

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Summa Theologiae* (1265-1279)**

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274)

This study guide has been arranged by *Fortuna*, one of the reigning concepts of mediaeval thought. There is to be sure an order in the categories of work or creation featured in our twenty entries. We touch down on epic poetry, lyric poetry, travel writing, history, theology and philosophy, and mysticism. In this sense we have been trying to inhabit multiple expressions of the mediaeval world-view, and to establish markers of the extreme and often inadequately understood mediaeval period. (A topic of importance in itself is furnished by the now dated habit of calling the Middle Ages, or the period from 500-1000, the 'Dark Ages.')

In establishing our more or less fortuitous perspective, on the mediaeval period, we have here tried to keep our eyes on the larger questions of historical succession. So that, although admittedly we move at a good rate through the centuries, we note, and will in our study guide probe, the quality of succession in historical time, the question of historical time as unpeeling, as we argued it in an earlier study guide, on the making of the modern European mind.

The person before us, in the present entry, was born into a noble family, near Naples; his father was a count, his paternal grandmother was a sister of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Thomas was as a child preternaturally drawn to symbols and catchwords of the Christian faith and although his mother opposed his early absorption into the life of the Church, he was in fact sent to the Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino for the first ten years of his educational life. From that point on, Saint Thomas advanced to a local University, struck the surrounding clergy with his brilliance, and rapidly made his way into the profession closest to his heart, preaching and teaching.

While a genius at writing and thinking on his feet, and a passionate lover of the poor, Thomas was to remain uniquely fond of preaching, throughout his life. Preaching and writing were for Thomas intertwined, as he considered them equally parts of an instruction of the people, in the word and mind of God. From early in life Thomas had been drawn to listening for the word of God, and to the inner dialogues by which he came increasingly to find himself conscripted into the principles God had laid down for him. Those who knew him, especially in the monastic communities in which he was a participant, wondered constantly at his propensity for prayer, into which he could fall on the least provocation—his mind was ever part of that inner discourse.

The distinguished teaching life of Thomas was soon underway. As a Professor in Paris, and as a special advisor to the Pope, Thomas was to prevail over his intellectual peers, until he became one of the most recognized voices of religious expression in the Christian West. He did so, it seems, by folding into his own intelligence and verbal skill the great bodies of thought and feeling that came to him through Saint Augustine (354-430) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) In other words, he reached back into the creative intellectual traditions of the Catholic Church, as well as into the giant synthesizer of classical thought, Aristotle, to create a new intellectual whole, firmly based in the main themes of Catholic Christianity. (This master synthesis, which was soon to find itself baptized as Thomism, and which to our day exercises potent influence in western Catholicism, was profoundly steeped in Christianity, as well as in Aristotelianism, with its distinctively stepwise processes of reasoning, and its revered themes—order, subordination, inquiry, search for ends—which Thomas managed to incorporate faultlessly into his many treatises on specific books of the Bible, and works of theology. It may be to our point, to concentrate (the approach is aleatory; on a few lines drawn at random from Aquinas's master work, *The Summa Theologica*.) We may proceed, in a fashion Thomas himself admired, as though we brought nothing to the interpretation except naked intelligence, and the groundrules of logic.

We close our eyes and lay down our forefinger on the beginning of the *Summa*. The whole text is a massive tribute to the interrelation of faith with reason, and should accordingly testify to the totality of things at any point of analysis. We should not fail at any point to touch pay dirt. A brief tussle with the following should take a step inside the method of the master, for whom the elements of logic seem to suffice: *a question is characteristically posed, answers to it tried out, and finally conclusions drawn—all following the course of basic Aristotelian logic.*

A passage from St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae—First Article (I.Q.1.Art 1)*. Editor's comments follow each item, in italics

Whether, besides Philosophy, any Further Doctrine Is Required? (*Three objections are proposed.*)

Objection 1: It seems that, besides philosophical science, we have no need of any further knowledge. For man should not seek to know what is above reason: "Seek not the things that are too high for thee" (Ecclus. 3:22). But whatever is not above reason is fully treated of in philosophical science. Therefore any other knowledge besides philosophical science is superfluous. (*The syllogism on which Aquinas's conclusion is based, is irrefutable, given the premises included in the inquiry—that man should not seek to know what is above reason.*)

Obj. 2: Further, knowledge can be concerned only with being, for nothing can be known, save what is true; and all that is, is true. But everything that is, is treated of in philosophical science—even God Himself; so that there is a part of philosophy called theology, or the divine science, as Aristotle has proved (Metaph. vi). Therefore, besides philosophical science, there is no need of any further knowledge. (*Philosophical science lays claim to the study of the truth. No further doctrine is needed than the philosophic science which uncovers the truth—for uncovering the truth is uncovering God.*)

On the contrary, It is written (2 Tim. 3:16): "All Scripture inspired of God is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice." Now Scripture, inspired of God, is no part of philosophical science, which has been built up by human reason. Therefore it is useful that besides philosophical science, there should be other knowledge, i.e. inspired of God. (*St. Thomas interjects the caveat permitted him by holy scripture, an objection of his own to the claim that philosophic knowledge is a sufficient portal to all knowledge. It seems, says Thomas quoting scripture, that scripture itself is a loftier portal than philosophic doctrine, and should be used accordingly.*)

I answer that, It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee" (Isa. 66:4). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation. (*The conclusion of the author. One more nail in the coffin of the notion of the idea that philosophic doctrine is an adequate final tool of knowing for men. Divine revelation takes precedence over whatever can be known by reason.*)

Aquinas proceeds, with the steadiness of nature, and of the reason which tracks it, to lay out a proposition, to review the case for that way of seeing things, then, as it happens in the present case, to refute what has been proposed and to supplant it by a vision dictated by truth and being.

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It should be noticeable, from the sample passage above, that Thomas proceeds methodically in thought. Propositions are systematically reduced to their fundamental elements, and evaluated by a stepwise scrutiny of those elements. Objections, which Thomas himself generates, lead to counter propositions formulating Thomas's own view, which always leans to the side of an orderly and meaningful cosmos, the path to understanding which was available to reason—aided by faith. (This faith-and-reason disposition of Thomas' thought is exceptionally well explained in Jacques Maritain's book, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, which indicates Thomas' studious and intricate path to the knowledge of God.)

What do you make of the blend of reason with abstraction in the personality of Aquinas. Let me explain the question, and invite you to comment. In this burly, tall, pure, loving but distracted soul there crouched a pious disciplinarian of the soul. Can you see, in him, the expostulating young male who drove a beautiful maiden from his bedroom, with curses at this devil—and who spent a thenceforth celibate life in the inwardness of God?