Thomas Aquinas

Basic Works

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INTRODUCTION

Aquinas’ Life and Works: A Brief Sketch

The aristocratic d’Aquino family made their primary home in the castle of Roccasecca in the Kingdom of Naples.\(^1\) It was probably in that castle, sometime between 1224 and 1226, that Thomas was born to parents Landulph and Theodora. Although his branch of the family had no title, their lands and other wealth would pass to the eldest son. Since Thomas was the youngest, the family needed to find him a position suitable for a man born to the aristocracy. They decided to send him to the nearby Abbey of Monte Cassino, the original Benedictine abbey, where St. Benedict himself had lived and died. Presumably, they anticipated that Thomas would someday become the abbot, a position of considerable prestige. However, the dispute between Pope Gregory IX and Emperor Frederick II eventually reached the abbey, which was occupied by Frederick’s troops in 1239. Until peace could be restored, the d’Aquino family thought it best to remove Thomas to the University of Naples, where he could continue his studies before returning to Monte Cassino.

What Thomas encountered at Naples, however, would change his life and ensure that he never would return to Monte Cassino. Thomas’s education at Monte Cassino would have served his formation as a Benedictine. Naples, by contrast, had been for some time a major center for the study of Greek and Arabic philosophy, theology, and science. It is very likely, therefore, that at Naples Aquinas turned to the study of Aristotle and perhaps some of his Islamic successors and commentators. What we know for certain is that at Naples the young student rethought his religious vocation and decided to join the Dominicans, which along with the Franciscans was one of the newly founded mendicant orders. In contrast to the traditional monastic ideal, the Dominicans valued not just a life of contemplation, but also sharing the fruits of that contemplation through preaching and teaching. The d’Aquino family originally opposed Thomas’s decision to join the Dominicans: They forcibly removed him from the friars’ company and kept him in the family castle for more than a year while they tried to change his mind. Seeing his unshakeable resolve, they released him to the Dominicans, who sent him to study at the University of Paris in 1245.

At Paris, Aquinas studied with Albert the Great, an extraordinarily prolific writer well versed in the works of Aristotle, which he studied in conjunction

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with Neoplatonist, Jewish, and Islamic philosophy. When Albert left in 1248
to teach in the newly formed University at Cologne, Aquinas followed, study-
ing with Albert until 1252, when he returned to Paris to finish his degree in
theology.

Aquinas would be appointed to a professorship in theology at Paris in 1256,
but prior to that time he had already composed two short but influential treatises,
both reproduced in this volume. The first, *On the Principles of Nature*, draws on
Aristotle, Averroës, and Boethius to explain the role of matter, form, and privation
in generation. It contains an early account of analogy, a topic that would become
central to Aquinas' philosophical theology. The second, *On Being and Essence*,
was an astoundingly influential little book that draws on Aristotle and Avicenna to
argue that essence and existence, which are related as matter and form, are really,
and not just conceptually, distinct in all creatures but not in God.

In 1259, the Dominicans sent Aquinas to teach in Italy. While in Paris, he had
begun his systematic *Summa contra gentiles*, which aimed to make known the
truths of the catholic faith. He finished the work in Italy, but shortly afterward
conceived a plan for a second systematic work that would serve as a textbook for
beginning theology students. We know this work as the *Summa theologiae*, that
is, Aquinas' "summary" or "synopsis" of theology, although we do not know what
Aquinas himself meant to call it. He divided this lengthy work into three parts.
Part I treats God and then creatures—in particular rational creatures—insofar as
they proceed from God. Part II concerns the ultimate end of human beings and
how they gain or lose that end. Part III details the way Christ leads humans back
to God through his works and sacraments. This anthology contains five treatises
from this *Summa*: The Treatise on Divine Nature and The Treatise on Human
Nature come from Part I, while the treatises on Happiness, on Human Acts, and
on Law come from Part II. Aquinas began this work in Italy and continued when
he returned to teach at the University of Paris a second time in 1268. When
the Dominicans sent Aquinas to teach in Naples in 1272, he worked on Part III
until December 1273 but failed to complete it. (The so-called "supplement" to
Part III, which completes the *Summa theologiae*, was assembled posthumously
out of material taken from Aquinas' first major work, his commentary on Peter
Lombard's *Sentences*.)

In addition to his systematic works, Aquinas wrote numerous commentaries
on philosophical texts and books of the Bible. He composed treatises and expert
opinions, and he also wrote liturgical works. His classroom activity, however, led
to the publication of his various disputations. The earliest and longest, the *Dis-
puted Questions on Truth*, stems from his first professorship in Paris. Reproduced
in this volume are units from his *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, which stem from
his second professorship in Paris. Based on transcripts of his course on the virtues,
this work explores the nature and function of the virtues, which we need if we are
to lead a flourishing human life.

No one fully understands what happened to Aquinas on December 6, 1273.
Whether it was a stroke, a mental breakdown, or a mystical vision is anybody's
guess. He did not stop working entirely, but his biographers report that he lost
his enthusiasm for life in this world and could not bring himself to complete
the *Summa theologiae*. Nevertheless, when Pope Gregory X called the Second
Council of Lyons, Aquinas’ superiors expected him to serve as an expert. On his
way to Lyons, Aquinas grew seriously ill, perhaps as a result of striking his head on
a tree branch. The illness proved fatal, and he died en route to Lyons on March
7th. Aquinas was canonized by John XXII in 1323, and Pius V declared him a
doctor of the Church in 1567.

Aquinas: Basic Works

There are many intelligent ways of anthologizing Aquinas’ works. We thought it
especially useful to create a volume of works that are “basic” in at least two senses.
First, the selected works treat issues of central importance in Aquinas’ thought
throughout his career, such as the relationship between being and essence, the
nature of free choice, and the working of language about God. In addressing
these matters, Aquinas was at his most innovative, and that is no surprise: He was
bringing fresh perspectives to bear on some of the most pressing philosophical
and theological problems of his day. Second, these works are basic in that they
are foundational for the study of other topics in Aquinas’ system of thought. This
foundational character is clearest in *On the Principles of Nature* and *On Being
and Essence*, which treat topics at the heart of his metaphysics—topics undergird-
ing his psychology, his ethics, and his theology. Aquinas’ famous accounts on
transubstantiation and the deep metaphysical divide between God and creatures,
for instance, depend on his teaching in these two short works. Likewise, Aqui-
nas’ commentaries on the Bible and pseudo-Dionysius will make little sense to
someone who has not mastered his teaching in the Treatise on Divine Nature;
and it is not hard to see that his treatments of specific virtues such as prudence,
religion, and justice build on the foundations he sets in works such as the Treatise
on Human Acts and the *Disputed Questions on Virtue*.

Of course, many other works could also count as basic in these senses, such
as selections from Aquinas’ *Disputed Questions on Truth* or the *Summa contra
gentiles*. The reason we avoided using units culled from these works was that we
tried, insofar as space permitted, to reproduce whole works or whole treatises and
not just selections. That way, this anthology will allow readers to see Aquinas’ thought—everything he decided was important for readers to know—unfold in
the order he judged best for the reader. In addition, the selections in this vol-
une showcase some of the most distinctive features of Aquinas’ work, such as
his genius for transforming the contributions of disparate earlier thinkers into
a novel system that elucidates the nature of God and creatures. They also show

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2 In a footnote at the head of most articles, we provide an extensive list of parallel
passages found in these other works.
the many ways in which Aquinas puts his theoretical works to practical use: An understanding of metaphysics helps us to understand, and therefore contemplate and appreciate, God’s creation; but it also helps us to understand the nature of our own actions and character, which we need to regulate if we are to lead flourishing lives.

The majority of the works reproduced here are written in question form, a literary convention that reflects a common practice in the medieval university classroom. Before class, the professor would introduce the day’s topic by asking a key question that could be answered either yes or no, such as whether human beings have free will. It was the responsibility of a student or group of students to formulate objections to the view the professor would take. An advanced graduate student then responded to each of those objections, pointing to flaws in the line of argument. Finally, the professor, taking account of all these proceedings, would formulate his answer to the question. The Disputed Question on the Virtues in General, for instance, is a revised transcript of Aquinas’ own graduate course on virtue at the University of Paris. When he readied his manuscript for publication, he selected, grouped, and revised his students’ objections and placed them at the head of each article. He then added a set of considerations—sometimes arguments, sometimes statements from authoritative texts—in opposition to these initial objections. In so doing, he encourages his readers to look at the issue from multiple perspectives and to prepare themselves for a distinctive approach that addresses the worries raised in the objections. Following these contrary considerations he placed his own reply, and followed this with his revised responses to the initial objections. When Aquinas wrote the Summa theologiae, he used an abbreviated version of this form, which is why the articles of the Summa have far fewer objections than those that are revisions of his classroom disputations.

Once readers understand the purposes of the question form and grow accustomed to reading it, they cease to see it as a quaint artifact of a bygone era and instead note its similarities with contemporary pedagogical practices. It brings earlier thinkers into dialogue with contemporary thinkers, fosters debate, helps crush the illusion that the reader already knows the answers, and sparks originality of approach. The right way to approach articles in question form is to read them actively, puzzling through the issues as if the reader were present in Aquinas’ classroom. Even scholars who are expert in Aquinas can sometimes find themselves surprised by his illuminating and concise observations on others’ views and the incisive creativity of his replies. The question form has its obvious limitations: Any sustained topic will be interrupted by numerous objections and replies, so authors cannot build their philosophical accounts as fluidly as they might in essays or treatises. Nevertheless, the question form enables us to focus on the individual building blocks of larger theories and to think about them honestly, critically, and from new perspectives.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank the various contributors to this volume for allowing their translations to be included. Some of these translations have not previously been published, namely: *On the Principles of Nature*, *On Being and Essence*, and the treatises *On Happiness* and *On Human Acts*.

The remaining translations are reprinted, with minor revisions for the sake of consistency across the volume. We gratefully acknowledge the translators’ permission to allow these changes. This material originally appeared as follows:

- Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, translated by Jeffrey Hause and Claudia Eisen Murphy, with Introduction and Commentary by Jeffrey Hause (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010).

We owe thanks for their help to Tyler Huismann, Emilie Pagano, and Kate Waidler. Above all, our thanks go to Brian Rak of Hackett Publishing, whose patient but enthusiastic support for these and other volumes over the years has done so much to foster Aquinas scholarship.