

The light of God in Thomas Aquinas: analogy or metaphor?

La luz de Dios en Tomás de Aquino: ¿analogía o metáfora?

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RESUMEN: Los estudios del siglo XX sobre la metafísica de la luz (*Lichtmetaphysik*) han examinado predominantemente a pensadores influenciados por las cosmogonías neoplatónicas, en particular figuras como Robert Grosseteste y Bonaventura. El discurso de Tomás de Aquino sobre la luz a menudo se pasa por alto o se descarta como “meramente metafórico”, en contraste con otros enfoques reconocidos como genuinamente analógicos. Este artículo explora las razones detrás de esta interpretación y argumenta su insuficiencia. Por lo tanto, sostenemos que la filosofía de la luz de Aquino pertenece legítimamente a la tradición intelectual más amplia de la *Lichtmetaphysik* medieval, en la que la luz funciona como un principio ontológico fundamental.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Tomás de Aquino – Luz – Analogía – Metáfora – *Lichtmetaphysik*

ABSTRACT: Twentieth-century studies on the metaphysics of light (*Lichtmetaphysik*) have predominantly examined thinkers influenced by Neoplatonic cosmogonies, notably figures such as Robert Grosseteste and Bonaventure. Thomas Aquinas’s discourse on light is often overlooked or dismissed as “merely metaphorical”, in contrast to other approaches recognized as genuinely analogical. This paper explores the reasons behind this interpretation and argues for its inadequacy. We contend, therefore, that Aquinas’s philosophy of light rightfully belongs within the broader intellectual tradition of medieval *Lichtmetaphysik*, in which light functions as a fundamental ontological principle.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Aquinas – Light – Analogy – Metaphor – *Lichtmetaphysik*

1. THE METAPHYSICS OF LIGHT

In 1908, the German historian Clemens Baeumker published an influential essay titled *Witelo: Philosopher and Naturalist of the 13th Century*. In his analysis of the *Liber de Intelligentiis*, an anonymous treatise then attributed to Witelo, Baeumker [1908, pp. 356-433] coined a concept that has sparked a rich academic discussion: the *metaphysics of light* (*Licht-metaphysik*).¹ According to the German historian, there have historically been three ways of using the concept of light to explain the ultimate foundation of reality:

1. Materialist model, according to which God is identified with a kind of physical light or cosmic fire. In Baeumker's opinion, the Stoics, the Manicheans, and the followers of the Upanishads belong to this category. These are generally pantheistic conceptions of the universe, where the divine and the material are intertwined.
2. Symbolic or metaphorical model, according to which physical light is an image of an immaterial reality, imperceptible to the senses. A classic example of this model would be Plato's cave myth, where the idea of the Good is compared to the sun because both serve as a principle of some kind of knowledge, whether sensory or intellectual.² According to this model, God can be called "light" in a metaphorical sense, but not in a proper or essential sense.
3. Combined or analogical model, which is the one followed by the *Liber de intelligentiis*.³ It oscillates between the two previous models and conceives light as a reality encompassing both the material and the immaterial. According to this model, the attribution of the concept of light to God is made through an analogy *per prius et posterius*.⁴ That is, God's light would be the transcendent archetype of physical light, just as His goodness is the transcendent archetype of the goodness found in creatures. God is light in a proper sense, but not in the same way that the sun is light; He is not a kind of cosmic fire but rather the immaterial light by essence, in which material beings participate.

1. Although one could argue that Athanasius Kircher mentioned the term in the 17th century (in the prologue of his *Ars magna lucis et umbrae*), it is evident that it is Baeumker who has truly brought it to prominence within recent academic discourse.

2. See Plato, *Republic*, 517 b.

3. «Hoc manifestari potest per auctoritatem beati Augustini in II super Genes, ad litteram dicentis, quod Deus non dicitur lux, sicut dicitur agnus. dicitur enim agnus translative et non proprie, lux autem dicitur proprie et non translative» (*Liber de intelligentiis*, Prop. VI,8).

4. At least, this is how the scholar of the metaphysics of light, Isidoros Katsos [2023, p. 3], interprets this model.

Baeumker classifies Thomas within the second model. The German scholar believes that Aquinas' strict adherence to Aristotelian physics led him to consider light as a merely sensory reality and, therefore, not transferable to the immaterial realm except in an improper way. The primary text supporting this interpretation is found in the *Commentary on the Sentences*: «Hence since light is a quality essentially visible and a determinate species in sensible things, it cannot be said to be in spiritual things except either equivocally or metaphorically».⁵

According to Thomas's own words, expressions such as «God is light» (1 Jn 1, 5) would be akin to other biblical metaphors, like «I am the vine and you are the branches» (Jn 15, 5) or «the Lord is my rock» (Ps 18, 2).

Although Baeumker employed the framework of the metaphysics of light to analyze a wide variety of philosophical currents, it is the thinkers associated with Neoplatonism, those belonging to the third model, who have received the most attention from subsequent research.⁶ The alleged reason is that this is the only model that, without falling into pantheism, takes the concept of light seriously when explaining the ultimate foundation of reality; it is the model that has developed a true *Lichtmetaphysik*, distinct from the *Lichtmetaphorik* characteristic of the second model [Katsos, 2023, p. 4].

This tendency, combined with Baeumker's reading of Thomas Aquinas, has resulted in the *Doctor Communis* being largely absent from these discussions. In the following discussion, I challenge Baeumker's interpretation, arguing that Aquinas's discourse on light cannot be explained solely within the framework of the second model.

2. THE METAPHYSICS OF LIGHT IN THOMAS AQUINAS

Thomas employs the divine attribute of "light" metaphorically to express three characteristics of divinity: that God is pure act, that God is the first cause of all creation, and that God is the unparticipated being [Whidden III, 2014, pp. 95-134]. These three characteristics of God resemble

5. «Unde cum lux sit qualitas per se visibilis, et species quaedam determinata in sensibilibus; non potest dici in spiritualibus nisi vel aequivoce vel metaphoricè» (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 13 q. 1 a. 2 co.). To carry out this research I have employed the Latin texts offered by Professor Enrique Alarcon at <<https://www.corpusthomicum.org>>. I will use the same abbreviations as he does. The English texts have been taken from <<https://aquinas.cc>>

6. Some important controversies include the debate between Wetter [1915] and Klein [1962] on whether Philo of Alexandria should be classified under the third model; the discussion between Beierwaltes [1961] and Ferwerda [1965] regarding the figure of Plotinus; or the comprehensive critique by Isidoros Katsos [2023], who argues that all debates of the past century have made the fundamental mistake of misinterpreting ancient theories on metaphor and analogy.

certain properties of physical light, thereby justifying the use of the metaphor: God is pure act, just as physical light is actuality in relation to darkness;⁷ God is the first cause, just as the light of celestial bodies is the primary agent of change among corporeal beings;⁸ God is the unparticipated being, just as light illuminates by its own nature, unlike a lamp, which merely participates in light.⁹

However, this metaphorical use of language does not seem to fully encompass Thomas's thought. In the comparisons mentioned, light is always physical light, perceptible to the senses, material. How, then, can we understand that for saint Thomas, «the Word of God was not a false light, nor a symbolic light, nor a participated light, but the true light, i.e., light by his essence (*per essentiam suam*)»?¹⁰ Or that «to be light is proper to God»?¹¹ If light were attributed to God in a purely metaphorical sense, such expressions would be vague and misleading. For example, Scripture also affirms that God is a rock (see Ps 18, 2), yet no one has ever dared to claim that God is “rock by essence”. How can such observations be reconciled with the text from the *Commentary on the Sentences*, cited by Baeumker?

In addition to these affirmations by Thomas, another issue arises. Both in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and in other works, the Common Doctor employs a series of traditional philosophical and theological concepts that reference light, such as the “light of glory”, the “light of grace”, the “light of the intellect”, or the “light of God”.¹² To say that all these expressions are mere metaphors raises a question: metaphors of what? It is one thing to claim that a stone serves as a metaphor for God's strength, but we do not gain much by asserting that the stone is a metaphor for God's stone. The same should apply in the case of light: it is one thing to say that the light of the sun serves as a metaphor for the manifestative power of the divine intellect, but what does it mean to say that the light of the sun is a metaphor for divine light? For example, when Thomas states that the agent intellect «illuminates the phantasma immaterially», just as the sun «illuminates the sensible reality materially»,¹³

7. See *Super Io.*, cap. 5 l. 6.

8. See *In De caelo*, lib. 2 l. 10.

9. See *Super Io.*, cap. 5 l. 6.

10. «Verbum Dei non erat lux falsa, non figuralis, non participata, sed lux vera, idest per essentiam suam» (*Super Io.*, cap. 1 l. 5 §125).

11. «Esse enim lucem est proprium Dei» (*Super Io.*, cap. 12 l. 8 §1713). See also: «Deus lux est, idest veritas» (*Super Io.*, cap. 5 l. 6 §805); «Deus lux est, non per participationem, sed lux vera» (*Super Io.*, cap. 1 l. 5 §126).

12. See *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 7 q. 1 a. 1 co.; *Ibid.*, lib. 2 d. 28 q. 1 a. 5 arg. 4; *De veritate*, q. 10 a. 10 arg. 6; *De malo*, q. 16 a. 4 co.; ST I-II, q. 109 a. 1 co; etc.

13. See *Q. d. de anima*, a. 4 arg. 7. We can ask ourselves the same question when reading those passages in which Saint Thomas uses sensible light as a metaphor for intelligible light, as for example here: «Nam sicut lumen non solum in seipso et per se visibile

what does it mean to “illuminate immaterially”? Are we still operating within the realm of metaphor?

The fact that the texts suggesting a proper use of the concept of light in the spiritual domain belong to works written after the *Commentary on the Sentences* invites consideration of the hypothesis that Thomas’s view on this matter underwent some evolution. In order to verify this possibility, I will analyze the three instances where Thomas addresses the nature of light. These are, in chronological order of composition: Question 13 of the second book of the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Lessons 14 and 15 of the second book of the *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, and Question 67 of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*.

2.1. *The Commentary on the Sentences*

The *Commentary on the Sentences* is the result of Thomas’s work as a bachelor during his first stay in Paris (1252-1254) [Torrell, 2002, pp. 58-66]. There is debate over whether the Angelic Doctor later refined the text during his lectures in Rome between 1265 and 1266. In any case, any modifications would have been minor additions affecting only the first book, without altering the discussion on light [Boyle, 1983, pp. 418-429; Johnson, 1990, pp. 41-46]. It is generally accepted that this commentary reflects a less developed thought compared to the *Summa*, something already noted by Aquinas’s disciples shortly after his death [Gauthier, 1952, pp. 271-293]. Following the tradition established by the Church Fathers and adhering to Peter Lombard’s structure [Tarabochia, 2004, p. 163],¹⁴ Thomas develops his doctrine of light within the context of his commentary on the first day of creation, the work of differentiation.

Does spiritual light exist in the proper sense? Saint Thomas raises this question by referencing a passage from the Gospel of John: «The Word was the true light, which enlightens every man coming into the world» (Jn 1, 9). Is the evangelist implying that the Word is made of the same substance as the sun? As absurd as this idea may seem, some of Aquinas’s contemporaries took it seriously. Catharism, a Christian sect that emerged in 12th-century Europe, was a kind of revival of Gnostic heresy [Runciman, 2003, pp. 11-25, 116-170; Inglis, 1999, pp. 95-128]. While it is unclear whether the Cathars developed an actual solar cult, the Manichean sects that influenced them certainly did [Oldenbourg, 2002, pp. 405-406; Ávila, 2005, p. 136]. As Thomas would argue in later works, these movements exhibited a dangerous tendency to conflate the immaterial God with some

est, sed etiam omnia alia per ipsum videri possunt, ita verbum Dei non solum in se lumen est, sed etiam est omnia manifestans quae manifestantur» (*Super Io.*, cap. 1 l. 4 §118).

14. See Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, lib. 2, dist. XIII.

material reality.¹⁵ In such a context, it is evident that incorporating a term derived from the sensible world into spiritual discourse could not be done uncritically.

Independently of the danger posed by Manichean heresy, there was also an older theological motivation behind the question Thomas raised. The Church Fathers had already noted a curious detail in the Genesis account: the fact that God first created light, while the sun and stars were created only on the fourth day. This led some to interpret the light of the first day as a reference to the creation of the angels,¹⁶ or to postulate the existence of a cosmic fire above the heavens.¹⁷ As a result of these hypotheses, two seemingly contradictory views emerged within Catholic orthodoxy regarding how to interpret the passage from John's Gospel (see Jn 1, 9). Saint Augustine argued that both corporeal and spiritual light properly exist, and that the Word is light in a proper sense.¹⁸ In contrast, saint Ambrose upheld a purely metaphorical interpretation of luminous language.¹⁹

Which position does Thomas take? As previously mentioned when discussing Baeumker's interpretation, in this early work the Angelic Doctor maintains that in the spiritual realm, the term "light" can only be used equivocally or metaphorically. His reasoning is simple: light is an essentially sensible reality. In itself, light is nothing more than what makes colors visible and warms the earth. The only type of movement or actuality it brings about is corporeal. It is not like the concept of *being* (*ens*) or other common concepts, which, since they do not include a reference to matter in their definition, can be applied equally to both sensible and intelligible realities.²⁰

But if this is the case, why is the term "light" so frequently used in a spiritual context? According to Thomas, this occurs due to a likeness or proportion: we metaphorically call the divine intellect "light" because it relates to intelligible knowledge in the same way that sunlight relates to sensible knowledge. However, this similarity reflects only a partial aspect of the concept whose name is being transferred. Light is not exclusively a manifestation of truth, it is also a heating agent, for example. Thus, the term "light" cannot be applied univocally to the spiritual realm: what is common to both the spiritual and corporeal orders is only the

15. See *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 17; *Super Io.*, cap. 8 l. 2 §1142.

16. See Augustine of Hippo, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, I, 1, 3.

17. See *Ibid.*, I, 19, 38; John Damascene, *De fide*, II, 7. For a commentary on the different patristic interpretations of this passage, see I. C. Katsos [2023, p. 61 y ss].

18. See Augustine of Hippo, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, IV, 28, 45.

19. At least, this is how Thomas interprets a passage from his exposition on the Creed (see Ambrose of Milan, *On the Faith II*, Prologue). Although Saint Ambrose does not explicitly state that brightness is a metaphorical name, his argument corresponds to what Aristotle teaches about analogical metaphors (see Aristotle, *Poetics* [1457b7-33]).

20. See *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 13 q. 1 a. 2 co.

manifestative aspect of light, but not light “as such”. To illustrate with another example: God is called a “rock” in the sense that He is strong, but He does not have mass, does not experience gravitational force, and cannot be eroded by water. “Strength” can properly be said of both God and a rock. But “rock”, in itself, carries a whole set of attributes incompatible with the perfection of an immaterial being.

In contrast to this doctrine, saint Augustine maintained that “light” is more properly said of the spiritual than of the corporeal. According to the Bishop of Hippo, intellectual manifestation is superior to sensible manifestation, and if light is that which manifests (see Eph 5, 14), then what manifests an intellectual truth is even more “light”, in fact, “true light”.²¹

Rather than outright rejecting this view, Thomas acknowledges that the principle of manifestation is indeed more perfectly realized in the spiritual realm. However, he clarifies that this perfection does not extend to the concept of “light as such”, which, as previously noted, includes purely corporeal aspects.²²

In summary, the concept of “light” refers to a sensible reality, though it contains certain aspects that can be transferred to the spiritual realm. Because of what is common between the two, it can be predicated metaphorically of spiritual realities; but because of what is specific, this application remains equivocal. Thus, in the strictest sense, a spiritual light does not properly exist.

2.2. *The Commentary on De Anima*

The second work in which Thomas delves into the nature of light is his *Commentary on De Anima* (*Sententia libri De Anima*) by Aristotle, specifically lessons 14 and 15 of the second book. Unlike the *Commentary on the Sentences*, this work has a predominantly philosophical character, so we do not find references to the patristic authorities that structured the previous reflection. The discussion regarding the nature of light no longer revolves around the first day of creation but is instead framed within an exposition on the proper objects of each sense. Torrell [2002, pp. 190-193] dates the composition of this commentary between the end of 1267 and

21. See Augustine of Hippo, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, IV, 28, 45. Augustine’s opinion has not only a philosophical foundation but also a biblical one. Scripture contains numerous expressions describing intelligible light as the true light, of which visible light is merely a pale image. For example: “The Word was the true light” (Jn 1, 9), and also, «(Wisdom) is indeed more beautiful than the sun and surpasses all the constellations. Compared to light, she is found more radiant; though night supplants light, wickedness does not prevail over Wisdom» (Wis 7, 29-30).

22. See *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 13 q. 1 a. 2 ad 2.

the summer of 1268, after William of Moerbeke had completed his translation of the Stagirite's work but before Thomas's second stay in Paris.

In general terms, the doctrine concerning the nature of sensible light aligns with that of the *Commentary on the Sentences* (since, even during Thomas's first stay in Paris, translations of *De Anima* already existed, long before Moerbeke's *Translatio nova*) [Torrell, 2002, p. 192]. However, the explanations and refutations in this work are more detailed. The most relevant point for the issue at hand appears in lesson 14, where Thomas analyzes the position of those who consider light to be a certain spiritual nature.²³ This is not a question of natural philosophy, how the species of color is transported to the pupil and whether light has a spiritual power to accomplish this,²⁴ but rather a confrontation between Aristotelian doctrine and an entire philosophical and theological tradition that consistently refers to an intelligible light: «Then there are those who maintain, on the contrary, that light is a certain spiritual nature. Otherwise, they say, why do we use the term "light" in speaking of intellectual realities? For we say that in the intellectual substances there is a certain intelligible light».²⁵

His response does not differ much from what he offers in the *Commentary on the Sentences*: «This also is inadmissible».²⁶ The reason is the same: «For it is impossible that any spiritual or intellectual nature should fall within the apprehension of the senses».²⁷ However, the contribution of this work lies in the nuance that follows: «But if anyone should say that there is a spiritual light other than the light that the senses perceive, we need not quarrel with him, so long as he admits that the light that vision perceives is not the spiritual nature. For there is no reason why one name can be imposed on very different realities».²⁸

In this passage, Thomas opens the door to a proper use of the term "light" in the spiritual realm. To understand how this is possible, it is necessary to clarify that, in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, a name is something purely conventional: nothing prevents what one group calls

23. See *Sententia De anima*, lib. 2 l. 14 nn. 17-19.

24. «Ipsum lumen virtutem spiritualem habet» (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 13 q. 1 a. 3 co.).

25. «Quidam vero alii dixerunt quod lux est quaedam natura spiritualis, argumentum sumentes quod in rebus intellectualibus, nomine luminis utimur: dicimus enim in substantiis intellectualibus esse quoddam lumen intelligibile» (*Sententia De anima*, lib. 2 l. 14 n. 17).

26. «... hoc etiam est impossibile» (*Ibid.*).

27. «Impossibile est enim quod aliqua natura spiritualis et intelligibilis cadat in apprehensione sensus» (*Sententia De anima*, lib. 2 l. 14 n. 18).

28. «Si quis autem dicat quod aliud est lumen spirituale ab eo quod sensus percipit, non erit cum eo contendendum, dummodo hic habeat quod lumen quod visus percipit, non est natura spiritualis. Nihil enim prohibet unum nomen imponi rebus quantumcumque diversis» (*Ibid.*).

“man” from being called “non-man” by another.²⁹ This multiplication of meanings may arise by chance, such as the word “pan”, which in Spanish means “bread” but in English means “a metal container used for cooking food in”, or it may occur due to resemblance, as when we call the upper part of a tree a “crown” because of its shape. In both cases, it is an equivocal attribution.

According to Thomas, the association of the term “light” with both a sensible and an intelligible reality falls into the second category. The resemblance on which this association is based lies in the superiority of sight over the other senses, making it comparable to the cognitive faculty.

The reason, in fact, why we employ “light” and other words referring to vision in matters concerning the intellect comes from the nobility of the sense of sight; it is more spiritual and more subtle than any other sense. This is evident in two ways. First, from the object of sight. For things fall under sight in virtue of properties that lower bodies have in common with the heavenly bodies.³⁰

The spirituality of the sense of sight is apparent in a second way from the manner of its modification. For in every other sense, there is no spiritual modification without a natural one ... But seeing involves only a spiritual modification.³¹

Why is this different from what is said in the *Commentary on the Sentences*? Because, according to what is stated here, it is possible to speak of an intelligible light in a proper sense, as long as we distinguish it from sensible light, with which it maintains a metaphorical relationship. It is no longer absurd to say that “God is light by essence”, since the term “light” does not necessarily have to signify a reality that is essentially sensible. Aristotle’s doctrine of names allows Thomas to reconcile the Aristotelian

29. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* [1006b]. It is worth recalling the definition of a name that saint Thomas develops based on Aristotle: «Since according to the Philosopher, words are signs of ideas, and ideas the similitude of things, it is evident that words relate to the meaning of things signified through the medium of the intellectual conception» (ST I, q. 13, a. 1, co.).

30. «Quod autem lumine, et his quae ad visum pertinent, utamur in rebus intellectualibus, contingit ex nobilitate sensus visus, qui est spiritualior et subtilior inter omnes sensus. Quod patet ex duobus. Primo quidem ex suo obiecto. Nam aliqua cadunt sub visu, secundum proprietates in quibus communicant inferiora corpora cum caelestibus» (*Sentencia De anima*, lib. 2 l. 14 n. 19).

31. «Secundo apparet quod sensus visus est spiritualior, ex modo immutationis. Nam in quolibet alio sensu non est immutatio spiritualis, sine naturali (...). Sed in immutatione visus est sola immutatio spiritualis» (*Sentencia De anima*, lib. 2 l. 14 n. 20).

doctrine of light with the opinion of saint Augustine, according to whom a spiritual light properly exists.

2.3. *The Summa Theologiae*

In the *Summa Theologiae* (written contemporaneously with the *Commentary on De Anima*), Thomas once again adopts the traditional framework he had followed in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and analyzes the nature of light within his study of the work of diversification. The structure of Question 67 closely resembles that of his work ten years earlier. The first issue that Aquinas addresses, once again, is whether the term “light” can properly be applied to the spiritual realm. In the *Commentary on De Anima*, he had already explained how this was possible through a transignification of the term “light”. The major contribution of the *Summa*, in my view, is a detailed justification of the mechanism by which this transignification takes place.

As Díaz Dorronsoro [2009, p. 24] notes in his study on the names of God, a «common process in the creation of language vocabulary is to name things based on one of their properties or operations».³² In this regard, Aquinas makes a crucial distinction: «Any word may be used in two ways, that is to say, either in its original application (*secundum primam eius impositionem*) or in its more extended meaning (*secundum usum*)».³³ When referring to realities whose nature we immediately grasp, such as heat or cold, it is unnecessary to designate them by other concepts (these names fall *secundum primam eius impositionem*). However, when referring to realities whose nature we cannot directly perceive, such as intellect or grace, we use names that signify their nature based on their effects.³⁴ These names fall *secundum usum*. In the first article of Question 67, Aquinas applies this doctrine to the concept of light:

In its primary meaning it [light] signifies that which makes manifest to the sense of sight; afterwards it was extended to that which makes manifest to cognition of any kind. If, then, the word is taken in its strict and primary meaning, it is to be understood metaphorically when applied to spiritual things, as Ambrose says. But if taken in

32. «(Un) proceso frecuente en la creación del vocabulario de la lengua consiste en denominar las cosas por alguna de sus propiedades u operaciones».

33. ST I, q. 67, a. 1, co.

34. «Whence a name is imposed, and what the name signifies are not always the same thing. For as we know substance from its properties and operations, so we name substance sometimes for its operation, or its property» (ST I, q. 13, a. 8, co.).

its common and extended use, as applied to manifestation of every kind, it may properly be applied to spiritual things.³⁵

The original meaning of “light” (*secundum primam eius impositionem*) corresponds to its common use: something like the «physical agent that makes objects visible». However, *secundum usum*, the word “light” has come to signify another reality: «That which makes manifest to cognition of any kind».³⁶ “Light” has ceased to be exclusively the manifesting principle of colors and has come to mean anything that brings about any form of knowledge («quamcumque cognitionem»), even on a spiritual level. It is not only something perceptible but, as the Angelic Doctor says, based on Scripture,³⁷ that which enables the intellect to know.³⁸

3. SYNTHESIS

The doctrine of the *Summa Theologiae* encompasses everything Thomas had previously said while also refining and expanding upon it. In the *Commentary on the Sentences*, his rejection of the existence of a spiritual light had been categorical: light was, by essence, something sensible. By doing so, he managed to purify luminous language of any materialistic connotation, though at the cost of failing to integrate a long-standing tradition that compares the light of the sun to a kind of intelligible light.

In the *Commentary on De Anima*, however, he merely preserved the opinion of those who accepted the existence of such an intelligible light, though it remained unclear to what extent he personally embraced this view. It seemed like a concession, provided that the attribution of the term *light* was understood as equivocal: «Then there are those who maintain...».³⁹

Finally, in the *Summa*, he not only adopts the idea of two different kinds of proper light but also integrates them within a single definition. It is not that “intelligible light” and “sensible light” merely share part of their names equivocally; rather, as “lights”, they share the same definition. This solution allows him to use luminous language analogically without losing the richness of metaphorical discourse, as seen in the following passage

35. ST I, q. 67, a. 1, co.

36. «Omne illud quod facit manifestationem secundum quamcumque cognitionem» (ST I, q. 67, a. 1, co.).

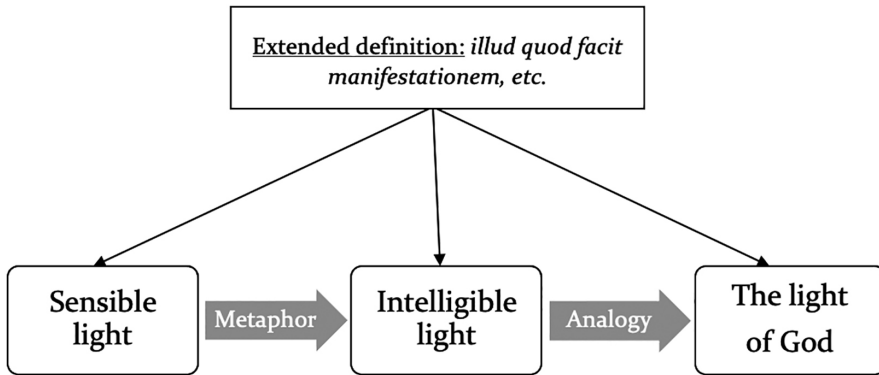
37. «Omne quod manifestatur, lumen est» (Eph 5, 14). Saint Thomas cites this passage in several places, such as ST I, q. 67, a. 1, arg. 2. or ST I-II, q. 109, a. 1, co.

38. See *Ibid.*; and also: «Sic lux illa intelligibilis intellectum facit cognoscentem» (*Super Io.*, cap. 8 l. 2 §1142).

39. «Alii dixerunt quod...» (*Sentencia De anima*, lib. 2 l. 14 n. 17).

from his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*: «Perceptible light, however, is a certain image of spiritual light ... Just as particular light has an effect on the thing seen, inasmuch as it makes colors actually visible, as well as on the one seeing, because through it the eye is conditioned for seeing, so intellectual light makes the intellect to know».⁴⁰

In summary, Thomas coins an extended definition of *light*, applicable without restrictions to both sensible and intelligible light, between which he establishes a metaphorical relationship. To illustrate these ideas, we can outline the following scheme:



4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given what has been discussed, it does not seem easy to confine Thomas's luminous discourse strictly to the realm of metaphor. However, I have said little about the content of his metaphysical proposal. What exactly is this intelligible light he speaks of, and to what extent is it a useful concept for studying the ultimate foundation of reality? These questions constitute a significant part of the doctoral thesis I am currently working on. While I continue to explore them in depth, I would like to introduce one of the most promising lines of research.

At the beginning of the second section, I mentioned some similarities between sensible light and the being of God, similarities that underlie Thomas's metaphorical discourse. However, I believe that the true

40. «Lux autem ista sensibilis, imago quaedam est illius lucis intelligibilis ... Sicut autem lux ista particularis habet effectum in re visa, inquantum colores facit actu visibiles, et etiam in vidente, quia per eam oculus confortatur ad videndum, sic lux illa intelligibilis intellectum facit cognoscentem» (*Super Io.*, cap. 8 l. 2 §1142).

“metaphysics of light” in Thomas’s thought lies in the extended definition found in the *Summa*: «That which makes manifest to cognition of any kind». ⁴¹ The metaphysical consequence of this definition is that if «each and everything is known through that which it is in act», then «the very actuality of the thing is a certain light of its own». ⁴² In this sense, all reality, insofar as it exists in act, is luminous. Moreover, due to the resemblance that every effect bears to its cause, ⁴³ the created act is not only manifestative of itself but also of its source, pure act, “light by essence”, the ultimate foundation of every manifestation and every type of knowledge [Arbeláez, Soto-Bruna, 2024].

In short, although Thomas does not develop a luminous cosmogony as detailed as that of Robert Grosseteste, his metaphysical proposal certainly has a remarkably luminous character.

41. «Omne illud quod facit manifestationem secundum quamcumque cognitionem» (ST I, q. 67, a. 1, co.).

42. «Unumquodque cognoscitur per id quod est in actu; et ideo ipsa actualitas rei est quoddam lumen ipsius» (*Super De causis*, l. 6).

43. See *Super De causis*, l. 14.

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