

A SYNTHESIS OF AQUINAS' TRANSCENDENTAL ATTRIBUTES OF BEING IN THE
CONTEXT OF BANTU PERSPECTIVES ON PERSONHOOD

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Abstract: This article seeks to make a synthesis of Aquinas' transcendental attributes of being in the context of Bantu perspectives on personhood. In order to reach out to this goal, Aquinas' transcendental attributes of Being will be investigated along with the Bantu perspectives on personhood. Aquinas outlines four basic transcendental attributes of being as one, true, good and beautiful. On the other hand, there are three perspectives in understanding the Bantu's conception of personhood. This is described by Placid Tempels with the vital force thesis, John Mbiti with the communalism thesis and Alexis Kagame with the shadow thesis. Synthesising the ideas of Aquinas in the context of Bantu perspectives will bring out the intrinsic nature and value of a human person who has formerly being understood as one with body and soul, rational and having a social character. A human person as such is one who is first and foremost one, good, beautiful and true.

Keywords: Bantu, Transcendental, Being, Perspectives, and Personhood.

1.0 Introduction

In this article, we will conduct a thorough investigation into the application of Aquinas' transcendental attributes of Being within the context of Bantu perspectives on personhood. Aquinas identifies four transcendental attributes of being, indicating that everything possesses four intrinsic characteristics. This article aims at synthesizing these four universal characteristics of Being to human beings within the Bantu culture. Through this perspective, it can be argued that a human being exemplifies intrinsic characteristics in the form of beauty, goodness, truth, and unity.

1.1 Being as One in Bantu Perspectives on Personhood

Aquinas, drawing from his Christian theological framework, posits the idea of being as One as a transcendental attribute that reflects the unity and interconnectedness of all things in the created order. This concept emphasizes the fundamental oneness that exists at the core of reality, serving as a unifying principle that binds all beings together in a harmonious whole. Tempels, in his exploration of African philosophy, introduces the vital force thesis, which highlights the belief in a universal life force or energy that animates all living beings and natural phenomena. This vital force is seen as the source of vitality, agency, and interconnectedness in African traditional societies, emphasizing the intrinsic value of all life forms and the importance of living in harmony with nature.

The application of Aquinas's transcendental attribute of Being as One on Tempels' vital force thesis depends on the shared recognition of the essential unity and interconnectedness present in the cosmos. Both concepts emphasize the idea that all beings are inherently connected and partake in a larger unity that transcends individual distinctions. While Aquinas approaches this unity through a metaphysical and theological lens, emphasizing the source of all existence in God. Tempels explores it through the lens of African philosophical traditions, indicating the vital force that permeates and sustains life in the natural world.

Aquinas's transcendental attribute of being as One and Mbiti's communalism thesis, a concept in African philosophy, both offer perspectives on the interconnectedness and unity of beings within the context of philosophical and theological discourse. Aquinas, drawing from his Christian theological framework, posits the idea of being as One as a transcendental attribute that reflects the unity and interconnectedness of all things in the created order. This concept emphasizes the fundamental oneness that exists at the core of reality, serving as a unifying principle that binds all beings together in a harmonious whole. Mbiti introduces the concept of

communalism to emphasize the communal nature of African societies and the interdependence of individuals within these communities.

He asserts that, in African beliefs, the community plays a pivotal role in an individual's life, with people regarded as interconnected and mutually dependent elements of the community. This principle of communalism underscores the importance of relationships, shared values, and the collective well-being of the community. The application of Aquinas's transcendental attribute of being as One to Mbiti's communalism thesis is grounded on the emphasis on unity, interconnectedness, and interdependence of human beings. This concept indicates that individual beings are not isolated entities but are part of a larger community where relationships and connections play a crucial role in shaping one's identity and existence.

Aquinas's transcendental attribute of being as One and Kagame's shadow thesis both demonstrate the nature of existence and the complexities of identity and reality from distinct philosophical and cultural perspectives. Aquinas discusses the transcendental attribute of being as One, indicating the unity and interconnectedness of all beings in the created order. This concept points to the fundamental oneness that underlies reality, serving as a unifying principle that binds all entities together in a cohesive whole. Kagame introduces the shadow thesis which explores the idea of shadows as symbolic representations of reality, existence, and identity.

According to Kagame, shadows serve as metaphorical reflections of the self and others. They represent the interconnected and interdependent nature of human existence. Shadows can represent hidden aspects of the self, collective memories, or cultural identities that shape one's understanding of reality and Being. The integration of Aquinas's transcendental attribute of Being as One to Kagame's shadow thesis is focused on the interconnectedness and unity that form the basis of existence. While Aquinas emphasizes the ontological unity of all Beings in the Divine order, Kagame places greater importance on the symbolic significance of shadows as reflections of identity and interconnectedness in human experience.

1.2 Being as Truth in the Context of Bantu Perspectives on Personhood

The implementation of Aquinas' transcendental attribute of being as truth to the vital force thesis of Placide Tempels depends on the fundamental nature of existence and reality. Aquinas considered truth as one of the transcendental attributes that can be predicated of all things that exist. In his philosophy, truth is seen as the correspondence between what is known or believed and what actually exists in reality.¹ Aquinas believed that truth is an essential aspect of being and reflects the order and harmony inherent in the universe. Tempels developed the vital force thesis to explore the concept of life energy or spiritual essence that animates and sustains all things in the cosmos.² This vital force is seen as a positive and life-affirming energy that permeates all existence.

Both of these viewpoints consider the essence of reality and existence. Aquinas' emphasis on truth indicates that every Being is knowable which underlines the importance of seeking truth as a means to understand existence.³ Tempels' theory of vital force represents the life-giving energy that brings life and energy to everything in the universe. Essentially, both Aquinas' idea of truth and Tempels' theory of vital force represent the underlying truths and energies that form the basis of reality and the interconnection of all things in the universe. They both help us comprehend the essential elements of existence and our position in the cosmos.

The execution of Aquinas' transcendental attribute of truth to the communal thesis of Mbiti is seen from the standpoint of the nature of truth and its relationship to community and shared beliefs. Aquinas argues that truth can be predicated on all things that exist. In the context of Being, truth refers to the correspondence between what is known and what actually exists in reality. Aquinas believed that truth is an essential aspect of being and that it reflects the order and harmony inherent in the universe.⁴ Mbiti proposed the communal thesis as a way of understanding the interconnectedness between individuals and their communities. According to Mbiti, African

¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 122.

² Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 42.

³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 123.

⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 42.

societies are characterized by a strong sense of communal identity and shared values, where truth is often understood and validated through collective experiences and beliefs.⁵

The utilization of these viewpoints depends on the mutual recognition of the importance of community in shaping our understanding of truth. Aquinas' concept of truth stresses the objective nature of truth. Mbiti's communal thesis focuses attention on the role of community in defining and upholding truth within a cultural context. In essence, both of these approaches consider that truth is not only a reflection of objective reality but also a product of our shared experiences, beliefs, and values within a communal setting.⁶ They signify the idea that truth is not solely an individual pursuit but is deeply intertwined with our social and cultural contexts. Aquinas' transcendental attribute of Being as truth and Kagame's shadow thesis both considers the nature of reality and existence, albeit from different perspectives.

Aquinas considered truth as a fundamental aspect of reality that allows us to understand the nature of existence.⁷ Kagame proposed the shadow thesis to examine the relationship between reality and its representations. According to Kagame, reality casts a "shadow" in the form of language and symbols, which mediate our understanding of the world. These shadows are not the ultimate reality themselves but are representations or reflections of it.⁸ The philosophical viewpoints of Aquinas and Kagame provide important insights into the nature of truth and its connection to our perception of reality. Aquinas pinpoints truth as a transcendental quality, asserting that the quest for truth is crucial for comprehending existence. On the other hand, Kagame's shadow thesis underscores the significance of language and representation in shaping our understanding of reality, indicating that our perception of reality is affected by how it is portrayed and described.

1.3 Being as Goodness Versus the Bantu Perspectives on Personhood

Applying Aquinas' transcendental attribute of being as goodness on the vital force thesis of Tempels resides in the fundamental nature of existence and the inherent goodness that underlines reality. Aquinas identified goodness as one of the metaphysical properties of being, along with unity, truth, and beauty. Goodness implies the moral and ontological perfection that is inherent in all existence. It is a fundamental aspect of reality that reflects the order and harmony of the universe.⁹ Tempels' vital force represents the life energy or spiritual essence that animates and sustains all things in the cosmos.¹⁰

This vital force is seen as a positive and life-affirming energy that permeates all existence. The central point of these perspectives is seen in their mutual emphasis on the inherent goodness and vitality that permeate reality. Aquinas' concept of goodness as a transcendental attribute signifies the moral and ontological perfection that underlies existence. Tempels' vital force thesis indicates the life-affirming energy that animates and sustains all things. In essence, both Aquinas' concept of goodness and Tempels' vital force thesis demonstrate the inherent goodness and vitality that underlie reality. They both point towards a deeper understanding of the positive and life-affirming aspects of existence, and the interconnectedness of all things in the universe.

The implementation of Aquinas' transcendental attribute of Being as Goodness to Mbiti's communalism thesis hinges on the emphasis of the significance of communal values and relationships in moulding human identity and moral understanding. In Aquinas' philosophy, goodness is seen as a fundamental aspect of reality that reflects moral perfection and the inherent moral order of the universe. Every Being as long as it is a being is good and shares this goodness with the creator who is the Most Good. Every Being participates in the goodness of God imperfectly.¹¹ Mbiti's communalism thesis outlines the significance of community and shared values in African societies. According to Mbiti, communalism emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a community, where moral values and ethical norms are upheld collectively.¹²

⁵ Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 56.

⁶ Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 57.

⁷ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, 7.

⁸ Alexis Kagame, "The Problem of Man in Bantu Philosophy," 30.

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 126.

¹⁰ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 42.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, 9.

¹² Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 57.

The synthesis of this understanding is hinged on the acknowledgement of the task of communal values and interrelations in fostering goodness and moral development. Aquinas' concept of goodness as a transcendental attribute underlines the intrinsic goodness of all existence. Mbiti's communalism thesis emphasizes the importance of communal identity and shared values in shaping individual moral beliefs and actions. In essence, both Aquinas' concept of goodness and Mbiti's communalism thesis demonstrates the interplay between individual moral development and communal values. They both indicate the significance of community in fostering moral understanding and ethical behavior, underscoring the interconnectedness between individual moral agency and communal ethics.

Synthesizing Aquinas' transcendental attribute of being as goodness in Kagame's shadow thesis is based on the nature of goodness and its relationship to reality and representation. In Aquinas' philosophy, goodness is understood as inherent in all existence.¹³ It mirrors the arrangement and balance of the cosmos and the inclusive essence of everything in God the maker. Kagame suggested the concept of the "shadow" as a means to comprehend the connection between truth and its depictions. Kagame believes that truth creates a "shadow" through language and symbols, which facilitate our comprehension of the world.¹⁴ These shadows are not the ultimate reality themselves but are representations or reflections of it. The central point between these perspectives is in how they both consider the concept of goodness and its relation to our understanding of reality in a participatory and representative nature.

Aquinas' emphasis on goodness as a transcendental attribute highlights the moral and ontological perfection that underlies existence. Kagame's shadow thesis designates the idea that our perception of goodness and reality is shaped by language and cultural values. In essence, both Aquinas' concept of goodness and Kagame's shadow thesis signify the nature of goodness, how it is perceived and represented, and its significance in shaping our understanding of the world. They both contribute to our exploration of the complex interplay between goodness, perception, representation, and reality.

1.4 Being as Beautiful in the Context of the Bantu Perspectives on Personhood

Applying Aquinas' transcendental attribute of Being as beautiful to the vital force thesis of Placide Tempels is based on the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of existence.¹⁵ Aquinas identified beauty as one of the transcendental attributes that can be predicated of all things that exist. In Aquinas' philosophy, beauty is seen as an aspect of reality that elicits a sense of delight and harmony. Beauty reflects the order and perfection inherent in the universe. God is the most beautiful and all beings share to some extent this beauty that resides in God. Tempels', vital force represents the life energy or spiritual essence that animates and sustains everything in the cosmos.

This life force is seen as a positive and life-affirming energy that permeates all existence. The meeting point of these perspectives is based on how they both hinge on the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of existence. Aquinas' emphasis on beauty as a transcendental attribute indicates the aesthetic dimension of reality and its capacity to evoke delight and harmony.¹⁶ The vital force thesis by Tempels emphasizes the spiritual essence that gives life to all things in the universe. Similarly, Aquinas' concept of beauty also invites us to contemplate the beauty and vitality inherent in existence that comes from God which all the created creatures share. These two perspectives point towards a deeper understanding of the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of reality. They indicate the interconnectedness and life-affirming energy that permeates all things in the universe.

Synthesizing Aquinas' transcendental attribute of being as beautiful to Mbiti's communal thesis has a bearing on the aesthetic dimension of existence and its relation to communal identity and values. Aquinas in his philosophy considers beauty as a quality that inspires admiration, delight, and harmony. It reflects the order and perfection inherent in the universe.¹⁷ Mbiti proposed the communal thesis as a way to understand the interconnectedness between individuals and their communities.¹⁸ According to Mbiti, African societies are marked by a profound sense

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 127.

¹⁴ Andrew Uduigwomen, *From Footmarks to Landmarks on African Philosophy* (Lagos: O.O. Publishers, 2009), 266.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 336.

¹⁶ I. Karp and D. Masolo, *African Philosophy as Critical Inquiry*, 151.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, 1.

¹⁸ Guttorm Floistad, *African Philosophy* (Netherlands: Martins Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 122.

of communal identity and common values, with shared experiences and beliefs significantly influencing the formation of individual identities.

The relevance of this point of view is on the emphasis of the aesthetic and communal dimensions of existence. Aquinas' concept of beauty indicates the aesthetic quality that permeates reality and evokes admiration and delight. Mbiti's communal thesis signifies the importance of community in shaping individual experiences and identities through shared values and beliefs. In essence, both Aquinas' concept of beauty and Mbiti's communal thesis demonstrate the interconnectedness between aesthetic experiences and communal identities. Both of these viewpoints indicate that the concepts of beauty and communal values are important in influencing our perception of life and our connections with others.

In Kagame's shadow thesis, the implementation of Aquinas' transcendental attribute of being as beautiful is deeply rooted in the intricate relationship between beauty and reality. According to Aquinas' philosophy, beauty is not merely a superficial concept, but rather an inherent aspect of reality that evokes a profound sense of delight and harmony. It is believed to be a reflection of the order and perfection that is woven into the fabric of the universe. Kagame's exploration of reality and its representations delves into the profound idea that reality casts a "shadow" through the medium of language and symbols, fundamentally shaping our perceptions and understanding of the world. This interplay between the tangible reality and its symbolic manifestations brings to light the complex and intricate nature of human interpretation and cognition.

The phenomena of shadows in our perception are not the ultimate reality itself, but rather symbolic representations or reflections of it. These transient images mirror the objects casting them but do not encompass their entirety. The central theme of these different perspectives revolves around the concept of beauty and its correlation with our perception of reality. Aquinas accentuates beauty as a transcendental attribute, emphasizing the aesthetic dimension of existence and its ability to evoke a sense of harmony and delight. On the other hand, Kagame's shadow thesis brings attention to the idea that our understanding of beauty and reality is influenced and shaped by language and cultural context. According to Kagame, our comprehension of beauty and reality is filtered through the lens of linguistic and cultural configurations, leading to diverse interpretations and representations.

1.5 Critique on Aquinas' Transcendental Attributes of Being and the Bantu Perspectives on Personhood

The three Bantu views on personhood and Aquinas' transcendental attributes of being can be understood in this way: Tempels' theory of vital force should be regarded as the essential elements of a human being. In Aquinas' perspective, a human consists of both body and soul, with the soul serving as the vitalizing or animating component of the individual. Tempels, with his vital force thesis, regards the Bantu as persons with body and spirit, where the spirit is the animating force of the body, essentially representing life itself. Although expressed in different forms due to the limitations of language, both perspectives consider the same thing with the same understanding. What the Bantu should reconsider is that the person consisting of body and spirit is first and foremost one, beautiful, good, and true.

Mbiti's theory of communalism should be seen as the societal nature of the individual. To emphasize the inherent worth of the individual, we should incorporate the transcendent qualities of Aquinas, who views all beings as unified, genuine, ethical, and aesthetically pleasing. Therefore, although a human person has a social character, they are inherently one, true, good, and beautiful because they participate in these attributes in a participatory nature with God. Kagame's shadow thesis should be comprehended as a human being composed of body and soul with rationality. Despite a human person being rational, they are first and foremost one, true, good, and beautiful.

Conclusion

Aquinas' transcendental attributes of Being, which include unity, truth, goodness, and beauty, can be connected to various philosophical theses proposed by different thinkers. As proposed by Tempels, the vital force thesis emphasizes the idea that all things possess a life energy or spiritual essence that animates and sustains them. This concept can be connected to Aquinas' transcendental attributes, as it highlights the interconnectedness and life-affirming energy that permeates all existence. The vital force thesis complements Aquinas' belief in the inherent goodness and vitality of the universe. John Mbiti's communalism thesis emphasizes the importance of community

and shared values in shaping individual identities and moral beliefs. This thesis can be connected to Aquinas' transcendental attribute of goodness, which reflects moral perfection and the inherent moral order of the universe. The communalism thesis underscores the role of communal values in fostering goodness and ethical behavior within a community.

Kagame's shadow thesis explores the relationship between reality and its representations, suggesting that reality casts a "shadow" in the form of language and symbols that shape our understanding of the world. This thesis can be connected to Aquinas' transcendental attributes, particularly regarding truth and beauty. The shadow thesis highlights the role of language and cultural frameworks in mediating our perception of truth, beauty, and other transcendental qualities. In a nutshell, the synthesis of Aquinas' transcendental attributes of Being and the Bantu philosophical theses hinges on the probe of the fundamental aspects of existence such as vitality, communal values, and the mediation of reality through language and symbols.

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