

“The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth.” So, Help Us...Aquinas? Why is Truth an *Adaequatio*?

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Even though throughout his works Aquinas uses at least ten different words to talk about the nature of truth, his preferred way of defining truth is *adaequatio*, as in his classic definition *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. Why does he prefer this one? This paper gives two possible reasons: 1) the connection between *adaequatio* and equality, understood as a mean or middle between more and less, and 2) the connection between *adaequatio* and the second act of the intellect. The paper will thus be divided into two parts.

I. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN *ADAEQUATIO* AND EQUALITY

Aquinas prefers to speak about truth more as an *adaequatio*, which he understands to involve an equality. What does this mean? At first, it may seem implausible to think of truth as an equality. Does this mean that a statement or thought is true because it is equal to the way things are? The statement “I am sitting” is true because it is equal to reality? How can the statement be equal to reality?

Throughout all his major treatises on truth, Aquinas elaborates on what this means. Truth is an *adaequatio* because it is a middle or a mean between more and less, that is, it is neither more nor less. In the following text, Aquinas basically argues that the intellectual virtues consist in a mean because the good of the intellectual virtues or of the intellect itself is truth, but truth, which is an

adaequatio, consists in a mean between two extremes.

The good of the intellectual virtues consists in this, that the true is said. Now truth consists in a certain adequation [*adaequatio*] of the intellect and spoken word to a thing. And because equality [*aequalitas*] is a mean/middle between more and less, therefore it is necessary that the good of the intellect consist in a mean, when, namely, it is said about a thing that which it is. If, however, it exceeds either in more or in less, there will be the false, which is related to the intellectual virtues, just as vice is related to the moral virtues. (*Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 33 q. 1 a. 3 qc. 3 co)¹

To understand truth as an *adaequatio*, it is crucial to grasp notion of equality and the corresponding notions of more and less. That is equal to another which is neither more nor less than it. Etymologically, contained in the Latin word “*adaequatio*” is the word “equality” or “equal,” which perhaps takes one back to mathematics. “Equal” brings to mind neither more nor less. One quantity is equal to another because it is neither more nor less than the other. If I have eleven oranges and you have ten, I have more than you. If I have nine and you have ten, I have less than you. However, if I have ten oranges and you have ten oranges, I have an *equal* number of oranges to yours, i.e., neither more nor less. Likewise, if one line is equal to another, it is neither shorter nor longer than the other line.

In the same text, Aquinas defines the mean in accordance with what the intellect recognizes to be the case about reality. He adds that when the intellect makes a quantitative judgment of “more or “less,” we have the opposite of truth—namely falsity. Truth, therefore, is an equality, (a neither more nor less) and falsity is an inequality (an either more or less). To further clarify what he means, he adds a comparison of falsity to moral vice. So, for example, just as courage lies in the mean between two vices—foolhardiness (the vice of excess) and cowardice (the vice of deficiency), so truth lies in the mean between two extremes, namely, more and less, both of which constitute falsity. So, truth is like a moral virtue, and falsity is like a moral vice.

Within the same text, in the reply to the third objection, Aquinas gives a more detailed account as to what it would mean for there to be an excess and a defect, and how truth is a mean between these extremes:

To the third it ought to be said that the extremes in the intellectual virtues are not taken according to a great and small intelligible thing: but the extreme is in [there being] more, when something is attributed to something which is not in it; and the extreme is in less, when something is removed from it which *is* in it. Now the false occurs in either way; but the true, when what belongs to something is said to belong to something, or what does not belong to something is said not to belong to something; and

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these extremes corrupt not the substance, but the truth of the intellect.
(*Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 33 q. 1 a. 3 qc. 3 ad 3)²

So, “the more” or “excess” is when something is attributed to something which is not in it. For example, if I were to say right now that “I am standing,” I am attributing to myself something which is not in me, namely, standing. Now, “the less” or “defect” is when something is removed from something which *is* in it. For example, if I were to say right now that “I am not sitting,” I am removing from myself something which indeed *is* in me, namely, my sitting. Now, both the statement “I am standing” (the more or excess) and the statement “I am not sitting” (the less or defect) are false. Aquinas says that the false occurs in either of these two ways. In this text, Aquinas also gives more details regarding the mean itself which is between the more and the less, the two ways of being false. It is basically the opposite of each of the extremes. So, if “the more” or “excess” is when something is attributed to something which is NOT in it, the “mean” would be when something is attributed to something which IS in it. Likewise, if “the less” or “defect” is when something is removed from something which IS in it, the “mean” would be when something is removed from something which is indeed removed from it. So, if both of these ways of being true are put down together, they would together be between the two ways of being false, and thus truth is a mean between two extremes.

Aquinas repeats this same idea in the following text from the *Summa*:

“The good of the speculative intellectual virtue consists in a certain mean, through conformity to a thing itself, according as it says to be what is or not to be what is not; in which the notion of the true consists. But excess is according to a false affirmation, through which what is not is said to be: but defect is taken according to a false negation, through which what-is is said not to be (*ST I-IIae*, q. 64 a. 3 co. 415).

Aquinas goes on to add that the excess happens when there is a false affirmation, and defect when there is a false negation. So, to sum up, truth is a mean between a false affirmation and a false negation. This idea of truth being a mean between more and less does not seem to belong solely to Aquinas. Rather, it appears that some awareness of this idea lies behind the courtroom practice whereby a witness is asked to “swear to tell the truth, the *whole* truth, and nothing *but* the truth.” If I am called to testify who was at the crime scene, and I say that Robert and Jonathan were there, when in reality neither of them were there, rather, only Mark and Todd were there, then what I say is not true. This is one very obvious way in which what I say does not agree with things, when there is absolutely no element of truth in what I say. Truth or agreement would be to say that Mark and Todd were there.

Now, let’s say that instead of saying that Robert and Jonathan were there, I

had said that Mark, Todd, and Robert were there. Well, this statement is also false; what I say does not agree with things either. However, this false statement is not completely like the former one. Mark and Todd were indeed there, and I have said that Mark and Todd were there; however, I have added Robert. And therefore, my statement becomes false even though there is an element of truth, unlike the previous statement which had no element of the truth in it.

Let's say again that instead of saying that Robert and Jonathan were there, I had said that **only** Mark was there, leaving out Todd. Again, this statement is also false. However, this statement is closer to the second statement than to the first. Mark was indeed there, and I have said that he was; however, I have left out Todd, thus making my statement false even though there is an element of truth in it. So, in the second statement (Mark and Todd and Robert were there) I have added to the truth, in the third (**only** Mark was there), I have subtracted from the truth. Therefore, the true statement, "Mark and Todd were there" is in a way in between the second and third statements. The true statement neither adds nor subtracts from the truth; in other words, the true statement says neither more nor less than the truth. So, when the witness swears to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, they are swearing to not speak falsely by either subtracting from the truth or adding to the truth.

In speaking of truth as a mean between more and less, Aquinas is not speaking improperly or figuratively. Aquinas actually thinks that it must be so. To see this, it is necessary to understand contrariety, that it can be found in the intellect, and how. That contrariety is a necessary element for understanding truth as an *adaequatio* seems to be what Aquinas says in a text from the *Disputed Questions on the Virtues* where he shows that the intellectual virtues consist in a mean because truth consists in a mean. Aquinas says, "If therefore in the intellect there were not some proper contrariety besides the contrariety of things, a mean and extremes would not be taken in the intellectual virtues (*Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 1, a. 13, co.)."³ In the *Summa theologiae* text on the same issue, one of the objections for there being no mean in the intellectual virtues is that there seems to be no contrariety in the intellect. The objection reads:

a mean is properly among contraries; as is clear by the philosopher in Metaphysics Bk. X. But in the intellect, there does not seem to be any contrariety, since even contraries themselves, according as they are in the intellect, are not contrary, but are understood at the same time, as white and black, healthy and sick. Therefore, there is no mean in the intellectual virtues (*ST I^a-IIae* q. 64 a. 3 arg. 3).⁴

Regarding things as they are externally to the mind, one contrary excludes the other. White excludes black, health excludes sickness, and virtue excludes vice. However, within the intellect, the idea of white does not exclude the idea of black

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nor does the idea of health exclude the idea of sickness, nor virtue the idea of vice. The complete opposite occurs. There is actually the *same* knowledge of opposites. For example, the medical art is a knowledge of health and sickness. The doctor does not just know about health; he knows also about illness. Ethics is a knowledge of virtue and vice. One contrary is actually necessary for understanding the other and thus can be understood *with* the other. Understanding what health is, for instance, helps me to understand what sickness is. Knowing what normal blood pressure is helps me to understand abnormal blood pressure. Thus, it would seem that there was no contrariety in the intellect.

However, Aquinas points out, following what Aristotle teaches in the *peri Hermeneias*, the contrariety in the intellect concerns affirmation and negation.⁵ They are furthest apart in the genus of statements. For example, the affirmation “Socrates is sitting” is contrary to the negation “Socrates is not sitting.” But what does this have to do with truth as an *adaequatio*? Well, truth as *adaequatio* is a mean between two extremes, namely, the two ways of being false, saying that what is, is not, or that what is not, is. But in the first case, there is a negation, in the second case an affirmation. In other words, the two ways of being false are contraries, just as in ethics, the two vices, one concerning excess and the other defect, are contraries. Thus, truth as an *adaequatio* truly stands between contraries. Contained, therefore, in the notion of *adaequatio* is the idea of something being between two extremes.⁶ *Adaequatio* is said of truth because it is a mean between two ways of being false: adding to the truth or subtracting from the truth. Though it has not been explicitly mentioned earlier, when Aquinas spells out in detail what the two ways of being false look like, as well as the mean between them, he has in mind Aristotle’s definition of the false and the true: “To say that what is, is not or that what is not is, is false; to say that what is, is and that what is not, is not is true” (*Metaphysics*, Bk. IV, ch. 7, 1011b25-28).

II. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN *ADAEQUATIO* AND THE SECOND ACT OF THE INTELLECT

It turns out that the word “*adaequatio*” also speaks better to the very nature of truth which is constituted by an *act* of the intellect. It is true, as was seen, that Aquinas often speaks of truth as an *aequalitas*, an equality. However, very rarely does Aquinas define truth simply as an *aequalitas*. He almost always prefers the word “*adaequatio*.” Why is that? “*Aequalitas*” is the noun form of the adjective “*aequalis*,” which means equal.⁷ “*Adaequatio*” is the noun form of the verb “*adaequo*,” meaning to make equal to, to equalize, to equate, to equal. So, “*aequalitas*” does not imply or include action, but rather a quality. “*Adaequatio*,” on the other hand, does imply an action, or something resulting from an action.

Now, according to Aquinas, and following Aristotle, truth is constituted *in part* by something that the intellect *does*, an *operation* of the intellect, as Aquinas

calls it, namely, the second operation of the intellect, which he calls composition and division. Aquinas explains this very clearly in his main treatises on truth.⁸ He sees the intellect as performing three fundamental operations: The first is understanding what a thing is, the second act he calls composition and division, and the third act is reasoning. So for example, the human intellect would first understand what an odd number is or what an even number is. The intellect secondly takes things as they were understood in the first act and either combines them in an affirmative statement or separates them in a negative statement. For example, after understanding what odd and even numbers are, the intellect may separate them in the negative statement, “no odd number is even.” In the third act, the intellect takes the affirmative or negative statements it has secondarily made as bases from which to generate new statements. The focus of this paper has been that of the second act of the intellect.

Truth arises, formally speaking, with the second act. In other words, we can start speaking about true and false when we have a statement but never prior to this. “Unicorn,” or “odd number,” or “dog” are neither true nor false. It is when the mind puts them together with other things in an affirmative or negative statement, that we begin to have something true or false. For example, “an odd number is not an even number” would be true, “dogs have wings” would be false. Aquinas, following Aristotle, sees this “putting together” in an affirmative statement or “separating” in a negative statement as acts of the intellect itself.⁹ So, if truth is formally constituted by something that the intellect *does*, namely, this putting together and separating, the second act of the intellect, it seems that truth would be defined better by a word that itself implies a doing or an act. Therefore, the noun form, “*adaequatio*,” derived from the verb “*adaequo*” is more fitting to define truth since it implies action, which is what truth involves on the side of the intellect.¹⁰ So, though “*aequalitas*” works well to speak of truth since it does speak to the nature of truth as a mean between two extremes, “*adaequatio*” works better, for it speaks both to the nature of truth as a mean between two extremes and also to the nature of truth as brought about by an operation or action of the intellect. So, “*adaequatio*” says what “*aequalitas*” says and something more.

CONCLUSION

Truth for Aquinas is an *adaequatio* because truth is a mean between two ways of speaking falsely, and truth is constituted in part by an act of the intellect. Both of these essential features seem to be well expressed by the word *adaequatio*. Unfortunately, Aquinas’s definition of truth is usually categorized in books on truth theory as a correspondence theory of truth. I say “unfortunately” because though Aquinas does describe truth as correspondence only once in all his works,¹⁴ it seems that the notion, especially as it is commonly understood, does not seem

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to do justice to the essential features examined above. Thus, the *adaequatio* nature of truth remains somewhat hidden.¹⁵

NOTES

1. *Ad tertiam quaestionem dicendum quod bonum virtutum intellectualium consistit in hoc quod verum dicatur. Veritas autem consistit in quadam adaequatione intellectus et vocis ad rem. Et quia aequalitas est medium inter majus et minus, ideo oportet quod bonum virtutis intellectualis in medio consistat, ut scilicet dicatur de re hoc quod est. Si autem excedat vel in plus vel in minus, erit falsum; quod se habet ad virtutes intellectuales, sicut vitium ad morales; et hoc inquantum intellectus absolute aliquid considerat, inquantum vero de uno in aliud discurrit, accipitur medium non solum secundum commensurationem ad rem, sed secundum commensurationem conclusionum ad principia, vel eorum quae sunt ad finem in operativis.*

2. *Ad tertium dicendum quod extrema in virtutibus intellectualibus non accipiuntur secundum magnum et parvum intelligibile; sed extremum in plus est, quando attribuitur aliquid alicui quod non inest ei; extremum autem in minus, quando removetur ab eo quod ei inest. Utroque autem modo falsum contingit; verum autem, quando dicitur inesse quod inest, aut non inesse quod non inest; et haec extrema corrumpunt non substantiam, sed veritatem intellectus.*

3. *Si igitur in intellectu non esset aliqua propria contrarietas praeter contrarietatem rerum, non esset accipere in virtutibus intellectualibus medium et extrema.*

4. Cf. *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, lib. 7 l. 6 n. 25. “Now, the existence of one contrary is destroyed by the existence of the other contrary; but the knowledge of one opposite is not destroyed by the knowledge of the other, but is rather helped. Hence, the forms of opposites are not opposite in the soul. In fact, the substance, i.e., the what it is, of a privation is the same as the substance of its opposite, just as the notion of health and sickness is the same in the soul. For sickness is known through the absence of health. Also, the health which is in the soul, is a certain notion through which health and sickness is known, and it is found in the science, i.e., in the knowing, of both.”

5. *ST I^a-IIae q. 64 a. 3 ad 3.* “*Ad tertium dicendum quod ipsae res contrariae non habent contrarietatem in anima, quia unum est ratio cognoscendi alterum, et tamen in intellectu est contrarietas affirmationis et negationis, quae sunt contraria, ut dicitur in fine peri hermeneias.*” *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 1, a. 13, co. “*Contraria autem intellectus sunt opposita secundum affirmationem et negationem, ut patet in II Periher. Inter affirmationes ergo et negationes oppositas accipitur medium virtutum intellectualium speculativarum, quod est verum.*”

6. This aspect of the notion of *adaequatio*, as understood by Aquinas and applied to the nature of truth, seems to be almost entirely absent from current literature on truth theory as well as studies on Thomas Aquinas. Wolfgang Künné, for example, who among truth theorists seems to have the most complete account of Aquinas does not mention this essential aspect of truth in Aquinas. Neither does Fr. Wippel or Jan Aertsen, who among Thomistic scholars, has perhaps one of the most complete textual accounts of truth in Aquinas. I was made aware of this aspect by Duane H. Berquist. Some truth theorists seem in some remote way to see that truth can for some involve this aspect. For example, Engel seems to have this in mind when he is explaining our ordinary notion of truth, but he seems

to limit this aspect to ‘true’ as it is said of things. “We apply, however, this predicate also to concrete things, such as pictures, artefacts, pieces of currency, or even living animals. For instance we say that this is a true drawing by Poussin, that this is a true copy of a document, a true 50 euro banknote, a true piece of artillery or a true Irish setter. In such cases, the meaning of “true” seems to be the same as “authentic,” “real,” “faithful,” “exact,” or “**conforming to**” a model or a type” [my emphasis] (Engel, *Truth* 9). Alasdair MacIntyre seems to also have this aspect in mind when he asks, for instance, “What is it to attain truth? The perfected understanding in which enquiry terminates, when some mind is finally *adequate* [my emphasis] to that subject matter about which it has been enquiring, consists in key part in being able to say how things are, rather than how they seem to be from the particular, partial, and limited standpoint of some particular set of perceivers or observes or enquirers.” (MacIntyre 58). τὸ μὲν γὰρ λέγειν τὸ ὄν μὴ εἶναι ἢ τὸ μὴ ὄν εἶναι ψευδός, τὸ δὲ τὸ ὄν εἶναι καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν μὴ εἶναι ἀληθές.

7. See DeFerrari 20.

8. *Commentary on the Sentences* Bk. 1, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1. *Quaedam autem sunt quae habent fundamentum in re extra animam, sed complementum rationis eorum quantum ad id quod est formale, est per operationem animae, ut patet in universali. Humanitas enim est aliquid in re, non tamen ibi habet rationem universalis, cum non sit extra animam aliqua humanitas multis communis; sed secundum quod accipitur in intellectu, adjungitur ei per operationem intellectus intentio, secundum quam dicitur species: et similiter est de tempore, quod habet fundamentum in motu, scilicet prius et posterius ipsius motus; sed quantum ad id quod est formale in tempore, scilicet numeratio, completur per operationem intellectus numerantis. Similiter dico de veritate, quod habet fundamentum in re, sed ratio ejus completur per actionem intellectus, quando scilicet apprehenditur eo modo quo est. Unde dicit philosophus, quod verum et falsum sunt in anima; sed bonum et malum in rebus.*

9. *DV* 1, 8, ad. 3: *Ad tertium dicendum quod secundum Philosophum in VI Metaphysicae veritas non consistit in compositione quae est in rebus, sed in compositione quam facit anima.* p. 28.

10. Aquinas actually does sometimes use the verb form *adaequare* when speaking of truth: *bonum enim intellectus nostri est verum, quod quidem sequitur intellectus noster quando adaequatur rei. Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 1, a. 13.

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