

The original justice in the context of natural sciences: Thomistic insights

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The picture of the beginnings of humankind presented by natural science is often contrasted with what is conveyed in Scripture. It has been pointed out that the Edenic state before sin – which we refer to as original justice – was a time of absolute perfection in which there was no room for any deficiency. According to Thomas Aquinas, however, this picture conflicts with what Paradise was as a state on the way to Heaven. For Aquinas, the difference between Paradise and the present situation is not an ontological one but a change of circumstance, because original justice was not a period of salvation. This means that Paradise was a period of development, thanks to the grace received, which is reconcilable with the principled account of natural science. The key is the distinction between Paradise and Heaven, which sets religion–science reflections in their proper context.

Contribution: The article drew attention to notions of original justice, emphasising the Paradise time as the development of virtues, including the theological virtue of faith. This helps to build an adequate theological framework for a fruitful dialogue with the natural sciences, as recommended by Buitendag.

Keywords: Evolution; original justice; religion–science; sin; nature and grace; natural sciences.

Introduction

An insight into life before sin can be gained not only from descriptions of the way of knowing the world and the proper formation of the will (rectitude) but also from questions concerning Adam's imperfection, which seems to be at odds with the account of the perfection of creation, whereby there was no sin that would have been responsible for any weakness, including death (Rosenberg 2006; Roszak 2022; Sánchez-Palencia-Martí & Jordana 2021). In his *Summa contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas calls Adam's perfection a 'personal perfection' – one that he needed in order to act as the *principium* of humankind, because 'human nature was not as yet wholly perfect in point of numbers' (ScG IV, cap. 83). In addition, he notes that 'no creature outside himself could harm him against his own will' (ST II-II 165.1c.); therefore, God's intent was not for humanity to attain the beatitude in a way where it would have been necessary to struggle with sin or experience any suffering (Platovnjak 2022). Consequently, humanity would have had infantile defects but no senile defects.

In the context of Adam's perfection, Aquinas also considers the question of venial sin. He emphasises that such sin would not have been possible if Adam had not previously committed a cardinal sin. Therefore, Adam and Eve could not have spontaneously suffered any irrational fears, anger or desire, which means that they could only have sinned in a fully deliberate manner. And even if they had sinned, they would still have been able to seek help – a possibility of which Adam did not avail himself because, in Aquinas view, his sin of pride consisted in a complacency in his own goodness and thus contemplation of that goodness without relating it to its source, severing the relationship with God and losing the ability to see the world 'through God' (Roszak 2020:73). And yet, this was precisely what made Adam distinct in Paradise: his unique manner of knowledge and state of being well ordered. Consequently, we are dealing with a certain kind of arrogance of mind, a disordered desire for greatness that brought confusion into the sphere of desires and upset humanity's internal balance. While Adam could have regained his personal graces lost as a result of sin if he had undertaken his penance, the harm done to nature would not have been reversed (Smith 2020). It is also important to note that Adam in Paradise had knowledge of sin as a possibility, but did not have it *per experientiam*. In summary, the subordination of the lower powers to reason means that Adam and Eve could not have spontaneously suffered any irrational fears, anger or desire, and therefore could only have sinned in a fully deliberate manner (Mrozek 2013:342).

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There is a noticeable realism in the treatment of the situation in which Adam could have experienced hardship and imperfection in connection with his development, a realism that is not precluded by the grace present in his life (McCoy 2018:160).

In one of his biblical commentaries, namely the commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Aquinas compares the sin of the first people to loss of taste: not a molecular change but the fact that a person begins to approve the disgusting and recoil from the tasty. To overcome this problem, one needs to return to 'eating good food'. So it was not enough for God to say to the man after he had sinned: 'do it', because rather than affecting physical development itself, the damage upset the thing that guided such development – rectitude.

In his discussion of original sin, Aquinas observes that there is a difference between us and our falls on the one hand and Adam and his Fall on the other (Hofmann 2020). In us, corruption takes place in an opposite manner to that in Adam, because in him, the soul corrupted the body and the person corrupted nature, whereas in us, the process is the reverse (Kemp 2020). In other words, Adam's sin belonged to the irascible power, while our sins today belong to the concupiscible power.

Faith and knowledge of God in Paradise

On account of the fact that innocence is treated as being in the state of a wayfarer (*in statu viatoris*) rather than among the saved in Heaven, Aquinas is convinced that Adam in Paradise had faith, because:

[T]he perfection of [*the primitive*] state did not extend to the vision of the Divine Essence, and the possession of God with the enjoyment of final beatitude. Hence faith and hope could exist in the primitive state, both as to habit and as to act. (ST I 95.3c)

This claim concerning Adam's faith is founded on the fundamental conviction that before the Fall, he also needed grace in the same manner as we do after original sin (DiNoia 2017; Vijgen 2018). The difference between him and us is not the fact that we need grace more than he did, as if it were about increasing its intensity today, but that we now need it for a greater number of things. Even before sin, Adam 'required grace to obtain eternal life, which is the chief reason for the need of grace' (ST I 95.4 ad 1). This, however, does not mean that he was able to behold the essence of God immediately, in the first moment of his existence, as explained in the following passage:

Man was made to see God. For God made rational creatures to participate in His beatitude. This consists in seeing Him, as is shown in the Sentences. Therefore, if Adam in the state of innocence did not see God through His essence, this was only because some medium prevented him from doing so. However, the medium due to sin did not prevent him, for he was then free from sin. Nor did the use of creatures as a medium prevent him, for God is closer to the rational soul than any creature is.

Therefore, in the state of innocence Adam saw God through His essence. (*De Veritate* 18.1 ad 5)

Although Adam desired to see God in his essence, he did not suffer at not having seen him in that state because his desire was well ordered. Instead, he calmly awaited the right time to do so. However, Aquinas admits in his *De Veritate* that Adam's mind in the state of innocence was not sufficiently perfect for God to be present to it in an intelligible form.

With the gift of grace, however, came the 'anticipation' of the happiness that emerges in the intellect through the virtue of faith (which is the onset of eternal life as further explained by Aquinas). Therefore, Adam was happy, but not in an absolute sense; he was happy to the degree appropriate for his state – as, for example, blessed are the poor in spirit, that is, those who do not possess all the riches of the world. So how did he progress in his knowledge of God in the Garden of Eden?

How did Adam see God in Paradise?

Aquinas makes it clear that the ability to see God in his essence – being a perfection of humanity as a human being – does not increase or decrease as if a slider for adjusting its intensity were moving up or down, but instead it consists in the possession or absence of a certain type of knowledge. Knowledge of God *in statu viatoris* differed in degree and kind from the knowledge of God possessed by the saved in Heaven, which is why humanity before sin did not know the essence of God, and their way to knowing the Creator led through a unique contemplation of creation instead. This was different, however, from how we – after sin – know the Creator from his works, because the knowledge granted in the first state was clearer and more intelligible. To offer a more in-depth explanation, Aquinas points to the differences between Divine, angelic and human knowledge. Whereas Divine knowledge is granted directly by the being in which all else is known (because God knows other things in himself by knowing himself), and thus without any 'medium', and angelic knowledge is obtained directly from the effects of the substances imprinted in the intellect (*per effectum relictum in intellectu videntis*), human knowledge requires one more level of mediation because it does not know the very essence but its *similitudo*, which is external to the intellect – whether with respect to the external effect (from the beauty of created things) or to the spiritual effect (through faith). Humans and angels attain the first mode of knowing the essence of God *per gloriam*, progressing to the beatific vision in Heaven, whereas the second mode of knowing – appropriate for angels – is made possible for humans thanks to grace (*per gratiam*).

Humans in Paradise, however, knew God not 'thanks to' the effects but 'through' the effects and 'in' the effects themselves: creation was in a sense transparent, naturally revealing its Creator (Roszak & Huzarek 2019:748). This is what Aquinas means when he claims that Adam knew God through the mediation of some intellectual light infused by God into the

human mind, bearing a clear similarity to the uncreated light. What Adam needed was a light of the intellect – both natural and granted by the grace of faith – and the ability to capture the ‘likeness of God’ (*De Veritate* 18.1 ad 1). Importantly, the fact that he had knowledge through the light of contemplation does not mean that knowledge of God from creatures was unnecessary (Adamski 2022). In fact, humans found joy in being able to know the same things in different ways (Anderson 2020:229). Aquinas interprets the biblical account of how God spoke to Adam in the following manner: the Divine *locutio* did not take place by means of some internal message (‘inspiration’) alone; it may also have taken place through creatures, ‘whether by images of bodies in ecstasy of spirit, or by some image presented to the senses of the body themselves’ (*De Veritate* 18.2 ad 6).

To illustrate the nature of such knowledge, Aquinas employs two metaphors: the mirror and the sun. The former metaphor shows that humans in the state of innocence did not observe things themselves but their reflections. Thus, humans did not know God directly (as the saints in Heaven did) but through something else – something other than discursive knowledge:

A medium (of knowledge) is twofold; one through which, and, at the same time, in which, something is seen, as, for example, a man is seen through a mirror, and is seen with the mirror: another kind of medium is that whereby we attain to the knowledge of something unknown; such as the medium in a demonstration. God was seen without this second kind of medium, but not without the first kind. For there was no need for the first man to attain to the knowledge of God by demonstration drawn from an effect, such as we need; since he knew God simultaneously in His effects, especially in the intelligible effects, according to His capacity. (*ST I* 94.1 ad 3)

While mediation in the knowledge of God did take place, it was not through creation, as is the case now, where we proceed from things of the senses to things of the spirit, but thanks to a spiritual effect in the intellect – an inner light. At the same time, Adam could have been progressing in such knowledge of God through creation.

The other metaphor is the sun, which points to God as the *primum principium*, an uncreated light that makes all other things being known by humans intelligible. While humans know colours thanks to sunlight, the mere observation of a colour does not justify the conviction that they thus see the substance of the sun; instead, they see what flows from the sun.

In summary, while Aquinas admits that Adam had an ‘open’ (*manifestam*) knowledge of God, he notes that this was not a beatific vision, which is why Adam also had faith concerning things that could not be seen (*ST II-II* 5.1c). At the same time, Aquinas also admits that – by manner of rapture (*raptio*) – Adam may have beheld the essence of God in the same manner as the saved do, thanks to a particular grace (as experienced by Moses and Saint Paul), although this would have been a momentary occurrence (*De Veritate* 18.1 ad 13).

What stood in the way of seeing God? It was not some obstacle (as when warmth is inhibited by cold) but the absence of the habit that only comes with the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*), which is similar to a situation where someone not familiar with geometry cannot practise it. While Adam could not see God in the first state, even though he supremely desired it (*summe desiderabat*), he was not saddened by that fact, because it was not yet the time for that vision (*Super Sent. II* 23.2.1 ad 4.).

The source of Adam’s faith: Did it come by ‘hearing’?

Because faith comes by hearing, Aquinas ponders the sources of Adam’s faith and arrives at the conclusion that in the case of the first man, faith did in fact come from what was heard (which Aquinas believes to be a trait of any faith), but the source was not external – as is the case with the people living today. Like those who have had a personal experience of God which they then recount to others (the latter becoming believers, thanks to the former’s experience and testimony), Adam heard an internal inspiration from God; therefore, his faith was also a response to the Divine revelation that preceded it. Thus, nobody proclaimed the faith externally to Adam, which is the difference between his faith and ours. Moreover, as if still concerned that the listener might be confused, Aquinas points out that ‘what’ Adam saw and responded to in his faith was not the essence of God but the sign of that essence (*signum essentiae*).

At this point, it remains to be resolved whether what Adam believed in Paradise is what we believe today. Aquinas reminds us that in the formal aspect, the object of faith is the first truth, inaccessible for direct contemplation by pilgrims on their way to Heaven, whereas in the material sense, the object of faith is the specific set of truths that humans believe. By persisting in faith, ‘man, before sin, possessed manifest knowledge about certain points in the Divine mysteries, which now we cannot know except by believing them’ (*ST II-II* 5.1c.). Therefore, one cannot simply equate Adam’s faith with ours. In comparison to our faith after sin, Adam’s faith gave him a greater ability to know the effects of God’s actions and his mysteries and made his knowledge clear. He was not looking for God as someone ‘remote’, because God was close to humans through the light of wisdom. Nevertheless, this still was not the kind of contemplation that is granted to the saved in the light of grace (*ST II-II* 5.1c). In other words, not every *visio Dei* is *beatifica*.

Adam’s faith could have been growing in some respect, because he was on his way towards greater perfection and may have deserved to know further things and experience God’s might in them. In his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Aquinas describes this situation by comparing two possible imperfections in horse riding, whereby either ‘the horse does not run well or the rider does not know how to guide the horse’ (*Super Rom.* 1.6 no. 106). In Adam’s case, his ability to guide the horse may have been improving.

Did Adam believe in Christ?

In the context of Adam's faith, one might also ask whether Adam believed in Christ. In response to such questions concerning those living before the Incarnation, Aquinas makes a distinction between two types of faith: implicit and explicit (*ST II-II 2.7c*). On the basis of that distinction, he demonstrates that every believer has in some way believed in Christ: either as the One who is to come or as the One who has already come. In the state of innocence, humans did not have any beliefs concerning redemption as there was no such need, yet by believing in Divine providence as the source of what is needed for salvation, they believed in Christ. Still, as Aquinas argues, there was one matter which required explicit faith both before and after sin, namely belief in the Holy Trinity; even if this did not apply to all people, it did to a majority of them (Roszak 2019). Furthermore, implicit faith in what the prophets and teachers were saying and what stemmed from belief in Divine providence was required after sin but before grace.

From Paradise to Heaven: Would Adam have stayed in Paradise if he had not sinned?

In view of the realities of Adam's life in the state of original justice, his manner of knowing God and the graces he had received, one should not be surprised with Aquinas's statements that Adam lived *in statu viatoris* rather than in a state of eternal happiness (Houck 2020; Murray 2008:112). Paradise as the place in which the state of innocence prevailed was an intermediate 'station' rather than the final destination, and Adam had the road from Paradise to Heaven ahead of him just as we do after sin. As Aquinas notes, 'the promised reward of the immortality of glory differs from the immortality which was bestowed on man in the state of innocence' (*ST I 97.1 ad 4.*). Therefore, the difference between the two states also concerns the manner in which freedom is experienced: while freedom in Heaven consists in not being able to sin (*non posse peccare*), freedom in Paradise consisted in being able not to sin (*posse non peccare*). Importantly, both cases are expressions of freedom!

By pointing to the difference between Paradise and Heaven, one also invites questions about the meaning of the time spent by Adam in the state of innocence and the meaning of all natural history. While Aquinas does not ask this question explicitly, it appears that his answer would direct our attention to the good that would not have emerged if original justice had not existed. After all, the time of original justice had its purpose (*telos*), and because Aquinas believes that there was no dysteleological suffering in the time of innocence, this must have been a time of the attainment of virtues and the development of a freedom that needed to be affirmed by Adam's further decisions as he gained awareness of what he was learning (McLeish 2020). The attainment of perfection is good and would not have come into existence if Adam had been created in Heaven.

If we sometimes say that the purpose of life is to attain Paradise, as was the case with Christ, who spoke the following words to one of the criminals on the cross: 'today you will be with me in Paradise' (Lk 23:43), then the transposition of the term 'Paradise' to Heaven refers to the *suavitas* that characterises the future glory. This is an analogy with the earthly Paradise, which was governed by moderation and the ability to conquer difficulties. The terminology concerning Heaven – with the distinction between different 'heavens' such as the third heaven to which Saint Paul was 'taken' by way of special grace – can be vague. A 'spiritual paradise' in the sense of perfect delight in God consists in seeing God, but in a broader sense, it may mean any contemplation of God. Aquinas ordered such 'paradises' as early as in his *Commentary on the Sentences*:

Paradise is of three sorts. One is the earthly paradise in which Adam was placed; another the bodily heavenly paradise, that is, the empyrean heaven; and another the spiritual paradise, that is, the glory of the vision of God. And one should understand the Lord to have spoken to the thief of this latter paradise, for immediately after completing his passion both the thief himself and all who were in the limbo of the patriarchs saw God through his essence. (*Super Sent.* III 22.2.1 qc. 3 ad 3)

It was fitting for Adam that 'he was not placed from the beginning in the empyrean heaven', which is synonymous to being face to face with God for eternity – as was the case with angels by reason of their nature – but rather 'destined to be transferred thither' after a certain period of time. As Aquinas notes, the material experience of Paradise was appropriate for humans (and even their deprivation of Paradise occurred for a reason), because it corresponded to their nature. And after sin, through the memory of that Paradise, humanity could be 'instructed in things pertaining to the heavenly paradise, the way to which is prepared for man by Christ' (*ST II-II 164.2 ad 4.*)

The differences between the two states are summarised in Table 1.

Conclusions

One of the themes addressed by Professor Johan Buitendag, to whom I dedicate this text, is the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences (Buitendag 2020; Buitendag & Simut 2021; Puglisi & Buitendag 2020). It is not, however, a question of one discourse being replaced by another, nor of two discourses existing in parallel with each other, but of one relating to the other, a question of integrations or consonances. The theological meaning of Paradise as a Heaven-oriented state rather than an end in itself provides a good framework

TABLE 1: Difference between paradise and heaven according to Thomas Aquinas.

Paradise	Heaven
Time	timelessness
Freedom consisted in <i>posse non peccare</i>	Freedom consisted in <i>non posse peccare</i>
Felicity: anticipation of beatitude	Beatitude
Faith in God	Delight in God
Knowledge of God in created things and through illumination	Direct knowledge of the essence of God

TABLE 2: Difference in human life before and after the Adam's sin according to Thomas Aquinas.

Before sin	After sin
Grace is needed	Grace is needed, but for a greater number of things rather than in greater quantity
The path to Heaven is <i>quies</i>	The method changes, but not the goal
Temptations are resisted without difficulty (<i>ST II-II 165</i>)	Temptations are resisted with difficulty
Integrity of nature	Lack of integrity (rectitude)
Thorns and thistles as food for animals, not to punish man	Thorns and thistles cause labour for the tiller of the soil (<i>ST II-II 164.2 ad 1</i>)
Dominion as council-based governance – mastership always in accordance with the will of another	Dominion as 'dominance' – mastership sometimes 'against' another's will
Infantile defects but no senile defects	Infantile defects and senile defects
Perfect emotions that do not infringe upon integrity	Emotions that upset and distract
The soul corrupts the body; the person corrupts nature (sin belongs to the irascible power)	The body corrupts the soul; nature corrupts the person (sin belongs to the concupiscible power)

for understanding the history of human development. The path to full perfection in cooperation with grace is disrupted by sin, which does not so much introduce new elements that were not there before as it shatters the rectitude that prevailed at the time. The result is a different approach of humans to their environment, to death, which – thanks to grace – is no longer connected to the purpose inscribed by the Creator. Humanity's harmony with nature, as described in the Bible in the language of Paradise and original justice, is the articulation of the effect of the action of grace, which for Aquinas elevates nature, leading it to a supernatural goal (Platovnjak & Svetelj 2021). Only from the perspective of the eschatological goal is this possible (Peters 2018). The differences pointed out by Aquinas are indicated in Table 2.

The issue of Adam's faith in Eden and the manner in which he came to know God is thus a case study that may prove relevant to the religion–science dialogue (Karwasz 2019). At the same time, it reminds us of what changes sin has made in history and builds a coherent theological narrative that is ready to be integrated into a scientific approach to reality (García-Alandete 2022; Horvat 2020).

It is this integration of the theological (biblical) approach with the discoveries of the natural sciences that is an important field of dialogue between religion and science today: it is not a matter of simply (or even more forcibly) fitting one field to the other, for example, subordinating religion to science or vice versa. As Neil Messer pointed out in proposing an interesting scale for the relationship between religion and science (Messer 2020), scientism and fideism are extremes, absolutising its solutions. The key is to discover that, as in music, a melodic line can run in parallel, on the principle of counterpoint, but interplay must exist so that there is no cacophony. Aquinas's proposal for a 'theological' Adam, with its realism, allows for an honest dialogue between theology and science to discover the possibility of consonance between the two modes of narration. The message that Aquinas leaves in his reflections on the life of the first humans before sin reveals at the same time the presence of science in Edenic reality. Science appeared not after sin, as a kind of 'punishment', but Aquinas even speaks

of Adam's advancement of knowledge, and therefore of a specific kind of doing science in that situation, thanks to the cognitive abilities of the first humans based on *rectitudo* and grace. Therefore, the dialogue between religion and science is not new and unexpected from the perspective of Christian theology, but it has a history even before the sin of the first people.

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P.R. is the sole author of this article.

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