has some personal significance for them. For, as stated by one observer of how post-truth natives prefer a perspective: “[They] fight for certain truths and against others because [they] care for them—and [they] have a reason why [they] care for them.”²⁸ Truth as objectively demonstrable is no longer appealing to the postmodern and post-truth natives unless they find the same truth meaningful for their existence.

Thomas Aquinas adopted the classical definition of truth, which he learned from Aristotle, as *adequatio* or correspondence with reality (truth-reality). In Thomas Aquinas, the truth of a proposition is validated when it reflects the affirmed properties of its objective reference. For instance, the statement, “Chair A is white,” is judged as true when the chair referred to by the statement is indeed painted white. Statements about the color of the chair that say otherwise will be construed as false. In contrast, in postmodernity, the notion of truth necessarily goes with what people find meaningful for them, even if such has no leveling with reality. Herein, there is a conflation of truth and meaning as it dawns on the person appreciating the proposition under consideration (truth-meaning), even if the same does not have a foundation in reality (truth-meaning ≠ reality).

As such, the task for the Thomist is to demonstrate that the teaching of the Dominican master is meaningful or has existential significance for the people, not even though, but more so because it is founded on nature and reality (truth-reality = meaning). Thus, in understanding truth as “conformity” with nature/reality, the person's initiative to form oneself consistent with the reality that one has discerned for oneself—a reality that guarantees one's flourishing alongside the flourishing of the community to which he belongs and the environment in which one lives—should be given stress. The Lublin School, represented by Karol Wojtyła and those who followed his reading of Thomas Aquinas, which looks at an existing essence as always personalized, making human acts not as proceeding spontaneously from nature but from the personal initiative of the human agent, is a step in this direction.²⁹

It cannot be said that Thomas Aquinas's body of doctrine is merely a list of truth claims that bear no meaning for people's lives and existential realities, akin to the scientific data of modern science that postmodernity rejects as objectively bland and detached from personal experience. This is because the angelic doctor based his reasoning not only on the existence of humankind and the community to which

²⁸ Frieder Vogelmann, “The Problem of Post-Truth: Rethinking the Relationship Between Truth and Politics,” *BEHEMOTH: A Journal on Civilization* 11, no. 2 (2018): 32.

²⁹ See Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person: A Contribution to Phenomenological Anthropology* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 396.

individuals belong, along with their situational context in the world, but also on the ultimate purpose toward which humanity and the material universe are naturally directed. Thomas Aquinas's faith plays a significant role in this conviction. He did not just believe that God created the universe, including human beings, but also that there was a divine reason for creating them. Aquinas argued that the purpose of creation could be demonstrated through rational thought. He illustrated this by examining the "physical properties and visible behavior of organisms" and concluded about their nature as it unfolds, a concept he referred to as their teleology (*telos*).

Natural tendencies reveal the *telos* of beings, and they are discernible through human reason. I take the *telos* (end) of human existence as an instance. One must acknowledge that the purpose of human existence is to live life to the fullest rather than simply die or just exist. Despite the revelation of the Sacred Scriptures, which record the incarnate God who said, "He came so that people may have life and may have it in its fullness" (Jn. 10:10), it can be rationally demonstrated that God created human beings so that they would not die. First, if one observes every person's natural tendencies, one will notice that he instinctively avoids anything threatening his existence (e.g., danger, diseases, etc.). Humanity naturally inclines towards preserving life rather than losing it. Second, there is no sense in bringing into existence something that originally had no existence if, ultimately, the intention is for it to perish eventually. If, ultimately, the end of humankind is for humanity to cease to exist, then why create it in the first place? Before creation, they were already non-existent, so it is absurd to give them existence only to return to non-existence eventually. The creator does not create out of nothing, so creation may return to nothing.

But, again, human life is finite, and, on its own, it will disintegrate. Without being granted participation in something or someone with permanence, it will gain no life of sustained existence. The only one who is himself permanence, with the authority to make finite beings live permanently, is God. From this, it can be said that human life's purpose (*telos*) is to share in the life of God, who can sustain its existence and bring it to perfection.

Thomas Aquinas's teaching is oriented towards demonstrating the qualitative growth of all creation, especially of human existence, towards the fullness of their being. It is on account of this that adopting the teaching of the angelic doctor should be meaningful to people because it is a guide to living life in abundance. In Thomas Aquinas, one is not just assenting to blunt propositional truths with no direct significance to one's own historical and personal context. Thomas Aquinas did not

merely make statements about objective reality (similar to the data of empirical science). Rather, he specified that nature and its unfolding, upon which he based his conclusions, is integral to one's personal history and development. This is why his teaching carries meaning for everyone who desires to live life and enjoy it accordingly. In this regard, Thomistic teaching is perennially relevant to human existence (relevant to the ancients, the moderns, and the postmodern generation) because its concern is the conduct of a quality life that will eventually ensure every individual's desired meaningful life.

Perceived from the context of the teleology of creation, the postmodern and post-truth mind would find the teaching of Thomas Aquinas not without meaning. The sense of meaning that this generation requires before they can throw themselves into the adoption and promotion of a particular position could be found in the teaching of the angelic doctor. The teaching of Thomas Aquinas, having as aim the growth of the person in maturity, should be profoundly significant to all since it touches the fundament that drives every person to live. It is, above all, personal. What all people naturally desire is to progress and gain happiness in life. The Thomistic system teaches how one can truly be happy and walk in the path of human maturity, i.e., personally, socially, and spiritually. Realizing this wealth of Thomas Aquinas's teaching, the postmodern and post-truth generation would knowingly and purposely consider adopting the Thomistic principles.

Many problems of society today can be resolved if the teaching of Thomas Aquinas is adhered to.

In this section, I will demonstrate that the teaching of Thomas Aquinas is advantageous not only to the individual but also to individuals collectively as a community. By doing so, it hopes to provide another motivation that will incline the postmodern and post-truth natives to the investigation of the teaching and example of the angelic doctor because, as shall be argued, it makes more sense to uphold it given that it resolves more problems in society and therefore sustains the conduct of societal life.

Let me go back to the point that the postmodern culture allows for a plurality of opinions, which in turn permits for the post-truth attitude that separates the configuration of truth from its basis on nature and objective reality to take root. Generally, the truth claim of this era is vastly hinged upon what the person believes to be true or wants to believe as true, even if such has no basis in factual reality. Owing to this understanding, some of its critics protest that this generation no longer takes the

meticulous effort of trying to validate the agenda that they advance with the available facts or, worse that they fabricate proofs and falsify data to support the reality that they construct so that others will accept it. While it could not be generalized, such an attitude is prevalently held by many of this generation. If not checked, this mindset results in contradictory positions that create problems for society, as they challenge many social institutions essential for preserving and advancing community life.

As such, not a few individuals assert that they have certain rights based merely on a personal claim, and they expect others to grant them such entitlements readily. Recently, a major network in the US featured a transgender athlete wanting to play competitive sports at a high level against natural-born female athletes, which started a worldwide debate. Several retired female athletes, who were legends in their own respective sporting events, protested on behalf of active female athletes who could not speak their own objection for fear of being branded as transphobic in the spirit of safeguarding the integrity of women's sports competition. One will understand their opposition because the transgender athlete expectedly will have an advantage over natural-born female athletes given that, for the most part, the transgender had lived as a man and developed biologically as a man, which gave the same physical strength and agility as a man. Thus, if allowed to compete in women's sports, fair play among participants, which all sports uphold and promote, will be compromised, as the transgender will have a natural advantage over the other competitors. Eventually, it will destroy women's sports competition as an institution. Notwithstanding, such is not being received by the transgender community and advocates claiming that the transgender feels and is now, in fact, a female person after having transitioned into it as a result of the medical procedure. Therefore, the transgender should be accorded with all the rights that all women enjoy, including participating in competitive sports for women.

However, no matter what the transgender person does, the fact remains that the transgender is a male and not a female person, even if he has been given a female organ medically and has reduced testosterone level to meet that of the women. Nicanor Austriaco, OP, an MIT-trained microbiologist before becoming a Dominican friar, has revealed in his research, looking at it from the perspective of the emerging science of system biology, that "from the system perspective, the specification of sex/gender and the maturation of the sexual organism is the result not of the activity of a single gene but of the interactions among numerous genes and the molecules that they encode. Together, these molecules determine the shape and overall trajectory of human sexual development."³⁰ Nature always reasserts itself

³⁰ See Nicanor Austriaco, OP, "The Specification of Sex/Gender in the Humans Species: A Thomistic Analysis," *The New Blackfriars* 94, Issue 1054 (November 2013): 701-715. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12028>.

through the biological system functioning as a whole, affirming the original gender specification of a person. The transgender recognizes this force of nature. Hence, the transgender avails of drugs to arrest this natural development to not revert to his true gender identity.

The demand for obligation based on what people arbitrarily believe as an ascribed natural right (e.g., the presumed rights of transgender) or the lack of it (e.g., a person in the fetal stage considered by some as not yet a person) will create problem in the conduct of social life, to the decay of societal institutions that sustain personal life and community living. I have merely mentioned here as an example the challenge that such a mentality presents to women's sports competition, but it can easily be extended to other areas of social life like marriage, education, governance, customs, etc.

Ultimately, the problem, as can be seen, lies in the notion of the truth, which is squared no longer with what is found and observed in nature or discovered in the objective realm, as influenced by the postmodern and post-truth mentality, and upon which are based the claims of certain rights by specific individuals. In this type of social environment, where challenges to society abound due to the different sectors asserting their voices to be heard and adhered to, even when such imperil the existence of society as a cohesive unity, the teaching of Thomas Aquinas becomes even more relevant. The teaching of Thomas Aquinas rests upon the proper understanding of the human person as a social being, with the insistence on "the obligation of each human agent to act in such a way that one's natural, human ends are fulfilled."³¹

The teachings and example of Thomas Aquinas, a holistic or synthetic thinker who considers the insights from every sector and aspect of reality, serve as a corrective to the divisive mindset that characterizes today's prevailing culture. In the teachings of the angelic doctor, the collective good, or the community interest, is not seen as adversarial to the personal good of the individual and vice versa. In fact, a dynamic and indispensable relationship exists between the two. The individual's interest is embedded in the pursuit of the community's good and vice versa. In this light, what benefits the individual also benefits society as a whole since a particular good, while not identical with, is integral to realizing the common good. The common good, in turn, fosters the fulfillment of the individual's particular good, which is essential for its own realization. In this context, the agenda promoted by transgender individuals and other self-centered ideologies, especially when they contribute to the erosion

³¹ Anthony Lisska, "Natural Law and the Roman Catholic Tradition," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71, no. 4 (October 2012): 760.

of the commonly held values of society, cannot be overlooked. In the same way, the common good should not be emphasized if it undermines the integrity of the individual in the process.

In other words, only a holistic and synthetic system like that of Thomas Aquinas would appeal to a multifaceted society, as it encourages the mutual coexistence of various sectors with seemingly diverse ideologies and agendas. If individuals with different perspectives cannot agree on the language of truth, the grammar that ensures everyone's continued existence and flourishing would compellingly motivate them to engage in societal life and seek ways to acknowledge each other's convictions without necessarily conceding too much of their own. This intellectual stance, which upholds the interconnectedness of people and things, is gradually being revived in contemporary thought, particularly after the world has navigated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the term "glocal," a blend of global and local, has now entered everyday language. It suggests that what is suitable locally is also appropriate on a global scale, highlighting that local and global concerns must be considered when managing an institution or addressing an issue of interest. Thomas Aquinas's teaching balances the demands of the collective and the personal, allowing for the fulfillment of one without undermining the satisfaction of the other and vice versa. In the mind of the angelic doctor, only a good that advances both individual and community goals is worth pursuing.

Conclusion

Will the study of Thomas Aquinas resonate with the postmodern and post-truth mindset? This is the question this article seeks to answer. It has been shown that postmodern and post-truth conditions allow for diverse perspectives on reality. In this context, the teaching of Thomas Aquinas is viewed as one of many competing schools of thought vying for people's adherence. Furthermore, it has been established that despite the pluralistic nature of this era, truth—contrary to claims made by some critics—has not been dismissed by postmodernism or post-truth advocates. This generation continues to respond to the authority of truth when it offers the meaning they seek in life. Recognizing this characteristic, I argue that the postmodern and post-truth mindset will find the teachings of Thomas Aquinas relevant. I discuss this perspective in the article for two reasons.

First, Thomas Aquinas's teachings hold personal significance for everyone because they are rooted in a proper understanding of human nature, which recognizes individuality and aims for growth and fulfillment within a community. I believe

this generation could be persuaded to embrace Thomas Aquinas's teachings, as his doctrine, when rightly interpreted, resonates personally with all. When personally embraced, it promotes growth and personal maturity, things we all instinctively seek. This significance may motivate the current generation to consider, if not fully adopt, his teachings. Second, Thomas Aquinas's system addresses more existential and social challenges than other viewpoints, which often create additional difficulties for society rather than support its proper functioning, as many of their claims serve the specific interests of a few individuals or groups. The foundation of the angelic doctor's teachings on nature, which considers both particular and collective dimensions, will give the postmodern and post-truth generation a valid framework for resolving differing perspectives on reality and avoiding actions that could harm others or undermine social institutions that enable human growth and flourishing. In other words, the teachings of Thomas Aquinas have the potential to stabilize the turbulent waters of conflicting and contradictory viewpoints that define postmodern and post-truth society. **PS**

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