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Dialectics as a Method of Reducing Epistemic Uncertainty in Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to show that Thomas Aquinas's dialectical method is not merely a tool for organizing theological and philosophical discourse but a strategic mechanism for reducing epistemic uncertainty. By systematically structuring his arguments, Aquinas progressively narrows the range of possible answers, eliminating ambiguity and strengthening the epistemic foundation of his conclusions. To support this claim, I examine three key aspects of his methodology: (1) the *quaestio* structure as a mechanism of epistemic selection, where the careful organization of objections and responses enables the systematic filtration of competing claims; (2) the role of negative dialectics and falsification in refining arguments through systematic refutation; and (3) his strategies for managing indeterminacy in metaphysical and theological reasoning. These elements reveal a deliberate epistemic strategy aimed at securing intellectual certainty within a structured methodological framework. I also argue that Aquinas's approach, while firmly rooted in the scholastic tradition, exhibits structural similarities to certain contemporary discussions in epistemology and argumentation theory. This reassessment highlights the enduring philosophical significance of his methodological rigour for contemporary philosophical discourse.

Keywords: dialectical method, uncertainty, *quaestio* structure, negative dialectics, first principles

1. Introduction

Scholasticism is often remembered for its rigid structures, yet few readers pause to ask what these structures actually do. At first glance, the pages of the *Summa theologiae* (hereinafter *ST*)[1] appear predictable: objections, an authoritative counterstatement, a response, and replies. This pattern appears to be nothing more than the polished habit of medieval pedagogy. But what if this familiar structure

[1] In this study, I refer to the English translation in *The* Summa theologiae *of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed., Burns, Oates & Washbourne, London 1920, and follow the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. The Latin texts are cited from the *Corpus Thomisticum*, an edition based on the Leonine text (Rome 1888) and revised by Enrique Alarcón.

conceals a deeper operation? This article proposes that these features are not only a stylistic relic of medieval pedagogy, but the signs of a deeper intellectual architecture: Aquinas's deliberate strategy for reducing epistemic uncertainty.

The present study does not claim that Aquinas invented the *quaestio*, nor that earlier medieval authors lacked methodological sophistication. The intellectual landscape of the late 12th and early 13th centuries had already witnessed the growing reception of Aristotelian methods in the Latin West. Robert Grosseteste's writings, for instance, demonstrate an increasing concern with Aristotelian modes of reasoning and the resolution of philosophical difficulties.[1] What distinguishes Aquinas, however, is the particular unity he gives to these elements. In his works, the *quaestio* acquires a distinctive epistemic orientation: competing positions are not simply presented or discussed but systematically ordered so that disagreement itself becomes the starting point for intellectual determination.

The *quaestio* functions in Aquinas's works as a cognitive instrument. Purposefully designed to narrow the field of possible responses, discipline the development of the intellect, and direct inquiry towards specific knowledge within the structured demands of *sacra doctrina* as defined by Aquinas.[2] The claim advanced here is that Aquinas operates not only as a theologian or metaphysician but as an epistemic strategist, who consciously organizes his methods for managing uncertainty and guiding research from confusion towards clarity.

The central intuition underlying this study is simple: the *quaestio* creates a structured space in which reasons advanced against a position can be examined and resolved. In this context, Aquinas is concerned with addressing arguments that appear to conflict with the truths he defends. This is particularly important in theological matters, where the articles of faith cannot themselves be demonstrated through arguments opposed to faith. Aquinas therefore understands the task as one of resolving the difficulties raised against them.[3] Within this frame-

1 R. Grosseteste, *De libero arbitrio*, cap. 1–2, URL: https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/De_Libero_Arbitrio_(Grosseteste).

2 *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2, co.: "[…] sacram doctrinam esse scientiam. […] Et hoc modo sacra doctrina est scientia, quia procedit ex principiis notis lumine superioris scientiae, quae scilicet est scientia Dei et beatorum. Unde sicut musica credit principia tradita sibi ab arithmetico, ita doctrina sacra credit principia revelata sibi a Deo."

3 *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8, co.: "Si vero adversarius nihil credat eorum quae divinitus revelantur, non remanet amplius via ad probandum articulos fidei per rationes, sed ad solvendum rationes, si quas inducit, contra fidem. Cum enim fides infallibili veritati innitatur, impossibile autem sit de vero demonstrari contrarium, manifestum est probationes quae contra fidem inducuntur, non esse demonstrationes, sed solubilia argumenta."

work, the objections presented in a *quaestio* should be understood as problems that require examination and resolution rather than as expressions of sceptical doubt on the part of the author. They represent the difficulties that have to be addressed before a satisfactory resolution can be established. Their examination contributes to a clearer understanding of the position defended by Aquinas by clarifying its grounds and addressing the arguments raised against it. Aquinas therefore brings together conflicting opinions in order to examine the difficulties they present and determine which can be sustained. The objections provide the material for this process, while their resolution leads to greater clarity and, ultimately, to first principles and more precise doctrinal conclusions.

It is this dynamic between epistemic indeterminacy and rational resolution that underlies this study. The central assumption is that Aquinas's dialectic constitutes a method of epistemic reduction, a structured process in which uncertainty is gradually narrowed, contradictory positions are clarified or eliminated, and intellect progresses towards stable and deeper knowledge. In what follows, I will analyse the architecture of the *quaestio* together with the conceptual operations that constitute this distinctive cognitive work.

In consequence, in the subsequent sections I turn to those elements of Aquinas's method that most clearly reveal its epistemic intent: the way the *quaestio* structures and narrows the field of possible answers; the function of negation and critical testing in clarifying disputed claims; and the intellectual operations by which Aquinas addresses different forms of indeterminacy in metaphysical inquiry, grounded in natural reason, and in theological inquiry, grounded in principles received through divine revelation. Finally, I will briefly discuss the significance of his method, emphasizing its structural persistence and pointing out modern analogies.

The key analyses presented in this article will be based on selected fragments of the first part of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. I will also refer to relevant fragments of other works, such as his commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*, and his *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*.

Although many important insights concerning the role of the structure of Aquinas's *quaestio* and his methodology have already been presented in numerous publications, according to my knowledge none has explicitly expressed the hypothesis I argue for. In this respect, I hope that my argumentation may contribute to the debate on the aims of Aquinas's strategies.

2. Why the *quaestio* Matters: Doubt, Possibility, and the Reduction of Uncertainty

Before turning to Aquinas's own procedure, it is necessary to understand the methodological environment he inherits. In early scholasticism, particularly in figures like Alexander of Hales, the *quaestio* and *disputatio* served primarily as pedagogical formats for academic debate. As Bernardo Carlos Bazán explains, it was a formal mode of teaching, learning, and research, in which participants offered opposing arguments grounded in both reason and authority, and the master was expected to resolve the issue through a doctrinal determination that confirmed his magisterial role. This structure provided order, but it remained largely shaped by the dynamics of debate and the contributions of the disputants.[4]

As Jean-Pierre Torrell notes, this development marked a significant shift from *lectio* to a discussion-focused model, expressed both in the *disputatio privata* of the master's school and in the more public *disputatio publica*.[5] However, although the *quaestio* became more clearly academic, it continued to operate within the fluent context of oral discussion and retained a certain reliance on the exchange of arguments rather than an internally unified method. Aquinas inherited this form but gave it a distinctive structure. As Margherita Maria Rossi emphasizes, he integrates traditional elements, such as objections, *sed contra*, determination, and responses, into a coherent structure that distinguishes doctrinal insight from auxiliary reasoning and clarifies the logical course of inquiry. In this way, he transforms the *quaestio* from a primarily pedagogical dialogue into a disciplined tool for theological scholarship.[6]

This transformation is not merely stylistic. It aligns directly with Aquinas's conviction, especially articulated in *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2, and q. 1, a. 8, that *sacra doctrina* is a science grounded in principles higher than human reason.[7] If theology is to function scientifically under such conditions, its method must be capable

4 B.C. Bazán, *Les questions disputées, principalement dans les facultés de théologie*, in: *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine*, eds. B.C. Bazán .W. Wippel, G. Fransen, D. Jacquart, Brepols, Turnhout 1985, p. 160.

5 J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 2022, pp. 75–76.

6 M.M. Rossi, *Methodological Guide to Interpreting the Texts of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, "Angelicum" 2008, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp. 11–14, URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/44618809.

7 *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2, co.: "Et hoc modo sacra doctrina est scientia, quia procedit ex principiis notis lumine superioris scientiae, quae scilicet est scientia Dei et beatorum."

of operating within a complex epistemic field: one in which revealed authorities, philosophical analysis, and metaphysical commitments constantly intersect.[8] The *quaestio* becomes this method: a disciplined framework that confronts doubt, regulates disagreement, and leads the intellect towards determination.

Aquinas accomplishes this through the four-part structure of the *quaestio*. Each part begins with a problem expressed in the form of a closed question, and each fulfils a distinct epistemic function:

1. The *videtur quod non* presents the *rationes in contrarium*. These are not "objections" in Thomas's own terminology, nor do they always oppose the thesis he will ultimately affirm. Rather, they systematize the strongest rival accounts or alternative interpretative possibilities, thereby expanding and mapping the field of available meanings.
2. The *sed contra* is an argument against the initial hypothesis. It introduces an authoritative point that orients the inquiry without prematurely resolving it.
3. The *respondeo dicendum* reconstructs the question from its metaphysical foundations. Here, the initially diffuse field of possibilities is narrowed, proportioned, and ordered. The *respondeo* thus performs the decisive epistemic work: transforming the tensions disclosed in the *videtur quod (non)* into a coherent line of explanation.
4. The *ad rationes* replies return to each earlier argument to purify, relocate, or integrate the insight contained within it. Rather than mere refutations, these replies specify the precise scope of each *ratio*, thereby eliminating misunderstanding while preserving what is true.[9]

What distinguishes Aquinas's practice of the *quaestio* lies not in the form itself, which he shares with other masters, but in the function he assigns to it. Beneath the pedagogical clarity and scholastic symmetry lies what might be called the "epistemic intentionality" of the method. The movement that constitutes the *quaestio* recalls the way Thomas works with analogy: before reaching a resolu-

[8] *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2: "Utitur tamen sacra doctrina etiam ratione humana, non quidem ad probandum fidem, quia per hoc tolleretur meritum fidei; sed ad manifestandum aliqua alia quae traduntur in hac doctrina. Cum enim gratia non tollat naturam, sed perficiat, oportet quod naturalis ratio subserviat fidei; […] Et inde est quod etiam auctoritatibus philosophorum sacra doctrina utitur, ubi per rationem naturalem veritatem cognoscere potuerunt."

[9] Cf. M. Grabmann, *Introduction to the Theological Summa of St. Thomas*, B. Herder Book, St. Louis 1930, pp. 67–68.

tion, the intellect must discern the range of possible meanings and establish their mutual proportions. As in analogy, where similarity does not deny difference but orders it.[10] Likewise, in the *quaestio* the point is to grasp what is common to different lines of argument and then to hierarchize them until a single line of necessary approach emerges. The *quaestio* thus functions as an analogy on the scale of discourse: it opens up possibilities only to identify their proper place and lead the intellect beyond the point where everything seems equal. Therefore, the structure of the *quaestio* in Thomas resembles the movement of opening and closing a fan: first, it allows for complete doubt, and then, through a rigorous interplay of arguments and counterarguments, composes it into a single, precise line of resolution. This is not merely a form of academic discussion, but a mechanism that leads thought from chaotic dispersion to certainty.

Each *quaestio* begins by putting the intellect into a state of tension. It often starts with a hypothesis (introduced by the phrase "it seems that" – *videtur quod non*), which appears to be in conflict with what the reader might expect from the author. The initial *rationes*, later labelled "objections," do not merely arrange arguments against the position Aquinas will ultimately defend. Although this frequently occurs, it is not always the case. Rather, these *rationes* articulate the most significant competing accounts available within the conceptual field. Sometimes they genuinely oppose the thesis; at other times, like in *ST* I, q. 75, a. 4, they do not contest Aquinas's ultimate conclusion but display alternative interpretative possibilities that require clarification and ordering. Here, the initial *rationes* arise from two different lines of reasoning that are not simply mistaken but plausible within their own conceptual frameworks.[11] One reads Scripture as identifying the "inward man" with the soul alone, the other infers from the soul's substantiality that it must be a human person. In his determination, Aquinas does not dismiss these arguments but disentangles the heterogeneous senses of "man" on which they depend, showing that the debate turns not on competing conclusions but on competing definitions, so precisely the kind of conceptual clarification the *quaestio* is designed to produce. In this way, the *quaestio* serves as both a site of refutation and a space in which different aspects of a problem are distinguished, assessed, and integrated into a coherent account.

[10] A. Terence, *The Epistemology of St. Thomas Aquinas with Special Reference to* Summa theologiae *Ia q. 84*, PhD diss., University of Glasgow 1997, p. 15.

[11] Cf. *ST* I, q. 75, a. 4, co.: "Respondeo dicendum quod animam esse hominem dupliciter potest intelligi."

Aquinas therefore selects *rationes* that extend the scope of the question, including Averroes's argument concerning the necessity of divine action (*ST* I, q. 19), Augustine's account of illumination (*ST*, I, q. 79), and many others. Their examination also allows Aquinas to determine the epistemic status of the arguments themselves. An argument may appear demonstrative while relying on premises that establish only probability; in such cases, Aquinas exposes its dialectical character.[12] Aquinas can therefore distinguish the epistemic force of the arguments under consideration and determine whether they establish demonstration or remain at the level of dialectical reasoning. In this opening stage of the article, Aquinas lays out the main difficulties surrounding the question. He brings the assumptions, intuitions, and incomplete insights underlying the initial positions into view, making them the material of the subsequent inquiry. The *quaestio* proceeds by drawing these scattered positions into view, allowing them to create an initial tension that directs the line of questioning and determines what the subsequent argument must resolve.[13] Seen from this angle, the epistemic function of the opening *rationes* is dual. They expand the space of possible answers while simultaneously defining the limits of valid inquiry, indicating precisely what must be addressed for the final *determinatio* to be rationally justified. Aquinas's procedure therefore brings the full difficulty of the question into view before its resolution. By presenting the positions that guide the inquiry, the *rationes* provide the basis for their subsequent examination and resolution.

The *sed contra* is often misunderstood as an appeal to authority, interrupting rigorous reasoning. However, as Guy Mansini demonstrates in his analysis of *sacra doctrina*, Aquinas treats revealed sources and patristic authorities not as argumentative shortcuts but as axiomatic constraints in the Aristotelian sense. According to Aristotle, an axiom is not self-evident but cannot be proven and defended by revealing the contradiction resulting from its denial.[14] In this light, one can understand that the appeal to authority in the *sed contra* is not an argumentative shortcut but rather establishes a framework within which further argument must operate. Authority itself, however, does not function as a sub-

[12] J. Isaac, *La notion de dialectique chez saint Thomas*, "Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques" 1950, Vol. 34, No. 4, p. 501.

[13] E. McLuhan, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Dramatist?*, "Studia Gilsoniana" 2016, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 114–115.

[14] G. Mansini, O.S.B., *Are the Principles of* sacra doctrina per se nota*?*, "The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review" 2010, Vol. 74, pp. 420–422, https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2010.0022.

stitute for proof or a direct source of certainty, but as an organizing principle. It indicates the proper direction of understanding and provides a starting point for discussion, allowing for a rational development of the problem.[15]

The *respondeo* is the heart of the *quaestio*, the moment at which Aquinas transcends the level of debate and reconstructs the problem in metaphysical terms. In the case of *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, the famous Five Ways[16] of proving the existence of God appear not as direct answers to objections, but as an explanation of what it means for something to exist through itself or through another, what constitutes causality, and how potency compels act. By grounding the question in the metaphysics of being, act and potency, necessity and contingency, and formal gradation, Aquinas effectively narrows the field of possible explanations. Most alternatives are eliminated not by polemic but by the logic of being itself. The Five Ways establish God's existence by identifying the causal principles that govern the order of reality. These principles then provide the basis for assessing the alternatives raised in the objections and for determining which explanations can be sustained. In this way, the *respondeo* gives the question a determinate framework in which the difficulties raised at the beginning can be resolved.

The final step: *ad obiectiones* – the response to the objections – completes the epistemic reduction. Aquinas returns to each objection not only to refute it but also to extract the truth contained within it and situate it within the refined conceptual framework established in the *respondeo*. In *ST*, I, q. 2, a. 3, Aquinas recognizes that natural causes are authentic causes but argues that they are insufficient unless they are grounded in a first cause. Similarly, the problem of evil is addressed through a deeper metaphysical account of good and the privation of good.[17]

3. Negative Dialectics

In the classical structure of Thomas Aquinas's *quaestio disputata*, negation serves a far more precise function than the simple rejection of false claims. It is a constructive epistemic tool that allows for the methodical narrowing of the field of possible responses before a positive position is formulated. If the *quaestio*

[15] P. Roszak, *Authority and the Search for Wisdom: On the Concept of "Auctoritas" in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, "Człowiek w Kulturze" 2011/2012, Vol. 22, pp. 73–75.

[16] *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, remains one of the clearest illustrations of the full structure of the *quaestio* method.

[17] Cf. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, co.; ad 1; ad 2.

structure distinguishes two elements particularly important for working with uncertainty, namely, the orderly presentation of opposing claims and systematic *responsiones ad obiectiones*, then we can speak of a procedure that can be described as negative dialectics. Similar dynamics have been identified by Michał Mrozek, and other recent interpreters of Aquinas's theological method, showing that the distribution of arguments between the opening *rationes*, the *sed contra*, the corpus, and the replies is designed to structure a field of competing interpretations rather than to oppose a single thesis to a single counter-thesis.[18] This is the process of clearing the cognitive space by eliminating weak, inconclusive, or internally contradictory positions, so that an answer can be developed that is not only true but also epistemically certain.

The expression "negative dialectics" is employed here in a restricted methodological sense. It refers to the systematic examination and elimination of competing explanations within the structure of the *quaestio*. Consequently, it should not be identified either with Aristotle's broader account of dialectic developed in the *Topics*[19] nor with Theodor W. Adorno's philosophical project of *Negative Dialectics*.[20] While Aquinas undoubtedly remains indebted to the Aristotelian understanding of dialectic as an ordered engagement with competing positions, his ultimate concern lies in the transition from plurality to demonstrative certainty. The term is therefore used here solely to designate the epistemic role of negation in Aquinas's procedure of inquiry.

Negative dialectics does not begin only at the moment of polemic. Objections already constitute the author's conscious, methodical entry into the realm of uncertainty. Thomas does not treat them as conventional rhetorical introductions, but as fully fledged epistemic proposals addressing the posed problem. Their role is to reveal the possible error: they present alternative lines of interpretation, reconstructing the arguments available in tradition in their strongest possible form. This strengthening of the opponent's argument is fundamental to understanding the entire method, because falsification is valuable only when it concerns assertions in their strongest form. In this context, the *sed contra* is not a simple appeal

[18] M. Mrozek, O.P., *The Use of Scripture in Aquinas's* Summa theologiae *I–II, qq. 49–70*, in: *Towards a Biblical Thomism: Thomas Aquinas and the Renewal of Biblical Theology*, ed. P. Roszak, J. Vijgen, EUNSA, Pamplona 2018, p. 62.

[19] Cf. Aristotle, *Topics*, I, 1–2, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, MIT Classics Archive, URL: https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/topics.1.i.html.

[20] Cf. T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, London 2015.

to authority but rather indicates the proper epistemic direction towards which the solution will develop. Negation in the structure of the *quaestio* is not an act of destruction, but rather of transforming the meaning of the opposing assertion. The negation used is not intended solely to refute false statements, but rather to refute their meaning, in order to reveal, through a gradual dialectic, a new meaning of the affirmative statement and the negated statement.[21] It is precisely this transformation of meaning that makes the first stage of negative dialectics more than a mere elimination of falsehood. Rather, it involves a structural correction of understanding that enables the emergence of the correct solution.

The full structure of the negation, however, is revealed only in Aquinas's responses to individual objections. This is the moment when Thomas does not simply reject a position but rather shows why it cannot be maintained in light of a more adequate understanding of the issue under discussion. He identifies problematic premises, unwarranted analogies, imprecise concepts, misidentifications of categories, or inappropriate extensions of predicates.[22] Each *responsio ad obiectionem* is therefore an act of semantic reconstruction, which allows for the proper ordering of a given thesis and the exposure of its structural inaccuracy. From an epistemological perspective, we are dealing with a procedure of eliminating not so much the conclusion itself, but the erroneous paths leading to its formulation.

In *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, Thomas presents two arguments denying the existence of God, each of which appeals to real metaphysical difficulties (the problem of evil, explanations of the order of causes). He then formulates the *quinque viae* as a positive proof, but the epistemic work does not end there. In his *responsiones ad obiectiones*, he refutes the presented counterarguments. He does not so much reject them as demonstrate that they are based on false identifications (as in the case of identifying *causa deficiens* with *causa efficiens* in the argument from the existence of evil). It is here that negative dialectics fully achieves its goal by eliminating false alternatives, while Thomas stabilizes the ground on which the positive solution stands. Thomas not only closes off erroneous paths but also prevents them from functioning further in the epistemic field, depriving them of

[21] M. Trepczyński, *Logika teologii objawionej w pismach Alberta Wielkiego i Tomasza z Akwinu*, "Roczniki Filozoficzne" 2013, Vol. 61, No. 3, p. 74.

[22] Cf. T.W. Guzie, *The Act of Faith according to St. Thomas*, "The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review" 1965, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 266, where the author notes that the replies to the *rationes* constitute "an integral part of the discussion," completing the elements of the argument still missing from the *respondeo*.

the possibility of appearing in future analyses. Thus, negation becomes a positive procedure. The process of clarification is itself an element of the construction of knowledge. And because Thomas strengthens the arguments of his opponents instead of weakening them, this method is fully critical in nature and does not amount to an a priori rejection of competing positions.

One could certainly argue that the objections formulated by Thomas are, in a sense, controlled by him. He chooses the form in which opposing arguments will appear. However, this objection loses its force when one considers the scholastic practice of presenting the opponent's arguments in their strongest possible form. This ambition is clearly visible in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, where Aquinas selects only two objections, yet intentionally chooses the two most serious metaphysical alternatives available: the argument from evil and the hypothesis that nature is a self-sufficient causal order. Both are presented in their most demanding formulation, and it is striking that these remain the two most persistent and intellectually weighty objections raised by contemporary atheism. The power of falsification here depends precisely on the honest and ambitious selection of alternatives, not on their marginalization. This is why Thomas's method, so often considered polemical, is in fact an epistemically rigorous method, based on the principle that a true thesis must withstand confrontation with the strongest counterproposals.

4. Intellectual Operations and First Principles in Managing Indeterminacy in Reasoning

Negative dialectics purges the cognitive field of false alternatives, but it does not eliminate a more fundamental problem: the conceptual and structural indeterminacy that accompanies the very act of knowledge. Aristotelian epistemology, as developed by Aquinas, shows that the beginning of knowledge is necessarily marked by an indistinct apprehension: to know anything as one requires grasping it through its differentiation from what it is not, and this differentiation rests on the primordial structure of affirmation and negation. Thus, the initial cognitive grasp constitutes a vague and indistinct form of knowledge rather than a fully transparent unity; it is threaded with implicit oppositions and latent relational determinations that must be progressively clarified by the work of the in-

tellect.[23] Consequently, the intellect begins with an initial apprehension marked by implicit contrasts. Through successive intellectual operations, these contrasts are gradually ordered, transforming vague and indistinct knowledge into a more differentiated understanding.

In the commentary on Boethius's *De veritate*, q. 15, a. 1, Thomas presents the basic form of the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*, explaining that the intellect can operate either through simple apprehension or by moving from one known element to another. *Intellectus* here refers to the act of grasping content as a unity, in which the intellect grasps the form of a thing directly, without engaging in analysis or comparison. *Ratio*, on the other hand, operates through ordering; it is the sphere of analysis, comparison, inference, and the establishment of relationships.[24] At this point, one may ask whether the simple and immediate character of *intellectus* is sufficient to ground the subsequent operations of *ratio*. In other words, what warrants the transition from intellectual apprehension to discursive reasoning?

Thomas responds to this objection by explaining that the *intellectus* and *ratio* are not two different faculties, but two necessary functions of the same cognitive faculty. In *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8, he emphasizes that the intellect is one in substance, while its acts differ: to understand is to grasp intelligible truth in a simple and immediate way, whereas to reason is to proceed from one understood content to another. *Ratio* therefore presupposes a prior act of *intellectus*, and this initial grasp is not cancelled by later analysis but grounds it. The simple apprehension of first principles is thus not an epistemic limitation but the condition that makes reasoning possible, providing the undivided unities and irreducible starting points on which every discursive process depends.[25] Aquinas does not dis-

[23] This formulation paraphrases Aquinas's account in *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 15, where he argues that knowing anything requires grasping its unity through a distinction grounded in affirmation and negation: "Qui non intelligit aliquid unum, nihil intelligit […] prima ratio distinctionis est in affirmatione et negatione […] ex hoc ipso quod cognoscitur aliquid, cognoscitur eius privatio et eius contrarium."

[24] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, in: *Corpus Thomisticum*, q. 15, a. 1, co.: "Intellectus enim simplicem et absolutam cognitionem designare videtur; ex hoc enim aliquis intelligere dicitur quod intus in ipsa rei essentia veritatem quodammodo legit. Ratio vero discursum quendam designat, quo ex uno in aliud cognoscendum anima humana pertingit vel pervenit."

[25] *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8, co.: "Respondeo dicendum quod ratio et intellectus in homine non possunt esse diversae potentiae. […] Intelligere enim est simpliciter apprehendere veritatem intelligibilem apprehendere. Ratiocinari autem est procedere de uno intellecto ad aliud, ad veritatem intelligibilem cognoscendam. […] Et quia motus semper ab immobili procedit, et ad aliquid quietum

tinguish *intellectus* and *ratio* as separate cognitive powers, but rather as distinct operations of the same intellectual faculty: reasoning begins from the act of the *intellectus* and ultimately returns to it.

This distinction is further articulated in *De Trinitate*, q. 5–6, where Thomas shows that the operation of *intellectus* corresponds to the most fundamental and immediate form of knowledge.[26] Metaphysics grasps first principles intuitively, as content impossible to further reduce, and then applies them to other fields in the form of discursive development. Mathematics, operating *disciplinaliter*, organizes what has previously been grasped as conceptually stable.[27] Physics, on the other hand, studying what is mutable, proceeds *rationabiliter*, relying on the same fundamental concepts, albeit applied to matter and motion.[28] Thus, a real hierarchy exists between the sciences. Each depends to varying degrees on the content previously grasped by the *intellectus*, and scientific discourse in physics, mathematics, and metaphysics can only begin when it possesses fixed points that do not require justification by others. From this perspective, the accusation of arbitrariness loses its significance. The transition from intuition to discourse is not an arbitrary change in the mode of cognition, but a consequence of the structure of the intellect: first, the apprehension of necessity in simple acts, then its development in argumentative proceedings. Without this first act, scientific reasoning, both in metaphysics and in the natural sciences, could not exist at all, for it would have no content to organize, compare, or apply. Metaphysics, as a science operating *intellectualiter*,[29] thus marks not only the beginning but also the framework of discourse. It grasps first principles and then applies them to lower-level sciences through the method of inference. In this way, *intellectus* proves to be a necessity, not a weakness. It is the only instance through which reason can maintain direction, coherence, and the capacity for decision. This hierarchy

terminatur; inde est quod ratiocinatio humana, secundum viam inquisitionis vel inventionis, procedit a quibusdam simpliciter intellectis, quae sunt prima principia. […] Manifestum est autem quod quiescere et moveri non reducuntur ad diversas potentias, sed ad unam et eandem, etiam in naturalibus rebus, quia per eandem naturam aliquid movetur ad locum, et quiescit in loco. […] Et sic patet quod in homine eadem potentia est ratio et intellectus."

[26] Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, in: *Corpus Thomisticum*, pars 3, q. 5, a. 1, ad 1: "Est autem alius modus quo pars animae speculativa perficitur per intellectum, qui est habitus principiorum, quo aliqua ex se ipsis nota fiunt."

[27] Cf. ibid., pars 3, q. 6, a. 1, co.

[28] Cf. ibid.

[29] Cf. ibid.

of cognitive operations explains why Aquinas can regard certainty not as the product of an infinite regress of justifications, but as grounded in the intellect's immediate apprehension of first principles.

The most profound justification for this structure appears in *De veritate*, q. 1, where Thomas develops the doctrine of first concepts. There, he argues that simple apprehension provides the intellect with its most universal concepts, such as being, one, or thing not by way of definition, but as an immediate grasp of what must already be presupposed for any definition to occur. These concepts cannot themselves be defined, since every definitional act depends on prior and more fundamental notions. Were the intellect to seek their acquisition through definition, it would be forced into an infinite regress, and the cognitive process could never begin.[30] It seems that this immediacy does not imply innate notions. The intellect reaches its first concepts at the moment when it begins to possess something proper to itself, something the external thing does not have, yet which corresponds to it and can stand in a relation of equivalence. Precisely this correspondence, and not any prior conceptual structure, grounds the *ratio veritatis*, since truth consists in the equivalence of thing and intellect.[31]

In such a framework first principles gain their proper meaning. Thomas treats first principles not as elements that contribute new content to scientific knowledge, but as structural limits that determine what can count as intelligible reasoning. Their significance is therefore primarily regulative: they mark off the space within which any demonstration must proceed and identify the points beyond which interpretation ceases to be meaningful. Principles such as non-contradiction or causality operate in this way not because they are self-evident in a psychological sense, but because the very practice of demonstration presupposes their stability. Their function is primarily negative: they eliminate approaches that would destroy the internal coherence of knowledge. Thomas makes this underlying structure explicit when he comments on the *Posterior Analytics*: the certainty of first principles must exceed that of demonstrative conclusions, and the falsity

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, op. cit., q. 1, a. 1, co.: "Dicendum, quod sicut in demonstrabilibus oportet fieri reductionem in aliqua principia per se intellectui nota, ita investigando quid est unumquodque; alias utrobique in infinitum iretur, et sic periret omnino scientia et cognitio rerum."

[31] Ibid., q. 1, a. 3, co.: "Veri enim ratio consistit in adaequatione rei et intellectus; idem autem non adaequatur sibi ipsi, sed aequalitas diversorum est; unde ibi primo invenitur ratio veritatis in intellectu ubi primo intellectus incipit aliquid proprium habere quod res extra animam non habet, sed aliquid ei correspondens, inter quae adaequatio attendi potest."

of their opposites must be taken as more firmly established than anything proved by demonstration.[32] It is only under these conditions that deduction can function as the ordered movement of reason.

It could be suggested that axioms, like first principles, are dogmatic in nature. However, Aquinas points out that first principles are not postulated but are self-evident in the sense that any act of negation of them already presupposes their validity.[33] An attempt to deny the principle of non-contradiction must use it to formulate a negation at all. Questioning it, therefore, results in an immediate contradiction. This is not dogmatism, then, but a structural feature of rationality; these are statements that cannot be proven because they constitute a formal condition for the existence of any proof. However, for the intellect to transcend this level of foundations and avoid indeterminacy in more complex content, it requires a tool that allows it to move from what is necessary and most stable to new insights. This tool is deduction. In the *Posterior Analytics*, the syllogism is not a formal mechanism, but a way in which *ratio* organizes and details what the *intellectus* has grasped as self-evident. Deduction reduces ambiguity, leading from a principle to its necessary consequence.

The most important thing about Thomas's deductive structure is that necessity passes exclusively from principles to conclusion. Jan Salamucha demonstrates this relationship directly: if a $p \rightarrow q$ relationship exists between the premises and the conclusion, then the negation of the consequent entails the negation of the antecedent, and thus the truth of the conclusion becomes a necessary condition for the truth of the premises.[34] In proof, the direction of thought flows from what is more certain to what is later, but after its completion, the process can be reversed not because cognition operates symmetrically, but because the epistemic value remains identical. Necessity, once established, extends throughout the entire sequence. Thus, the certainty of inference depends solely on the absolute certainty

[32] Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Posteriorum analyticorum*, lib. 1, l. 6, n. 7: "Deinde, cum dicit: non solum oportet etc., ostendit quod non solum oportet magis cognoscere principia quam conclusionem demonstrandam, sed etiam nihil debet esse certius quam quod opposita principiis sint falsa. Et hoc ideo, quia *oportet scientem non esse incredibilem* principiis, sed firmissime eis assentire. Quicunque autem dubitat de falsitate unius oppositorum, non potest firmiter inhaerere opposito: quia semper formidat de veritate alterius oppositi."

[33] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*, lib. 4, lect. 6.

[34] J. Salamucha, *Pojęcie dedukcji u Arystotelesa i św. Tomasza z Akwinu. Studium historyczno-krytyczne*, Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne, Warszawa 1930, p. 14.

of the principles, and deduction becomes a tool that prevents the weakening of cognitive value at subsequent stages.

It is in this light that Thomas's syllogistic practice becomes understandable. The example from *ST* I, q. 42, a. 1, is particularly representative here: Thomas compiles two general premises, the definitional understanding of equality and the thesis of the lack of gradation in God and derives from their necessary connection the conclusion concerning the equality of the divine Persons.[35] The force of the argument lies in the necessity of this connection. Once the premises have been established, the conclusion follows from them according to the rules of syllogistic inference. The deductive order therefore reduces indeterminacy at the point where the reasoning moves from premises to conclusion, since the conclusion must be grounded in the premises and cannot introduce an unsupported claim. Deduction consequently provides Thomas with a strict form of epistemic stabilization: the certainty of the conclusion is secured by the principles from which it follows, and the necessary order of inference preserves this connection throughout the argument.

5. The Significance of Aquinas's Method: Structural Persistence and Modern Analogies

Although Aquinas's method arose in the context of 13th-century scholastic discourse, its structure displays continuity with contemporary forms of rational argumentation. It is not that Aquinas anticipates contemporary epistemic models, but rather that his method of reducing uncertainty by ordering questions (*quaestio*), eliminating errors (negative dialectics), and managing indeterminacy through syllogistic reasoning employs mechanisms that can be recognized in many contemporary academic and scientific practices. Modern scientific discourse, regardless of the field, assumes a specific model of argumentative structure: presenting the problem, identifying competing hypotheses, justifying the choice of one, and neutralizing objections. This sequential ordering is standard in peer-reviewed publications, especially in the humanities. It is another variant of the same logic expressed in Aquinas's methodology in the Middle Ages. The

[35] M. Trepczyński, *Ścieżki myślenia Alberta Wielkiego i Tomasza z Akwinu*, Wydawnictwo Campidoglio, Warszawa 2013, pp. 69–70.

arrangement of arguments, the response to objections, the need to demonstrate why a given position cannot be sustained – all these elements remain recognizable as structural equivalents of the scholastic way of conducting arguments. The academic peer-review process, in which the author is confronted with the reviewers' objections and then forced to provide precise answers, repeats the pattern of *obiectiones – respondeo – ad obiectiones*. This is, of course, not a genealogical continuation, but a persistent structure. Certain contemporary academic practices continue to employ structurally comparable patterns of argumentation.

This analogy is even more evident in contemporary research on decision-making and argumentation processes. In many contemporary approaches to cognitive science, logic, and probabilistic modelling, it is assumed that humans reach conclusions not through simple data accumulation but through the elimination of alternatives. Phan Minh Dung assumes in his model of analysing the properties of systems in which arguments compete with each other that the rational acceptance of a position depends not on the strength of a single argument, but on its ability to defend itself against all counterarguments. In his view, an argument is acceptable only if it can effectively neutralize all attacks directed against it.[36] This approach is not far from Thomas's intuition: a solution becomes binding only when the remaining interpretative possibilities lose their epistemic power. This understanding of the stability of a position corresponds to the central feature of Thomas's epistemology: knowledge emerges not as a result of the completeness of data, but as a result of the disappearance of the contrary error, which ceases to constitute a viable cognitive alternative.

In a fragment from the *Summa contra Gentiles* that Michael Emmett Brady extracts and interprets, Thomas clearly distinguishes between a situation of pure ignorance and a situation of epistemic uncertainty, understood as having only partial knowledge. Knowledge of future events is "both certain and uncertain" because it is based on indicators that provide only partial insight into the direction and stability of the process.[37] Thomas's reflections on uncertainty exhibit

[36] P.M. Dung, *On the Acceptability of Arguments and Its Fundamental Role in Nonmonotonic Reasoning, Logic Programming and* n*-Person Games*, "Artificial Intelligence" 1995, Vol. 77, No. 2, p. 326, https://doi.org/10.1016/0004-3702(94)00041-X.

[37] M.E. Brady, *Thomas Aquinas on Decision Making under Uncertainty, Ignorance, and Risk: The Role of Keynes's Weight of the Evidence Concept in His Approach*, SSRN, 15.03.2018, pp. 8–10, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3140986, where he analyses Aquinas's treatment of partially certain and partially uncertain knowledge, with specific reference to *Summa contra gentiles* III, c. 154, n. 11, p. 243.

certain structural similarities to contemporary Bayesian models, in which the essence is not subjective certainty but the degree to which available data allow for narrowing the space of possible hypotheses. In the Bayesian approach, belief-updating involves reducing the probability assigned to hypotheses that are inconsistent with the available observations and increasing the probability assigned to the hypothesis that best explains the data. As new evidence becomes available, the range of viable hypotheses is progressively narrowed, while alternatives that receive insufficient evidential support lose their plausibility. In this sense, both for Thomas and in probabilistic theories of cognition, the stability of a conclusion emerges when competing alternatives can no longer provide an equally adequate explanation of the available evidence. Reason is left with the hypothesis that, given a particular set of premises or data, has the strongest support.

In this sense, Thomas's method can be understood as a pre-systemic form of eliminative logic. His argumentation does not rely on confining a person to a single model, but on minimizing the number of reasonable alternatives so that the conclusion remains the most stable answer under the available conditions. This thinking operates on mechanisms that contemporary logic and decision theory have formalized only since the 20th century. This is why Thomas's method should not be described as modern but may nevertheless remain philosophically illuminating for contemporary discussions concerning rationality and inquiry. The recurrence of comparable argumentative structures in the cognitive sciences, logic, theories of argumentation, and contemporary academic practices suggest that some patterns of rational inquiry possess a broader philosophical significance extending beyond their original historical context. From this perspective, Aquinas's distinctive use of the *quaestio* represents one of the most sophisticated medieval attempts to organize inquiry in the face of epistemic uncertainty.

6. Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article suggests that Aquinas's dialectical method should be understood as more than a merely pedagogical device. While deeply indebted to earlier scholastic practices, it reveals a particularly sophisticated way of organizing inquiry, confronting disagreement, and guiding the intellect towards determination. What at first glance appears to be merely a formal sequence

of objections, counter-authority, responses, and rebuttals reveals, upon careful inspection, its deeper function: organizing the field of interpretation, eliminating erroneous possibilities, and leading the intellect to a stable resolution.

The structure of the *quaestio* functions here as an instrument of epistemic selection, negative dialectics serves as a tool for systematic falsification, and the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*, which is rooted in the doctrine of first principles, defines the conditions under which reason can move from ambiguity to necessity. Together, these elements reveal a fundamental intuition: certainty arises not through the accumulation of data but through the elimination of competing possibilities. For as long as alternatives remain alive, the intellect can neither stop nor proceed; as long as error remains possible, truth cannot ultimately reveal itself.

In this light, Aquinas's method emerges not merely as a theological instrument, but as a particularly sophisticated medieval account of how inquiry may proceed under conditions of uncertainty. Moreover, its logic remains surprisingly consistent with many contemporary epistemic models: theories of argumentation, invariant logic, decision models, and probabilistic procedures for restricting hypotheses. This is not because Aquinas anticipated modernity, but because some problems concerning rational inquiry extend beyond the historical circumstances in which they were first articulated. Where knowledge arises through confrontation with objections, where the strength of a position depends on resistance to criticism, that is where logic in its purest form operates.

Ultimately, this is precisely why Aquinas's method remains philosophically significant: it constitutes an early and sophisticated reflection on how reason reduces uncertainty and how it organizes the field of possibilities to extract from it what is necessary. It demonstrates that clarity is not given but produced; that certainty does not stem from quantity, but from the removal of what cannot endure. The epistemic path from doubt to resolution requires first the opening and then the consequent closure of the space of thought. In this sense, Aquinas's method remains one of the most profound descriptions of reason's work in a situation of indeterminacy, and therefore its structural intuition endures, regardless of historical context.

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