

Reality and Judgment in the Epistemological Thought of Thomas Aquinas

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ABSTRACT

Judgment is an intellectual act that arises from the mind's reflection on the process of apprehending reality. This process begins with sensory experience, through which the human intellect recognizes the various relations objectively present in things before it provides rational justification. Through critical reflection, the intellect discloses the rational (noetic) structure of apprehension and thereby understands the correspondence between knowledge and reality. On this basis, judgment, as the second operational act of the intellect, affirms or denies the existence of things and thus establishes the truth of cognition. This study aims to explain the relationship among apprehension, reflection, judgment, and justification as the epistemological foundation of valid knowledge. Employing a qualitative library research approach, the study systematically examines, analyzes, and synthesizes philosophical sources on epistemology that address the concepts of reality and judgment. The data were analyzed using a descriptive-critical method to reconstruct an epistemological synthesis of the formation of valid knowledge. The findings indicate that judgment is preceded by a series of intellectual intuitions that naturally guide the process of reasoning toward justified cognition. Furthermore, universal principles of knowledge are discovered within reality itself; the content of knowledge is grounded in both sensory and intellectual experience; intellectual cognition becomes possible only through the rational understanding of sensory data; and the intellect does not create the content of knowledge but discovers it within concrete reality. Accordingly, the validity of knowledge rests upon the correspondence between the intellect and reality (*adequatio intellectus et rei*). Through its two fundamental operations apprehension and judgment the human intellect is therefore capable of attaining objective knowledge that is both epistemically valid and philosophically justifiable.

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INTRODUCTION

Human knowledge originates in the relationship between the intellect and reality. Within Thomas Aquinas' epistemology, the intellect does not construct the object of knowledge but rather receives and understands reality through the act of *apprehensio* (apprehension), which begins with sensory experience. Aquinas maintains the Aristotelian principle *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu* nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses thereby affirming that every act of intellectual cognition is grounded in data provided through sensation (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.84, a.6; *In Aristotelis*

Librum De Anima Commentarium, III, lect. 8). Sensory perception therefore provides the material conditions under which objective relations existing in reality become accessible to the intellect.

Nevertheless, apprehension alone does not constitute complete knowledge. Its immediate outcome is merely the intellectual grasp of the essence (*quidditas*) of a thing together with the objective relations inherent in it. Such apprehension remains pre-propositional because it does not yet affirm whether the object truly exists as apprehended. For Aquinas, genuine knowledge emerges only through the second operation of the intellect, namely *judicium* (judgment), by which the intellect composes or divides concepts and consequently affirms or denies reality. Judgment thus expresses the propositions "it is so" or "it is not so," thereby establishing the correspondence between intellectual cognition and existence (*esse*). Accordingly, Aquinas argues that truth formally resides not in sensation itself but in the intellect insofar as it performs the acts of composition and division (*componendo et dividendo*) (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.16, a.2; *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q.1, a.3).

The transition from apprehension to judgment, however, is not immediate. It is mediated by intellectual reflection (*reflexio*), through which the intellect returns upon its own cognitive act and becomes aware of the noetic structure underlying its apprehension. Reflection enables the intellect not only to know an object but also to recognize that it knows the object and to understand the rational grounds upon which its judgment rests. Aquinas explains that the intellect recognizes truth by reflecting upon its own operation and discerning its conformity with the object known (*Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q.1, a.9). Reflection therefore functions as the indispensable epistemological condition linking intellectual representation to justified judgment.

Consequently, judgment is not founded exclusively upon sensory data but upon the intellect's direct insight into the necessary relations discovered within reality. Sensory experience supplies the material of cognition, whereas the intellect uncovers its intelligible structure through abstraction and reflection. In his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas maintains that truth consists in the conformity of the intellect to reality (*adequatio intellectus et rei*), implying that reality itself and not subjective mental construction constitutes the ultimate criterion of truth (*In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Commentaria*, IV, lect. 4). This position situates Aquinas' theory of knowledge firmly within the tradition of metaphysical realism, in which *esse* (being) serves as the ontological foundation of all intellectual activity (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c.59).

Although Thomistic epistemology has received considerable scholarly attention, existing studies have largely focused on Aquinas' theory of knowledge, metaphysics of being, or conception of truth. Bandas (1932) examined the principles of Thomistic epistemology within the framework of contemporary philosophy, while Rousselot (1935) interpreted Thomistic intellectualism as a synthesis of sensory experience and intellectual activity. Casey (1955) investigated the development of Aquinas' theory of truth in his early writings, whereas Reese (2022), te Velde (2022), Boland (2023), and Stump (2023) have emphasized metaphysics as the organizing principle of Aquinas' philosophical system. Despite these significant contributions, relatively little attention has been devoted to the internal structure of judgment as an epistemological process integrating apprehension,

reflection, intellectual intuition, and justification into a unified cognitive act. Yet it is precisely this process that explains how the intellect attains objectively valid knowledge.

This study addresses that gap by offering a systematic reconstruction of Aquinas' theory of judgment as the culminating operation of intellectual cognition. Rather than treating apprehension, reflection, justification, and judgment as isolated epistemological concepts, the present study argues that they constitute an integrated sequence through which the intellect progresses from sensory experience to objectively valid knowledge. By examining the dynamic relationship among these operations, this article demonstrates that epistemic validity in Aquinas does not arise from autonomous rational construction nor from empirical experience alone, but from the conformity between the intellect and reality as disclosed through reflective cognition. In doing so, the study provides a more comprehensive account of judgment as the epistemological foundation of Aquinas' theory of truth and contributes to contemporary discussions on realist epistemology and the objective validity of human knowledge.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Thomas Aquinas' Realist Epistemology

Thomas Aquinas developed an epistemology rooted in Aristotelian realism by affirming that the primary object of human knowledge is reality itself, namely *ens* (being). Knowledge does not originate from the construction of the subject but from the openness of the intellect toward reality that is already present through sensory experience. Therefore, Thomas upholds the classical principle *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*, meaning that nothing exists in the intellect that was not previously received through the senses (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.84, a.6). However, sensory experience is not the final goal of knowledge but rather the starting point for the intellectual activity of grasping the rational structure embedded within reality (*In Aristotelis Librum De Anima Commentarium*, lib. III, lect. 8).

From this perspective, the intellect does not create the content of knowledge but discovers the universal forms contained within objects through the process of abstraction. Reality, therefore, becomes the measure of knowledge, while the intellect functions to discover and understand the objective structure already present in things. This view constitutes the foundation of Thomas Aquinas' theory of truth, which defines knowledge as the conformity between the intellect and reality (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c.59).

Rousselot (1935) describes this characteristic as *intellectual realism*, namely the view that intellectual activity is always oriented toward being (*being*) rather than merely toward subjective representations. Similarly, Reese (2022) and Velde (2022) demonstrate that Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics cannot be separated from his epistemology because every act of knowing is ultimately directed toward *ens inquantum ens* (*being as being*).

The Twofold Operation of the Intellect: *Apprehensio* and *Judicium*

The fundamental basis of Thomas Aquinas' theory of judgment lies in the distinction between two operational acts of the intellect: simple apprehension and judgment. Apprehension (*simple apprehension*) is the intellectual act through which the intellect receives the form (*species intelligibilis*) of an object, allowing the object to become present within the mind as a representation. At this stage, the intellect grasps the essence

(*quidditas*) of something, but it has not yet determined whether what is understood corresponds to reality itself (*Commentaria In Aristotelis Libros Peri Hermeneias*, lib. I).

The second operation is judgment (*judicium*). In this act, the intellect combines or separates concepts through affirmation or negation (*componere et dividere*). Thomas emphasizes that formal truth emerges precisely within this operation because the intellect declares that something “is so” or “is not so” (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.16, a.2; *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q.1, a.3).

Therefore, judgment is not merely the arrangement of logical propositions but rather an intellectual act that affirms the objective structure existing within reality. Although both apprehension and judgment originate from the object, their functions are fundamentally different. Apprehension produces a representation, whereas judgment determines the validity and correspondence of that representation with reality.

Judgment, Reflection, and Justification

Thomas Aquinas explains that judgment does not occur immediately after apprehension. Between these two operations exists the activity of reflection (*reflexio*), namely the intellect’s return to its own act of knowing. Through reflection, the intellect becomes aware of the nature of the act of apprehension and simultaneously understands the rational grounds that enable a particular affirmation to be made (*Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q.1, a.9).

Reflection possesses a crucial epistemological function because it produces justification. Through reflection, the intellect recognizes that its act of knowing corresponds to reality. Therefore, justification does not arise merely from sensory experience or from formal reasoning alone, but from intellectual insight into the necessary relations present within the object. Reflection is what enables judgment to possess a rational foundation and thus allows it to be regarded as accountable knowledge.

According to Casey (1955), Thomas Aquinas’ theory of truth does not merely explain the relationship between the intellect and the object but also demonstrates how the intellect achieves certainty through reflection upon the act of knowing itself. Similarly, Boland (2023) emphasizes that reflection constitutes a fundamental element connecting Aquinas’ epistemology with his metaphysics of being.

Truth as *Adequatio Intellectus et Rei*

The entire theory of judgment developed by Thomas Aquinas reaches its culmination in the concept of truth as the conformity between the intellect and reality (*adequatio intellectus et rei*). Truth is not produced by the mind; rather, it is discovered when the intellect successfully conforms its judgment to the objective structure of reality (*Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q.1, a.1).

This concept demonstrates that the validity of knowledge does not depend on the subjectivity of the knower or on social consensus, but on the ability of the intellect to apprehend and judge reality as it truly is. Therefore, judgment is always related to *esse* (existence), because it is through judgment that the intellect can affirm whether something truly exists or does not exist.

In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Thomas states that the intellect is true when it affirms that what exists is, and that what does not exist is not (*In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Commentaria*, lib. IV, lect. 4). Thus, knowledge acquires objective validity because

it is grounded in reality itself rather than in human intellectual constructions.

The Concept of *Ens* as the Object of Knowledge

For Thomas Aquinas, the first object known by the intellect is *ens* (being). All intellectual activity is ultimately directed toward *esse* (existence), because only that which truly exists can become the object of genuine knowledge. In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas explains that the intellect first apprehends “that which is” (*ens*) as the most universal concept underlying all other forms of understanding (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.5, a.2; I, q.85, a.3). Consequently, all concepts, propositions, and judgments acquire their meaning because they refer to realities possessing existence.

This perspective is further developed in *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Commentaria*, where Thomas explains that metaphysics is the science of being as being (*ens inquantum ens*), namely the study of existence precisely insofar as it is existence itself (lib. IV, lect. 1). Consequently, knowledge cannot be understood as an independent mental construction but rather as the disclosure of the objective structure of reality. A judgment becomes true when it successfully affirms being as it is, whereas error occurs when the intellect establishes relations between concepts that do not correspond to reality.

According to Reese (2022) and Velde (2022), the concept of *ens* represents the point of convergence between Thomas Aquinas’ metaphysics and epistemology. Every act of knowing obtains its orientation toward reality because being constitutes the foundation of all intelligibility. Therefore, Aquinas’ theory of judgment is fundamentally a theory concerning how the intellect attains knowledge of being.

***Species Intelligibilis* and Intellectual Abstraction**

According to Thomas Aquinas, the process of knowledge occurs through abstraction (*abstractio*), namely the activity of the active intellect (*intellectus agens*) that abstracts universal forms from sensory data so that they may become intelligible to the possible intellect (*intellectus possibilis*). Thomas argues that the intellect does not directly know material things but rather knows them through the *species intelligibilis*, the intelligible form obtained through the process of abstraction (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.85, aa.1–2; *In Aristotelis Librum De Anima Commentarium*, lib. III).

The *species intelligibilis* is not itself the object of knowledge but rather the means through which the intellect apprehends the object. Thus, the intellect does not remain confined to mental representations; instead, through these representations it reaches the reality existing outside itself. This explanation demonstrates that Aquinas’ theory of knowledge avoids two opposing extremes: empiricism, which reduces knowledge to sensory experience alone, and idealism, which regards objects merely as constructions of consciousness.

Barrett (1941) demonstrates that the role of imagination and abstraction in Thomistic epistemology never functions independently but always cooperates with the intellect in forming universal representations. Gonzales (1961) similarly argues that the noetic structure of Aquinas’ intellect can only be understood when abstraction is recognized as the bridge between sensory experience and intellectual knowledge.

Reflection and Intellectual Intuition

One of the distinctive characteristics of Thomas Aquinas’ epistemology is his recognition of intellectual reflection (*reflexio*). Reflection is not a new form of knowledge

separated from the object, but rather an intellectual act through which the intellect turns back upon its own act of knowing. Through reflection, the intellect understands that it knows and becomes aware of the rational grounds that justify a particular judgment (*Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q.1, a.9).

Through this reflective activity emerges what Thomistic tradition calls intellectual insight, namely the direct understanding of the first principles underlying all human knowledge. Principles such as the principle of identity, the principle of non-contradiction, and the principle of causality are not created by the intellect but discovered as necessary structures inherent within reality. Thomas explains that these first principles are immediately known by the intellect through *intellectus*, rather than through discursive reasoning (*Commentaria In Aristotelis Libros Posteriorum Analyticorum*, lib. I).

Fay (1974) emphasizes that intellectual intuition in Thomas Aquinas should not be understood as mystical intuition or irrational experience, but rather as direct knowledge of universal principles that make all processes of reasoning possible. Therefore, reflection does not merely generate self-awareness but also provides the objective foundation for the justification of knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research oriented toward a philosophical analysis of the concept of judgment (*judicium*) within Thomas Aquinas' epistemology. Library research was selected because the object of investigation consists of philosophical ideas contained in the works of Thomas Aquinas and in scholarly literature discussing his thought. The purpose of this study is not to empirically test hypotheses but rather to reconstruct conceptually the relationship between apprehension (*apprehensio*), reflection (*reflexio*), judgment (*judicium*), and justification (*justificatio*) as the foundation of the validity of knowledge.

The sources of data consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include the works of Thomas Aquinas, particularly *Summa Theologica*, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, *In Aristotelis Librum De Anima Commentarium*, *Commentaria In Aristotelis Libros Peri Hermeneias et Posteriorum Analyticorum*, and *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Commentaria*. These works were selected because they provide systematic discussions concerning the theory of knowledge, the structure of intellectual acts, the concept of truth, and the relationship between intellect and reality. Secondary sources consist of books, dissertations, and scholarly articles examining Thomas Aquinas' epistemology and metaphysics, including the works of Bandas (1932), Barrett (1941), Casey (1955), Gonzales (1961), Fay (1974), Rousselot (1935), Reese (2022), Velde (2022), Boland (2023), and Stump (2023).

Data collection was conducted through documentary study by identifying, selecting, and cataloguing textual passages that explicitly discuss the concepts of *ens*, *esse*, *species intelligibilis*, *apprehensio*, *judicium*, *reflexio*, *veritas*, and *adequatio intellectus et rei*. The collected texts were subsequently classified according to relevant epistemological themes in order to establish conceptual relationships among the ideas that constitute the foundation of the analysis.

The data analysis employed a philosophical hermeneutic method with an analytical-

critical approach. The first stage involved textual analysis of Thomas Aquinas' primary works in order to understand the conceptual meaning of each philosophical term within the broader context of his philosophical system. The second stage consisted of conceptual analysis, namely the examination of the logical structure of the relationship among apprehension, reflection, judgment, and justification. The third stage involved philosophical interpretation, which aimed to reconstruct Thomas Aquinas' argument concerning the validity of knowledge through a critical dialogue between primary sources and secondary scholarly interpretations. The final stage consisted of conceptual synthesis in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the theory of judgment as an operational act of the intellect that connects mental representation with objective reality.

The validity of the analysis was maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing discussions of similar concepts across various works of Thomas Aquinas and by examining them in relation to interpretations provided by contemporary Thomistic scholars. This procedure was undertaken to avoid partial interpretations and to ensure that the conceptual reconstruction remained consistent with the overall structure of Thomas Aquinas' epistemological and metaphysical system.

Through this methodological approach, this study aims to provide a comprehensive philosophical reconstruction of Thomas Aquinas' theory of judgment. The analysis does not merely explain the operational stages through which the intellect acquires knowledge but also demonstrates that the validity of knowledge is grounded in the conformity between intellect and reality (*adequatio intellectus et re*). Consequently, judgment becomes the epistemological foundation for the justification and certainty of human knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Judgment as the Culmination of Intellectual Cognition

An examination of Thomas Aquinas' works demonstrates that judgment (*judicium*) represents the culmination of the entire human cognitive process. Unlike many modern epistemological theories that emphasize mental representation, Aquinas argues that the epistemological significance of intellectual activity does not emerge merely when an object is understood (*simple apprehension*), but rather when the intellect affirms the relationship between concepts and reality. Therefore, knowledge does not terminate in the formation of concepts but reaches its fulfillment through the affirmation of existence (*esse*).

In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas distinguishes two fundamental operations of the intellect: simple apprehension and judgment. Simple apprehension (*apprehensio simplex*) produces an understanding of the essence (*quidditas*) of an object without yet affirming whether that object truly exists. In contrast, through judgment, the intellect performs *compositio et divisio*, namely the act of combining or separating concepts, enabling it to affirm that something "is" or "is not" (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.16, a.2; q.85, a.5).

The central finding of this study demonstrates that judgment is not merely a logical operation but an ontological act because it is directly related to existence (*esse*). Accordingly, the primary function of judgment is not the construction of linguistic propositions but the affirmation of the objective structure of reality.

This interpretation corresponds with Reese (2022) and Velde (2022), who argue that Aquinas' epistemology is consistently oriented toward the metaphysics of being.

Knowledge becomes true not because of the internal consistency of propositions, but because the intellect successfully conforms itself to the reality it apprehends.

Apprehension and Judgment: Two Complementary Intellectual Operations

The analysis of the *Commentary on De Anima* reveals that Aquinas understands the process of knowing as a gradual sequence of intellectual activities. Sensory experience provides empirical data, after which the *intellectus agens* abstracts the universal form, resulting in the formation of the *species intelligibilis*. However, the *species intelligibilis* is not itself the object of knowledge but rather the medium through which the intellect reaches the external object (*In Aristotelis Librum De Anima Commentarium*, III, lect. 8).

This finding indicates that simple apprehension does not yet produce knowledge possessing truth-value. At this stage, the intellect merely understands “what” (*quid est*) an object is. The determination of truth or falsity emerges only when the intellect enters into the act of judgment. Therefore, judgment constitutes the transformation from representation into objective knowledge.

The relationship between these two operations can be reconstructed as follows:

Reality → Sense Experience → Species Intelligibilis → Apprehension → Reflection → Judgment → Truth

This model demonstrates that Aquinas’ account of knowledge is progressive. Each stage depends upon the preceding stage but cannot be reduced to it.

Reflection as the Epistemological Foundation of Justification

One of the significant contributions of Thomas Aquinas’ epistemology is the concept of reflection (*reflexio*). Unlike sensory perception, which is directed toward external objects, reflection is an intellectual act through which the intellect returns to its own act of knowing.

In *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, Thomas explains that the intellect becomes aware that it knows when it reflects upon its own intellectual activity (*De Veritate*, q.1, a.9). This reflection is not a form of psychological introspection but rather an epistemological act that enables the intellect to understand the rational foundation of its judgments.

The textual analysis reveals that reflection performs three primary functions:

1. Reflection generates epistemic awareness concerning the act of knowing itself.
2. Reflection discloses the relationship between intellectual representation and external reality.
3. Reflection produces justification, namely the rational grounds that make a judgment acceptable as true.

From this perspective, justification does not arise merely from logical coherence or from empirical experience alone, but from the conformity between the intellectual act and the structure of reality. These findings demonstrate that Thomas Aquinas’ theory of justification possesses the character of epistemological realism, in which justification is always grounded in objective existence rather than in subjective construction.

Truth as *Adequatio Intellectus et Rei*

The analysis of *De Veritate* and *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Commentaria* demonstrates that Aquinas’ entire theory of judgment culminates in the classical definition of truth as *adequatio intellectus et rei*.

Truth is not an independent property of propositions but rather a relation between the intellect and reality. Knowledge is considered true when the content of judgment

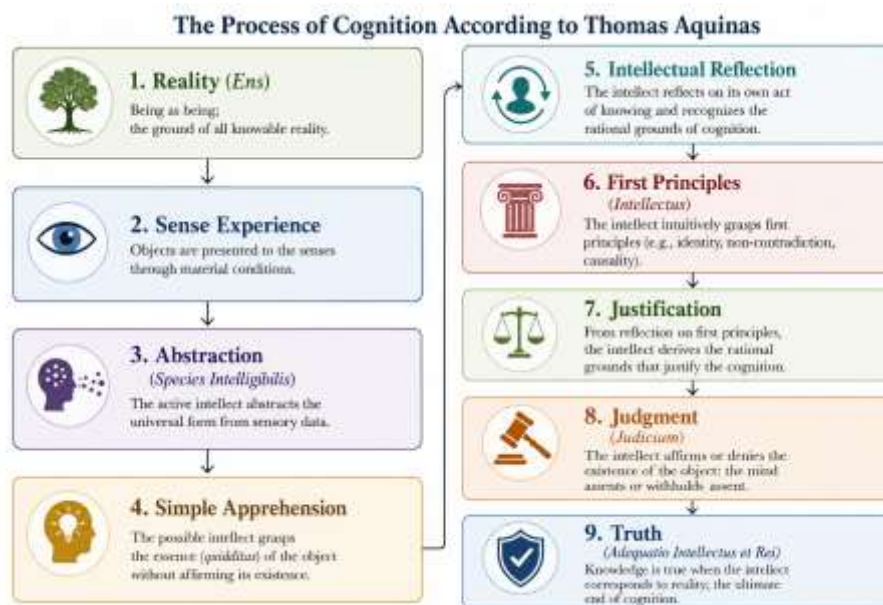
corresponds to the objective state of affairs that truly exists (*De Veritate*, q.1, a.1).

This concept demonstrates that the ultimate criterion of knowledge is not language, logic, or consciousness, but rather existence (*esse*). Therefore, judgment always possesses an ontological dimension. The findings of this study demonstrate that the concept of *adequatio* in Thomas Aquinas can be understood through three interconnected layers:

1. Ontological adequation (*adequatio ontologica*), namely conformity with being or existence.
2. Noetic adequation (*adequatio noetica*), namely conformity between the structure of the intellect and the structure of the object known.
3. Logical adequation (*adequatio logica*), namely the correct propositional expression of truth.

Reconstruction of Aquinas' Theory of Judgment

Based on the entire analysis, Thomas Aquinas' epistemological model of judgment can be reconstructed as presented in Figure 1.



Gambar 1. Model Epistemologi Penilaian Thomas Aquinas

The model demonstrates that judgment represents the integration of all operational acts of the intellect. Valid knowledge is not produced by a single intellectual operation but emerges from the entire epistemological process that moves from sensory experience, proceeds through reflection, and ultimately reaches the affirmation of being.

Theoretical Contribution

The primary contribution of this study lies in the reconstruction of the internal structure of Thomas Aquinas' theory of judgment, which has often been examined only partially within studies of epistemology and metaphysics. This research demonstrates that judgment constitutes the point of convergence among three fundamental dimensions of Aquinas' philosophy: epistemology, logic, and metaphysics. Judgment is not merely a propositional activity but an intellectual act that integrates sensory experience, abstraction, reflection, intellectual insight, and being into a unified epistemological process.

This reconstruction further demonstrates that, according to Thomas Aquinas, the validity of knowledge does not arise from subjective consciousness or from formal

rationality alone, but from the structural conformity between the intellect and reality. Accordingly, Aquinas' theory of judgment offers a model of integrative epistemological realism, namely a framework that unites the ontological dimension (*being*), the noetic dimension (*understanding*), and the logical dimension (*judgment*) within a coherent conceptual structure. This synthesis constitutes the philosophical contribution of this article because it demonstrates that judgment is not merely the final stage of intellectual activity but rather the foundation that enables knowledge to attain the status of truth that can be rationally and ontologically justified.

Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Epistemology

The reconstruction of Thomas Aquinas' theory of judgment has implications that extend beyond the historical context of scholastic philosophy. The analysis of the operational structure of the intellect demonstrates that Thomistic epistemology provides a model of knowledge capable of bridging the classical dichotomy between empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism tends to regard sensory experience as the primary source of knowledge, whereas rationalism prioritizes the activity of reason. Thomas Aquinas integrates these two approaches by showing that sensory experience constitutes the starting point of all knowledge, yet experience acquires epistemological significance only through the intellectual activities of abstraction, reflection, and ultimately judgment (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.84, a.6; *In Aristotelis Librum De Anima Commentarium*, lib. III, lect. 8).

These findings demonstrate that knowledge according to Thomas possesses an integrative character because it simultaneously involves empirical, intellectual, logical, and ontological dimensions. Therefore, the validity of knowledge cannot be reduced merely to empirical verification or logical coherence but depends upon the conformity between intellect and reality (*adequatio intellectus et rei*). This perspective remains relevant within contemporary epistemological discussions that seek to overcome the fragmentation between objectivist and constructivist approaches.

Furthermore, the concept of reflection (*reflexio*) within Thomas Aquinas' epistemology reveals that certainty of knowledge is not obtained through subjective intuition detached from reality, but through the intellect's awareness of the conformity between the act of knowing and the object known. In this sense, reflection functions both as the foundation of epistemological justification and as an evaluative mechanism through which the intellect examines the truth of its own judgments (*Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, q.1, a.9). This perspective provides an alternative to modern theories of justification that are frequently understood exclusively within the frameworks of foundationalism or coherentism.

This study also demonstrates that Thomas Aquinas' concept of *judicium* possesses a stronger ontological dimension than the concept of judgment found in many modern epistemological theories. Within modern traditions, judgment is generally understood as a logical relation among concepts or propositions, whereas for Thomas, judgment is an intellectual act that directly affirms being (*esse*). Consequently, every judgment contains a metaphysical dimension because it refers to reality that truly exists (*In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Commentaria*, lib. IV, lect. 4). This perspective reveals that logic, epistemology, and metaphysics are not independent disciplines but interconnected dimensions within a unified structure of knowledge.

This contribution is significant for the contemporary development of the philosophy of

knowledge. Amid the growing influence of epistemological relativism and radical constructivism, Thomas Aquinas' epistemology offers a realist foundation that preserves the objectivity of knowledge without neglecting the active role of the knowing subject. Knowledge is understood as the result of a dynamic interaction between experience, intellectual activity, reflection, and objective reality. Thus, objectivity is not viewed as something entirely separate from the activity of the subject but as the outcome of the conformity between intellect and *ens*.

Conceptual Synthesis

Based on the entire analysis, this study develops a conceptual synthesis concerning the epistemological structure of Thomas Aquinas' theory of judgment. The synthesis demonstrates that the act of knowing proceeds through eight interconnected stages.

First, reality (*ens*) constitutes the foundation of the entire process of knowledge because only that which truly exists can become an object of knowing. Second, sensory experience provides empirical data that becomes the material for intellectual activity. Third, the *intellectus agens* abstracts the intelligible form (*species intelligibilis*) so that the object becomes accessible to intellectual understanding. Fourth, the intellect performs simple apprehension, namely the understanding of the essence (*quidditas*) of an object without yet affirming its existence. Fifth, through reflection (*reflexio*), the intellect returns to its own act of knowing and acquires epistemic awareness concerning the rational foundation of knowledge. Sixth, reflection gives rise to intellectual insight into the first principles that serve as the basis of justification. Seventh, the intellect performs *judicium* by affirming or denying the relationship between concepts and reality. Eighth, knowledge achieves the status of truth when the judgment corresponds to reality (*adequatio intellectus et rei*).

This synthesis demonstrates that judgment represents the point of integration of all intellectual activities. True knowledge is not the result of a single operation but emerges from the entire epistemological process that progressively moves from experience toward reflection, justification, and judgment. Therefore, Thomas Aquinas' theory of judgment can be understood as a model of integrative epistemological realism, namely a model that unifies empirical, noetic, logical, and ontological dimensions within a coherent framework.

This model constitutes the principal conceptual contribution of the study because it demonstrates that the validity of knowledge is not determined solely by the correctness of reasoning but, above all, by the structural conformity between the intellect, the act of knowing, and the reality that constitutes the object of knowledge.

Novelty

Based on the preceding synthesis, the novelty of this study does not lie in the discovery of a new doctrine within Thomas Aquinas' philosophy but rather in the systematic reconstruction of judgment as a unified epistemological structure. Unlike previous studies that generally examine apprehension (*apprehensio*), the theory of truth, or the metaphysics of *esse* separately, this study demonstrates that these elements can only be adequately understood when placed within a unified sequence of intellectual operations consisting of apprehension–reflection–justification–judgment.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Thomas Aquinas' theory of judgment cannot be

understood merely as a logical stage within the process of reasoning, but rather as the culmination of the entire intellectual activity that integrates sensory experience, abstraction, reflection, and being within a unified epistemological framework. The analysis of the *Summa Theologica*, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and Thomas Aquinas' commentaries on Aristotle reveals that *judicium* is the intellectual act through which human beings first become capable of affirming that something truly "is" as it is. Therefore, judgment does not merely produce logically correct propositions but also constitutes an ontological affirmation of reality (*esse*) as the object of knowledge.

The reconstruction presented in this study demonstrates that the relationship between simple apprehension and judgment is intrinsic. Apprehension provides an understanding of the essence (*quidditas*) of an object, whereas judgment grants epistemological status to that understanding through affirmation or negation concerning its existence. Between these two intellectual operations lies reflection (*reflexio*), namely the activity of the intellect that returns to its own act of knowing. Through reflection, the intellect obtains rational justification that enables knowledge to achieve objective validity. Consequently, reflection functions as the epistemological bridge between intellectual representation and true judgment.

The principal finding of this study is that the validity of knowledge within Thomas Aquinas' epistemology does not rest solely upon empirical experience or merely upon logical coherence, but upon the structural conformity between intellect and reality (*adequatio intellectus et rei*). This perspective demonstrates that Aquinas' theory of judgment possesses the character of integrative epistemological realism, as it unifies empirical, noetic, logical, and ontological dimensions within a comprehensive structure of knowledge. Within this framework, knowledge obtains its legitimacy not because it is constructed by the subject, but because the intellect successfully conforms itself to objective being, which constitutes the foundation of all intelligibility.

The philosophical contribution of this study lies in the systematic reconstruction of judgment as the core of Thomistic epistemology. Unlike previous studies that tend to examine abstraction, the metaphysics of *esse*, or the theory of truth separately, this research demonstrates that these elements can only be adequately understood when placed within the operational sequence of the intellect, moving from apprehension to reflection, then toward justification, and ultimately culminating in judgment. This reconstruction not only clarifies the internal structure of Thomas Aquinas' epistemology but also demonstrates its relevance for contemporary epistemological discussions concerning objectivity, justification, and the possibility of attaining true knowledge.

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