

# Thomas Aquinas

## *Basic Works*

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Edited by  
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## CONTENTS

List of Articles	vi
Introduction	xix
Acknowledgments	xxiii
I. Philosophical Foundations	
<i>On the Principles of Nature</i>	2
translated by Eleonore Stump and Stephen Chanderbhan	
<i>On Being and Essence</i>	14
translated by Peter King	
II. God and Human Nature	
<b>The Treatise on the Divine Nature</b> ( <i>Summa Theologiae I.1–13</i> )	36
translated by Brian J. Shanley, O.P.	
<b>The Treatise on Human Nature</b> ( <i>Summa Theologiae I.75–86</i> )	160
translated by Robert Pasnau	
III. Ethics and Human Action	
<b>The Treatise on Happiness</b> ( <i>Summa Theologiae I-II.1–5</i> )	316
translated by Thomas Williams	
<b>The Treatise on Human Acts</b> ( <i>Summa Theologiae I-II.6–21</i> )	376
translated by Thomas Williams	
<i>Disputed Questions on Virtue</i>	503
translated by Jeffrey Hause and Claudia Eisen Murphy	
<b>The Treatise on Law</b> ( <i>Summa Theologiae I-II.90–97</i> )	619
translated by Richard J. Regan	
<b>Bibliography</b>	675
<b>Index</b>	681

## LIST OF ARTICLES

### The Treatise on the Divine Nature (*Summa Theologiae* I)

#### Question 1. Concerning Sacred Teaching: What Is Its Character and What Is Its Range?

Article 1. The necessity of sacred teaching.

Article 2. Is sacred teaching a science?

Article 3. Is sacred teaching one or many sciences?

Article 4. Is sacred teaching a speculative or practical science?

Article 5. How does sacred teaching relate to the other sciences?

Article 6. Is this teaching wisdom?

Article 7. What is the subject of this science?

Article 8. Does sacred teaching involve arguments?

Article 9. Should sacred scripture use metaphorical or symbolic language?

Article 10. Should sacred scripture be interpreted in multiple senses?

#### Question 2. Does God Exist?

Article 1. Is the existence of God self-evident?

Article 2. Is the existence of God demonstrable?

Article 3. Does God exist?

#### Question 3. Divine Simplicity

Article 1. Is God a body?

Article 2. Is there composition of form and matter in God?

Article 3. Is there composition of quiddity, essence, or nature and subject in God?

Article 4. Is there composition of essence and existence in God?

Article 5. Is there composition of genus and difference in God?

Article 6. Is there composition of subject and accident in God?

Article 7. Is there composition of any kind in God, or is God absolutely simple?

Article 8. Can God enter into composition with other things?

#### Question 4. Divine Perfection

Article 1. Is God perfect?

Article 2. Is God perfect in every way, possessing in himself the perfections of all things?

Article 3. Can creatures be said to resemble God?

**Question 5. The Good in General**

- Article 1. Are good and being identical in reality?
- Article 2. Which is conceptually prior: good or being?
- Article 3. Is every being good?
- Article 4. To what kind of cause is the character of the good reducible?
- Article 5. Does the character of the good consist of mode, species, and order?
- Article 6. Is the good divided into the noble, the useful, and the delightful?

**Question 6. Divine Goodness**

- Article 1. Is to be good appropriate to God?
- Article 2. Is God the highest good?
- Article 3. Is God alone good through his own essence?
- Article 4. Are all things good by divine goodness?

**Question 7. Divine Infinity**

- Article 1. Is God infinite?
- Article 2. Is anything other than God essentially infinite?
- Article 3. Could anything be infinite in magnitude?
- Article 4. Could there be an infinite multitude of things?

**Question 8. God's Existence in Things**

- Article 1. Is God in all things?
- Article 2. Is God everywhere?
- Article 3. Is God everywhere by his essence, power, and presence?
- Article 4. Is being everywhere unique to God?

**Question 9. The Immutability of God**

- Article 1. Is God completely immutable?
- Article 2. Is being immutable unique to God?

**Question 10. The Eternity of God**

- Article 1. What is eternity?
- Article 2. Is God eternal?
- Article 3. Is to be eternal unique to God?
- Article 4. Does eternity differ from time?
- Article 5. Is the aevum different from time?
- Article 6. Is there only one aevum?

**Question 11. The Unity of God**

- Article 1. Does one add something to being?
- Article 2. Are one and many opposed to each other?
- Article 3. Is God one?
- Article 4. Is God supremely one?

## Question 12. How God Is Known by Us

Article 1. Can any created intellect see the essence of God?

Article 2. Is the essence of God seen by the intellect through any created likeness?

Article 3. Can the essence of God be seen through the eyes of the body?

Article 4. Is any created intellectual substance sufficient by its own nature to see the essence of God?

Article 5. Does a created intellect need some created light in order to see the essence of God?

Article 6. Among those seeing the essence of God, does one see more perfectly than another?

Article 7. Can any created intellect comprehend the divine essence?

Article 8. Does a created intellect seeing the essence of God know all things in that essence?

Article 9. Are the things known in God known through any likenesses?

Article 10. Are all things known at once that are seen in God?

Article 11. Can any human being see the essence of God in this life?

Article 12. Can we know God through natural reason in this life?

Article 13. Is there any knowledge of God through grace in this life that goes beyond the knowledge of natural reason?

## Question 13. The Names of God

Article 1. Is God nameable by us?

Article 2. Are any of the names said of God predicated substantially?

Article 3. Are any names said properly of God, or are they all attributed to God metaphorically?

Article 4. Are the many names said of God synonymous?

Article 5. Are any names said of God and creatures univocally, or are they said equivocally?

Article 6. Are names said primarily of God or creatures?

Article 7. Are any names attributed to God beginning at a certain point in time?

Article 8. Does the name 'God' refer to the nature of God or the actions of God?

Article 9. Is the name 'God' communicable?

Article 10. Is the name 'God' used univocally or equivocally?

Article 11. Is the name 'He Who Is' the most proper name of God?

Article 12. Can affirmative propositions about God be formed?

**The Treatise on Human Nature (*Summa Theologiae* I)****Question 75. On Soul Considered in Its Own Right**

Article 1. Is the soul a body?

Article 2. Is the human soul something subsistent?

Article 3. Are the souls of brute animals subsistent?

Article 4. Is the soul the human being, or is the human being rather something composed of soul and body?

Article 5. Is the soul composed of matter and form?

Article 6. Is the human soul incorruptible?

Article 7. Does the soul belong to the same species as an angel?

**Question 76. The Soul's Union with the Body**

Article 1. Is the intellective principle united to the body as its form?

Article 2. Is the intellective principle numerically multiplied according to the number of bodies? Or is there a single intellect for all human beings?

Article 3. Does a body whose form is the intellective principle have any other soul?

Article 4. Is there any other substantial form in the human body?

Article 5. What sort of body should have the intellective principle as its form?

Article 6. Is the intellective soul united to its body through the mediation of any accident?

Article 7. Is the soul united to the body through the mediation of any other body?

Article 8. Is the soul whole in each part of the body?

**Question 77. The Capacities of the Soul in General**

Article 1. Is the soul's essence its capacity?

Article 2. Does the soul have only one capacity, or more than one?

Article 3. How are the soul's capacities distinguished?

Article 4. The order of the soul's capacities to one another.

Article 5. Is the soul the subject of all its capacities?

Article 6. Do the soul's capacities flow from its essence?

Article 7. Does one capacity of the soul originate in another?

Article 8. Do all the soul's capacities remain in it after death?

**Question 78. The Soul's Pre-Intellective Capacities**

Article 1. The kinds of capacities belonging to the soul.

Article 2. The capacities of the vegetative part.

Article 3. The external senses.

Article 4. The internal senses.

**Question 79. The Soul's Intellective Capacities**

- Article 1. Is the intellect a capacity of the soul, or the soul's essence?
- Article 2. Is the intellect a passive capacity?
- Article 3. Should we posit an agent intellect?
- Article 4. Is the agent intellect part of the soul?
- Article 5. Is there one agent intellect for everyone?
- Article 6. Is memory in intellect?
- Article 7. Is intellective memory a different capacity from intellect?
- Article 8. Is reason a different capacity from intellect?
- Article 9. Are higher and lower reason distinct capacities?
- Article 10. Is intelligence a different capacity from intellect?
- Article 11. Are speculative and practical intellect distinct capacities?
- Article 12. Is synderesis a capacity of the intellective part?
- Article 13. Is conscience a capacity of the intellective part?

**Question 80. The Appetitive in General**

- Article 1. Should appetite be treated as a special capacity of the soul?
- Article 2. Should appetite be divided into sensory and intellective appetite, as distinct capacities?

**Question 81. Sensuality**

- Article 1. Is sensuality solely an appetitive power?
- Article 2. Is sensuality divided into the irascible and the concupiscible, as distinct capacities?
- Article 3. Do the irascible and concupiscible obey reason?

**Question 82. Will**

- Article 1. Does the will have appetites for anything of necessity?
- Article 2. Does the will have appetites for all things of necessity?
- Article 3. Is the will a loftier capacity than intellect?
- Article 4. Does the will move the intellect?
- Article 5. Is the will distinguished into the irascible and the concupiscible?

**Question 83. Free Decision**

- Article 1. Do human beings have free decision?
- Article 2. What is free decision: a capacity, an act, or a disposition?
- Article 3. Is free decision an appetitive or a cognitive capacity?
- Article 4. Is free decision the same capacity as the will or a different capacity?

**Question 84. What Does the Soul Cognize Bodies Through?**

- Article 1. Does the soul cognize bodies through intellect?
- Article 2. Does the soul understand bodies through its essence or through species?



Article 3. Are the species of all intelligible things naturally endowed to the soul?

Article 4. Do intelligible species emanate from certain separate immaterial forms into the soul?

Article 5. Does our soul see all the things that it understands in their eternal natures?

Article 6. Does the soul acquire intelligible cognition from sensation?

Article 7. Does the intellect need phantasms in order actually to understand?

Article 8. Is the intellect's judgment impeded by obstruction to the sensory powers?

### Question 85. How the Intellect Understands Bodily Things and in What Order

Article 1. Does our intellect understand by abstracting species from phantasms?

Article 2. Are the intelligible species abstracted from phantasms related to our intellect as that which is understood or as that by which something is understood?

Article 3. Does our intellect naturally understand the more universal first?

Article 4. Can our intellect think about more than one thing at the same time?

Article 5. Does our intellect's thinking occur through composition and division?

Article 6. Can the intellect err?

Article 7. Can one person understand the same thing better than another?

Article 8. Does our intellect cognize the indivisible prior to the divisible?

### Question 86. What Our Intellect Cognizes in Material Things

Article 1. Does our intellect cognize singulars?

Article 2. Does our intellect cognize the infinite?

Article 3. Does our intellect cognize contingent things?

Article 4. Does our intellect cognize the future?

## The Treatise on Happiness (*Summa Theologiae* I-II)

### Question 1. The Ultimate End of Human Beings

Article 1. Is it characteristic of human beings to act for the sake of an end?

Article 2. Is acting for the sake of an end something that only rational natures do?

Article 3. Do human acts get their species from their end?

Article 4. Is there an ultimate end of human life?

Article 5. Can one human being have more than one ultimate end?

Article 6. Do human beings will everything they will for the sake of the ultimate end?

Article 7. Is there one and the same ultimate end for all human beings?

Article 8. Do all other creatures have the same ultimate end as human beings?

### Question 2. The Things in Which Happiness Consists

Article 1. Does human happiness consist in wealth?

Article 2. Does human happiness consist in honors?

Article 3. Does human happiness consist in glory or fame?

Article 4. Does human happiness consist in power?

Article 5. Does human happiness consist in goods of the body?

Article 6. Does human happiness consist in pleasure?

Article 7. Does happiness consist in a good of the soul?

Article 8. Does human happiness consist in any created good?

### Question 3. What Is Happiness?

Article 1. Is happiness something uncreated?

Article 2. Is happiness an activity?

Article 3. Is happiness an activity of the sensory part or only of the intellectual part?

Article 4. Given that happiness is an activity of the intellectual part, is it an activity of the intellect or of the will?

Article 5. Is happiness an activity of the speculative or of the practical intellect?

Article 6. Does human happiness consist in thinking about the speculative sciences?

Article 7. Does human happiness consist in the cognition of the separated substances—that is, the angels?

Article 8. Does human happiness consist in the vision of the divine essence?

### Question 4. The Things That Are Required for Happiness

Article 1. Is delight required for happiness?

Article 2. What is more fundamental in happiness: delight or vision?

Article 3. Is comprehension required for happiness?

Article 4. Is rectitude of will required for happiness?

Article 5. Is the body required for human happiness?

Article 6. Is the perfection of the body required for happiness?

Article 7. Are any external goods required for happiness?

Article 8. Is the companionship of friends required for happiness?

**Question 5. The Attainment of Happiness**

- Article 1. Can human beings attain happiness?
- Article 2. Can one human being be happier than another?
- Article 3. Can someone be happy in this life?
- Article 4. Can happiness, once possessed, be lost?
- Article 5. Can human beings attain happiness through their natural powers?
- Article 6. Do human beings attain happiness through the action of some higher creature?
- Article 7. Are any deeds required of human beings in order for them to receive happiness from God?
- Article 8. Does every human being desire happiness?

**The Treatise on Human Acts (*Summa Theologiae* I-II)****Question 6. Voluntariness and Involuntariness in General**

- Article 1. Is there voluntariness in human acts?
- Article 2. Is there voluntariness in non-rational animals?
- Article 3. Can there be voluntariness without any act?
- Article 4. Can violence be done to the will?
- Article 5. Does violence cause involuntariness?
- Article 6. Does fear cause involuntariness in an absolute sense?
- Article 7. Does desire cause involuntariness?
- Article 8. Does ignorance cause involuntariness?

**Question 7. The Circumstances of Human Acts**

- Article 1. Is a circumstance an accident of a human act?
- Article 2. Should a theologian pay attention to the circumstances of human acts?
- Article 3. Is the list of circumstances given in *Ethics* III correct?
- Article 4. Are “on account of what” and “what the action is in” the most important circumstances?

**Question 8. The Objects of Will**

- Article 1. Is will only of what is good?
- Article 2. Is will only of the end, or also of things that are for the end?
- Article 3. Is the will drawn in a single act to both the end and what is for the end?

**Question 9. What Moves the Will**

- Article 1. Is the will moved by the intellect?
- Article 2. Is the will moved by the sensory appetite?

Article 3. Does the will move itself?

Article 4. Is the will moved by any external principle?

Article 5. Is the will moved by a heavenly body?

Article 6. Does only God move the will as an external principle?

#### Question 10. How the Will Is Moved

Article 1. Is the will moved toward anything naturally?

Article 2. Is the will moved necessarily by its object?

Article 3. Is the will moved necessarily by the lower appetite?

Article 4. Is the will moved necessarily by God?

#### Question 11. Enjoyment, Which Is an Act of the Will

Article 1. Is enjoyment an act of an appetitive power?

Article 2. Does enjoyment belong only to rational creatures or to non-rational animals as well?

Article 3. Is enjoyment only of the ultimate end?

Article 4. Is enjoyment only of an end that is actually possessed?

#### Question 12. Intention

Article 1. Is intention an act of the intellect or of the will?

Article 2. Is intention only of the ultimate end?

Article 3. Can one intend two things at the same time?

Article 4. Is intention of the end the same act as will of what is for the end?

Article 5. Does intention belong to non-rational animals?

#### Question 13. Choice, Which Is an Act of Will Concerning Things That Are for the End

Article 1. Is choice an act of will or of reason?

Article 2. Does choice belong to non-rational animals?

Article 3. Is choice only of things that are for the end, or is it sometimes also of the end itself?

Article 4. Is choice only of things that we do?

Article 5. Is choice only of possible things?

Article 6. Do human beings choose out of necessity, or freely?

#### Question 14. Deliberation, Which Precedes Choice

Article 1. Is deliberation an inquiry?

Article 2. Is deliberation about the end, or only about things that are for the end?

Article 3. Is deliberation only about things that we do?

Article 4. Is deliberation about all the things that we do?

Article 5. Does deliberation proceed by analysis?

Article 6. Does deliberation go on infinitely?

### Question 15. Consent, Which Is an Act of Will Concerning Things That Are for the End

Article 1. Is consent an act of an appetitive power or of an apprehensive power?

Article 2. Does consent belong to non-rational animals?

Article 3. Does consent concern the end?

Article 4. Does consent to an act belong solely to the higher part of the soul?

### Question 16. Use, Which Is an Act of Will Concerning Things That Are for the End

Article 1. Is use an act of the will?

Article 2. Does use belong to non-rational animals?

Article 3. Can use also concern the ultimate end?

Article 4. Does use precede choice?

### Question 17. Acts Commanded by the Will

Article 1. Is command an act of the will or of reason?

Article 2. Does command belong to non-rational animals?

Article 3. What is the order of command and use?

Article 4. Are command and the commanded act a single act or distinct acts?

Article 5. Is an act of the will commanded?

Article 6. Is an act of reason commanded?

Article 7. Is an act of the sensory appetite commanded?

Article 8. Is an act of the vegetative soul commanded?

Article 9. Is an act of the parts of the body commanded?

### Question 18. The Goodness and Badness of Human Acts

Article 1. Is every human act good?

Article 2. Does an action derive its goodness or badness from its object?

Article 3. Is an action good or bad because of a circumstance?

Article 4. Do goodness and badness in human acts derive from the end?

Article 5. Do good and bad acts differ in species?

Article 6. Does the goodness or badness that derives from the end make for a difference in species?

Article 7. Is the species that derives from the end contained in the species that derives from the object, as in a genus, or the reverse?

Article 8. Is any act indifferent in species?

Article 9. Is any individual act indifferent?

Article 10. Does any circumstance determine the species of a good or bad act?

Article 11. Does every circumstance relevant to goodness or badness give a species to an act?

**Question 19. The Goodness of the Interior Act of the Will**

Article 1. Does the will's goodness depend on the object?

Article 2. Does the will's goodness depend only on its object?

Article 3. Does the will's goodness depend on reason?

Article 4. Does the goodness of a human will depend on the eternal law?

Article 5. Is a will that is out of harmony with mistaken reason bad?

Article 6. Is a will that is in harmony with mistaken reason good?

Article 7. Does the will's goodness depend on the intention of the end?

Article 8. Does how good the will is depend on how good the intention is?

Article 9. Does the goodness of a human will depend on its conformity with the divine will?

Article 10. Should a human will always be conformed to the divine will in terms of what it wills?

**Question 20. The Goodness and Badness of Exterior Acts**

Article 1. Are goodness and badness primarily in the act of will or in the exterior act?

Article 2. Does the goodness or badness of the exterior act depend wholly on the will?

Article 3. Is there one and the same goodness for both the interior and the exterior act?

Article 4. Does an exterior act add any goodness or badness beyond that of the interior act?

Article 5. Does a consequence add to the goodness or badness of an act?

Article 6. Can one and the same exterior act be both good and bad?

**Question 21. Features That Accrue to Human Acts**

Article 1. Does a human act count as right or sinful simply by being good or bad?

Article 2. Is a human act praiseworthy or blameworthy simply because it is good or bad?

Article 3. Does a human act count as meritorious or demeritorious simply because it is good or bad?

Article 4. Does a human act count as meritorious or demeritorious before God simply because it is good or bad?

**Disputed Questions on Virtue****On the Virtues in General**

Article 1. Are virtues dispositions?

Article 2. Is the definition of virtue asserted by Augustine accurate?

- Article 3. Can a power of the soul be a subject of virtue?  
 Article 4. Can the irascible and concupiscible appetites be subjects of virtue?  
 Article 5. Is the will a subject of virtue?  
 Article 6. Is there virtue in the practical intellect as its subject?  
 Article 7. Is there virtue in the contemplative intellect?  
 Article 8. Are virtues in us naturally?  
 Article 9. Do we acquire virtues through acts?  
 Article 10. Do we receive any virtues by infusion?  
 Article 11. Does infused virtue increase?  
 Article 12. Are the distinctions among the virtues drawn accurately?  
 Article 13. Does virtue lie in a mean?

**On Charity**

- Article 1. Is charity something created in the soul, or is it the Holy Spirit itself?  
 Article 2. Is charity a virtue?

**On the Cardinal Virtues**

- Article 1. Prudence, justice, courage, and temperance: are these four the cardinal virtues?  
 Article 2. Are the virtues connected so that those with one virtue have them all?  
 Article 3. Are a person's virtues all equal?  
 Article 4. Do the cardinal virtues remain in heaven?

**The Treatise on Law (*Summa Theologiae* I-II)****Question 90. On the Essence of Law**

- Article 1. Does law belong to reason?  
 Article 2. Is law always directed toward the common good?  
 Article 3. Is any person's reason competent to make law?  
 Article 4. Is promulgation an essential component of law?

**Question 91. On Different Kinds of Law**

- Article 1. Is there an eternal law?  
 Article 2. Is there a natural law in us?  
 Article 3. Are there human laws?  
 Article 4. Did human beings need a divine law?  
 Article 5. Is there only one divine law?  
 Article 6. Is there a law of concupiscence?

**Question 92. On the Effects of Law**

Article 1. Is the effect of law to make human beings good?

Article 2. Do we suitably designate legal acts?

**Question 93. On the Eternal Law**

Article 1. Is the eternal law the supreme plan in God?

Article 2. Do all know the eternal law?

Article 3. Is every law derived from the eternal law?

Article 4. Are necessary and eternal things subject to the eternal law?

Article 5. Are contingent natural things subject to the eternal law?

Article 6. Are all human affairs subject to the eternal law?

**Question 94. On the Natural Law**

Article 1. Is the natural law a disposition?

Article 2. Does the natural law include several precepts or only one?

Article 3. Do all virtuous acts belong to the natural law?

Article 4. Is the natural law the same for all human beings?

Article 5. Can the natural law be changed?

Article 6. Can the natural law be excised from the hearts of human beings?

**Question 95. On Human Law**

Article 1. Was it beneficial that human beings establish laws?

Article 2. Is every human law derived from the natural law?

Article 3. Does Isidore appropriately describe the characteristics of positive law?

Article 4. Does Isidore appropriately distinguish the kinds of human law?

**Question 96. On the Power of Human Laws**

Article 1. Should human laws be framed in particular rather than general terms?

Article 2. Does it belong to human laws to prohibit all vices?

Article 3. Do human laws command every virtuous action?

Article 4. Does human law impose obligation on human beings in the court of conscience?

Article 5. Is everyone subject to the law?

Article 6. Are those subject to the law permitted to act contrary to the letter of the law?

**Question 97. On Changing Laws**

Article 1. Should human law be changed in any way?

Article 2. Should human laws always be changed when something better presents itself?

Article 3. Can customs take on the force of law?

Article 4. Can the people's rulers dispense subjects from human laws?



## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup>Two excellent secondary sources on Aquinas's life are Simon Tugwell, *Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) and Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Vol. 1: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

with Neoplatonist, Jewish, and Islamic philosophy. When Albert left in 1248 to teach in the newly formed University at Cologne, Aquinas followed, studying 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 *Disputed 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 undergirding 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, Aquinas' 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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 volume 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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<sup>2</sup>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, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature*, translated, with Commentary, by Brian J. Shanley, O.P. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).
- Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on Human Nature*, translated, with Introduction and Commentary, by Robert Pasnau (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).
- Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, translated by Jeffrey Hause and Claudia Eisen Murphy, with Introduction and Commentary by Jeffrey Hause (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010).
- Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on Law*, translated with Introduction by Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).

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