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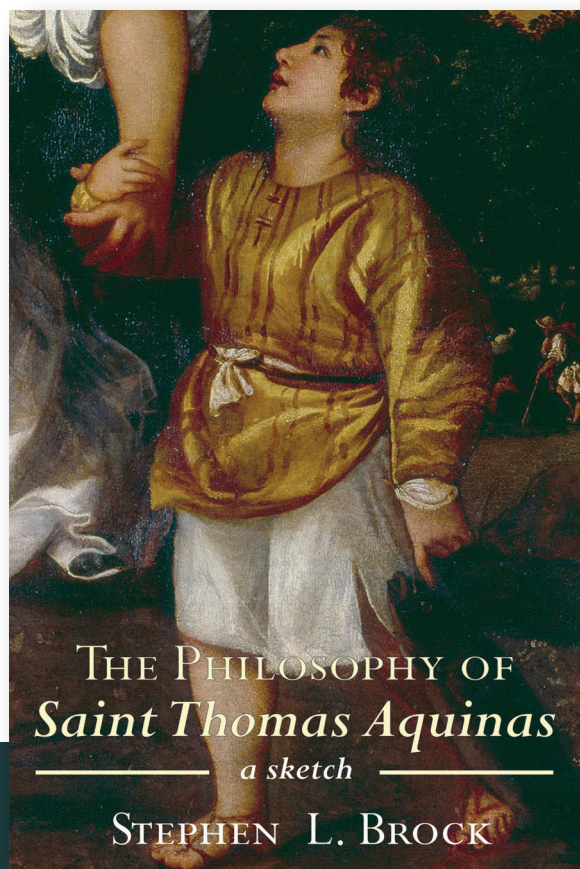
THE PHILOSOPHY OF *Saint Thomas Aquinas*

a sketch

STEPHEN L. BROCK

If Saint Thomas Aquinas was a great theologian, it is in no small part because he was a great philosopher. And he was a great philosopher because he was a great metaphysician. In the twentieth century, metaphysics was not much in vogue, among either theologians or even philosophers; but now it is making a comeback, and once the contours of Thomas's metaphysical vision are glimpsed, it looks like anything but a museum piece. It only needs some dusting off. Many are studying Thomas now for the answers that he might be able to give to current questions, but he is perhaps even more interesting for the questions that he can raise regarding current answers: about the physical world, about human life and knowledge, and (needless to say) about God. This book is aimed at helping those who are not experts in medieval thought to begin to enter into Thomas's philosophical point of view. Along the way, it brings out some aspects of his thought that are not often emphasized in the current literature, and it offers a reading of his teaching on the divine nature that goes rather against the drift of some prominent recent interpretations.

Stephen L. Brock is Professor of Medieval Philosophy at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. He is the author of *Action and Conduct: Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action* (1998) and of numerous scholarly articles on Thomas's thought.



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"Thomas Aquinas was a theologian who used philosophy to lead us step by step from familiar truths to unfamiliar wisdom, from what natural reason can know to the divine things it cannot. To follow his lead, we need to know something about the philosophy he finds useful, something about its object, principles, concepts, and limits. Stephen Brock's book is a splendid sketch of the metaphysics Thomas uses in the service of theology. It's the best we have."

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SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

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A Sketch

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To my teachers

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Preface

“The artist is the man who is more and not less intelligible than other men.”
—G. K. Chesterton, “An Apology for Buffoons”

IF CHESTERTON IS RIGHT about the artist, then Thomas Aquinas was one of the greatest artists ever. His whole aim, we might say, was to be intelligible, and few have been more so. As a result, those who have learned something from him, when they set out to convey the thing to others, do indeed risk buffoonery. They are sure that his own way of putting it is better.

Their readers may feel the same way. Chesterton was decrying a tendency that he saw among followers of artists in his own day. It was not their forming factions or cliques; he found these inevitable, and excusable. But now, he protested, the clique “has taken on the character of an interpreter; by hypothesis the interpreter of something unintelligible; and its existence encourages the artist to be unintelligible, when it is his whole function to be intelligible.” On this reasoning, if the art is good, to interpret it may even reflect badly on the interpreter’s own intelligence.

Chesterton’s targets, however, must have been interpreters who were the masters’ contemporaries; otherwise his complaint would boomerang. And of his many interpretations of past masters, one of the best—a work of art in its own right—is of Saint Thomas.

Aquinas’s very language is dead. As he himself often observed, what is more intelligible in itself may be less so to us. The intellectual signal, however clear at the source, may hit interference in transmission. It might still get through, of course; in fact, Thomas got that thought from Aristotle, who was in various ways even farther from him than he is from us. But the

P R E F A C E

signal may still need a booster, and therein lies the only excuse for a book like this.

For all of its shortcomings, at least it is short. Right now there are several short books on Aquinas in circulation. This one is not meant to replace any; they all fit on the shelf, and they may even support each other. Nor is it meant to favor any school (the academic equivalent of a clique). Saint Josemaría Escrivá, who wished his own followers to form no school, used to commend Thomas simply as “a good friend.” I hope this book will be received in that spirit.

Acknowledgments

MY THANKS TO KEVIN Flannery, Craig Iffland, Christine Jensen, Steven Jensen, and Luca Tuninetti for their very helpful comments on drafts of this book. A special word of gratitude goes to Francisco Fernández Labastida, to whom the book owes its very existence.

Abbreviations, References, and Technical Terminology

EN Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Metaph. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

THOMAS AQUINAS:

De ente *De ente et essentia (On Being and Essence)*

De pot. *Quaestiones disputatae De potentia (Disputed Questions on the Power of God)*

De princ. nat. *De principiis naturae (On the Principles of Nature)*

De spir. creat. *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis (On Spiritual Creatures)*

De subst. sep. *De substantiis separatis (On Separate Substances)*

De ver. *Quaestiones disputatae de ueritate (Disputed Questions on Truth)*

In De an. *Sententia Libri De anima (Commentary on Aristotle's De anima)*

In De caelo *Sententia super librum De caelo et mundo (Commentary on Aristotle's De caelo)*

In De gen. *Sententia super libros De generatione et corruptione (Commentary on Aristotle's De generatione et corruptione)*

ABBREVIATIONS, REFERENCES, AND TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGY

<i>In De Trin.</i>	<i>Super Boetium De Trinitate</i> (Commentary on Boethius's De Trinitate)
<i>In Eth.</i>	<i>Sententia Libri Ethicorum</i> (Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics)
<i>In Meta.</i>	<i>Sententia super Metaphysicam</i> (Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics)
<i>In Peryerm.</i>	<i>Expositio Libri Peryermenias</i> (Commentary on Aristotle's De interpretatione)
<i>In Phys.</i>	<i>Sententia super Physicam</i> (Commentary on Aristotle's Physics)
<i>In Polit.</i>	<i>Sententia Libri Politicorum</i> (Commentary on Aristotle's Politics)
<i>In Post. an.</i>	<i>Expositio Libri Posteriorum</i> (Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics)
<i>In Sent.</i>	<i>Scriptum super libros Sententiarum</i> (Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences)
<i>Quodl.</i>	<i>Quaestiones de quolibet I–XII</i> (Quodlibetal Questions I–XII)
<i>Scg</i>	<i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>
<i>STh</i>	<i>Summa theologiae</i>

Where possible, references to Thomas's works include the paragraph numbers (signaled by §) of the Marietti editions (see the Bibliography), which many English translations follow. The translations of Thomas in this book, however, are the author's.

Although Thomas strives to adhere to the meanings that words carry in ordinary speech, a number of terms in his lexicon bear technical senses. I have tried to catch and explain those that appear in this book, but if the reader still finds a term unclear, or desires a fuller account, an excellent source is William Wallace's handy reference work, *The Elements of Philosophy*.

Introduction

Manuductio

ACCORDING TO ONE OF his earliest biographies, when Thomas Aquinas was a boy of five or so, he would pester his tutor with the question, *quid est Deus*—what is God?¹ Poor tutor. Sooner or later the youth would come to understand that only one man could possibly answer that question satisfactorily: the God-man. But its hold on him never slackened. That is why he became a theologian. He also never lost his readiness to learn from other, merely human persons about the things they were qualified to teach. That may be one reason why he became such a great teacher himself, eventually dubbed Angelic.

A term that Thomas himself often uses to describe the activity of teaching is *manuductio*, leading by the hand. Teachers bring us from familiar truths, truths that we already know, to others hitherto unfamiliar or unknown. It usually takes time, and patience. Thomas thinks angels take in whole fields of knowledge in an instant, but our earthbound, sense-bound mind is made to proceed gradually, step by step.² Thomas finds pedagogical *manuductio* practiced in quite a variety of ways and settings, the chief practitioner being God Himself.³

1. Petrus Calo, *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, §3, 19.

2. See George, “Mind Forming and *Manuductio*.”

3. See, for example, *De ver.*, q. 14, a. 10.

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But there is also a kind of *manuductio* into divine matters that is practiced mainly by human teachers, and in which Thomas especially excelled. It is the kind that he ascribes to philosophy when he considers it from the theologian's viewpoint. Philosophy, he says, regards what can be known by man's natural reason. The things proper to theology, by contrast, are above reason (which does not mean contrary to it). The philosophical things, then, are more familiar or better known to us. Indeed, without reason, neither faith nor any other kind of access to divine truth would even be possible for us, any more than it is for beasts. So the human mind, Thomas judges, "is more easily led by the hand" from philosophical things into the things of theology.⁴ Later we will look at his conception of philosophical *manuductio* in more detail. But for a testimony to his own proficiency at it, let us fast-forward to a few weeks after his death.

Thomas died before reaching fifty. At the time of his demise he was traveling in southern Italy, which was the region that had witnessed his birth, his upbringing, and the discovery of his vocation as a Dominican friar. But he had moved extensively over Europe during his short life, and the place where he had spent most time and made most impact, first as a student and then as a theologian, was Paris. So it is not too surprising that authorities at the university of Paris, upon learning of his passing, should have sent the Dominicans a letter of condolence.⁵ But the emotion avowed in the letter, even allowing for rhetorical excess, is striking. "For news has come to us which floods us with grief and amazement, bewilders our understanding, transfixes our innermost vitals, and well-nigh breaks our hearts." They went so far as to claim for Paris the right to Thomas's remains.

But two other features of the letter are what interest us most. First, it speaks on behalf of only part of the university's personnel: "the rector and the procurators, and the other Parisian masters presently teaching in the Faculty of Arts." The Faculty of Arts was what we could call the Philosophy Department. Second, other things, besides Thomas's body, were also requested. These included "some writings pertaining to philosophy, begun by him at Paris, left unfinished at his departure, and completed, we believe, in the place to which he had been transferred." Possibly among these was his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.⁶

4. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

5. See Foster, *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 153–57.

6. See Weisheipl, *Thomas D'Aquino*, 332.

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The letter made no reference at all either to the Faculty of Theology or to any of Thomas's own theological works. Of course, the theologians might have reacted separately to the news of his death, leaving no record. Still, the omission does bring to mind the doctrinal tensions that had arisen between Thomas and some of the less Aristotelian-minded, more conservative theologians at Paris, including Stephen Tempier, now the city's Bishop.⁷ And there is irony here, because it is not that Thomas's relations with the Arts Faculty were always perfectly smooth. Just four years earlier, he had produced a polemical tract against a position that was being promoted by some of the Arts masters themselves (and was formally condemned by Tempier the same year).⁸ Thomas attacked the position as at once contrary to the faith, to Aristotle's views, and to the principles of philosophy. Philosophers are an unpredictable lot. Was the Paris letter written despite that tract, or partly because of it?

The intellectual situation today is rather more complex, of course, but with regard to how Thomas is seen, there do seem to be some similarities. Obviously the proportion of Christians among philosophers is lower now than in the thirteenth century, and so is the interest in theological matters. But is there any other theologian, past *or* present, for whom philosophers show anything like the regard they show for Aquinas? A brilliant contemporary reader of Aristotle, for example, talking about commentaries on the *De anima*, says, "For students the only one I found useful is the one by Aquinas. While I disagree with him about some vital issues, I find him somewhat helpful to first readers at every point. He stretches out what Aristotle compresses."⁹ (He leads by the hand.) Nor is the esteem confined to the Aristotle experts. Among the heirs of Frege and Wittgenstein there is a current called analytical Thomism.¹⁰ Some of Husserl's students have gone deeply into Thomas. On the practical side, Thomas is present in action theory, virtue ethics, and legal theory. The Straussians respect him. Even some Heideggerians engage him. (I am thinking of Heidegger's hostility toward Aristotle and of his view of faith and philosophy as mutually inimical.) Some may say that the theological intent underlying Thomas's philosophizing detracts from its strictly philosophical value, or from its intrinsic

7. See below, 10–14.

8. The tract is *On the Unity of the Intellect*.

9. Gendlin, *Line by Line Commentary*, vol. 1, Introduction, 8.

10. See Haldane, *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value*, and Paterson and Pugh (eds.), *Analytical Thomism*.

INTRODUCTION

intelligibility (which is almost the same thing). But surely the broad interest that it generates among philosophers at least suggests otherwise.

As for Thomas's relation to contemporary Catholic theology, this is a topic far exceeding the limits both of these pages and of my competence, but I will hazard a few remarks.¹¹ He does remain a reference-point, though his views certainly do not have the quasi-canonical status they once had. That was, at best, a mixed blessing anyway, especially as concerned the direct study and assessment of his own works in their own setting. Such study now proliferates. But of course it is mostly confined to specialists. The general attitude among the theologians, in a way reminiscent of his own time, seems to be one of wariness. And even those who are favorable to him seem inclined to discount his philosophical thought and, when they must treat it, to downplay the Aristotelian side. All of this is not explained merely by the burgeoning of scriptural and patristic studies (which Thomas would surely have welcomed). In part, it is a reaction to what are perceived as the rationalistic excesses of the Neo-Scholastic approach that dominated Catholic theology in the first half of the twentieth century. But other factors surely figure in as well; for instance, the influence, direct or indirect, of Martin Heidegger. Perhaps, however, the attitude is less pervasive now than it was two or three decades ago.¹²

I have no wish to promote Thomas's philosophical thought to the detriment of his theology. That would be silly. Thomas was a theologian. Period. And he himself denies that theology absolutely needs philosophy.¹³ Nevertheless he just happened to find philosophy useful in theology. He also just happened to think that, in order to use it, one first had to master it. And to me it seems undeniable that, in his particular case, the quality of the theology produced was very much a function of the philosophical mastery achieved. Of course, it depended on many other things too, things

11. My acquaintance with Protestant theology is very partial, but my impression is that, within it, Thomas is being read more than ever, and with excellent results. For instance, there is the study by Princeton theologian John Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, and also that of his student David Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity*.

12. See, for example, Reinhard Hütter's *Dust Bound for Heaven* and Matthew Levering's *Scripture and Metaphysics*. Both theologians have also produced several other fine works. A strong resurgence of high-quality Thomistic theology has been taking place for some time now within the Dominican order, both in North America and in Europe; currently prominent names include Serge-Thomas Bonino, Gilles Emery, Michael Sherwin, and Thomas Joseph White. Very interesting theological studies, mostly in English, are also coming out of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht in the Netherlands.

13. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

INTRODUCTION

shared by Thomas and other great theologians: a profound acquaintance with Scripture and the Fathers, personal holiness, a keen mind, taste for study, writing skills, and so forth. But I think that a Thomas without his philosophy would have been rather like a young David without his sling.

1

Matrices

Philosophy in the Setting of Thomas's Life,
Thought, and Works

Student

THOMAS AQUINAS WAS BORN in or around 1225.¹ His birthplace, halfway between Rome and Naples, lay on the edge of the kingdom of Sicily, and therefore under the rule of emperor Frederick II, but near the Papal States. The place's name, Roccasecca, is sometimes rendered Dry Rock, but much closer would be Dry Fort or Dry Castle. Or, if we have to have an echo, hardly less accurate than Dry Rock would be Dry Rook, in the sense of the chess piece. In fact, the place's single remaining tower rather resembles one, and the word could serve as a reminder of the Arab influence on medieval culture generally and on Thomas's thought (although he may not have played the game). His father was a knight. His mother, if not a queen, was a noblewoman, a countess.

They had nine children. As the youngest of the four boys, Thomas would have been expected to enter the service of the Church, and the family may have nourished hopes of his succeeding his paternal uncle as abbot

1. Most of the biographical information in this chapter is taken from Torrell, *Initiation*.

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of the important Benedictine monastery at nearby Monte Cassino. In any case, at the age of five or six he was sent there as an oblate to learn the liberal arts.

Whether on account of his precocity, or because the abbey was drawn more and more into the Guelph–Ghibelline conflict, at about the age of fourteen Thomas was sent to the university that Frederick had founded at Naples in 1224. There the youth continued with the liberal arts and began to study philosophy. It was a lucky circumstance. The university was already a major European intellectual center, and almost nowhere else in Christendom could Thomas have been exposed so fully to the thought of Aristotle.

Only very recently had the bulk of Aristotle's writings been translated into Latin. They were causing a stir throughout the continent, and Church authorities regarded them with some suspicion. This was perhaps in part because they arrived accompanied by translations of the commentaries of the great Arab philosophers Avicenna (†1037) and Averroes (†1198), some of whose readings seemed to favor heretical views. In any case, when Thomas began his philosophical studies, ecclesiastical universities such as the one at Paris did not allow the official teaching of any but a fraction of Aristotle's works, those on logic and ethics. Frederick's civil university had no such restrictions.

A certain Peter of Ireland, himself author of a commentary on one of Aristotle's logical treatises, was Thomas's main guide through the so-called natural books. These covered all the natural sciences then known, and also the master philosophical science of metaphysics. Thomas never acquired more than a basic knowledge of Greek, but eventually he would be counted among Aristotle's greatest interpreters, and his distinctive way of using the teachings of "the Philosopher," both in philosophy and in theology, is a hallmark of his thought.

It was also at Naples that Thomas met the new order of mendicant friars, the Dominicans, founded at Toulouse in 1215. He soon decided to enter their ranks. The decision encountered severe opposition from his family, but his will proved adamant, and eventually they relented. Soon afterwards, in 1245 or thereabouts, his Dominican superiors sent him to their priory in Paris, Saint Jacques, to continue his philosophical studies. He also began the formal study of theology, apparently even before finishing the philosophy curriculum. There is a manuscript containing his own transcriptions of a series of courses on that great Syrian theologian, now

known as pseudo-Dionysius, whom the medievals identified with Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17:34). The professor was the renowned German Dominican, Albert the Great.

Perhaps Albert's recognition of Thomas's qualities was what led to the young friar's early entry into theology. At any rate, when Albert left Paris in 1248 to assume the direction of a new Dominican house of studies in Cologne, Thomas went along. There, besides studying Sacred Scripture and perhaps writing his first biblical commentaries (on *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, and *Lamentations*), he continued transcribing the courses on pseudo-Dionysius, and he also transcribed a course of Albert's on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is somewhat surprising, since by then he would have finished philosophy. But whatever the explanation, Thomas clearly treasured the course. He kept his notes from it and made use of them even long afterwards, in composing the moral part of the *Summa theologiae*.

It would be hard to exaggerate Albert's influence on Thomas. If the young friar needed any help in learning to value philosophy, no one was more suited to provide it than Albert. Thomas must have been inspired by Albert's gigantic effort to assimilate Aristotle's thought and to integrate it with the Neoplatonism that was more traditional among Christian thinkers. This is not to say that the disciple's mind was in every way like the master's. For instance, Thomas shows considerably less interest in natural history. His real bent and genius were metaphysical. And in his own synthesis of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, the former is much more dominant than it is in Albert's. Perhaps on this account, and whether for better or for worse, scholars generally seem to agree that Thomas's synthesis also looks more unified.

Probably while at Cologne, Thomas was ordained to the priesthood. In 1251 or 1252 he returned to the Dominican priory at Paris, now as sub-regent. At the university he soon began working toward the most advanced degree in theology, that of Master. The program was intense. There were many courses on Sacred Scripture, other Christian writings, and specific theological topics. The candidate also had to deliver a series of lectures of his own, based on the standard theological textbook of the time, the *Sentences*. This was a broad summary of Christian doctrine, weaving together Scriptural texts and opinions ("sentences") of Fathers of the Church, compiled by the twelfth-century Bishop of Paris, Peter Lombard. The commentary on the *Sentences* that resulted from Thomas's lectures was his first major

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work. His last, the *Summa theologiae*, would be motivated, at least in part, by dissatisfaction with the *Sentences* as a book for beginners in theology.

Before finishing his studies, Thomas also composed two short philosophical treatises, *On the Principles of Nature* and the more famous *On Being and Essence*. The first lays out the main ideas governing the Aristotelian philosophy of nature or of physical reality. We will look at some of those ideas later. The second work offers an extraordinary synthesis, and even development, of the doctrine contained in the daunting middle books of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The focus is on the constitution of the essences of things at different levels of reality: substances and accidents, material and immaterial substances, and God. Both works show the influence of the Arab commentators on Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes.

Sources

Having finished his formal education, Thomas devoted the rest of his life to teaching and writing. This seems a good place to suspend the narrative and to say something about the principal sources of his thought, which is to say, the writers who chiefly influenced him. Like most of his contemporaries, Thomas considered himself heir to an ancient and venerable intellectual tradition, and to a large extent his own work can be seen as a kind of dialogue with its main representatives, the so-called *auctores*.

The word is not easy to translate. It is certainly weightier than our *author*. But if we say *authority*, we must be careful about the kind of authority we mean. It is not that of a commander or a lawgiver. It is that of a teacher, a person deemed a reliable source and guide in the process of acquiring knowledge. The difference is not small. Following a commander or lawgiver consists mainly in obeying, executing orders. This may sometimes require asking for clarification of the order's meaning, or even of its purpose; but the point is to obey. Of course following a teacher also involves performing assigned tasks. But the point is to learn. And learning is very much a matter of asking questions. A good commander will allow some questions, but a good teacher welcomes, even provokes them. A medieval thinker was always putting questions to the *auctores*. This was not because he doubted whether they knew what they were talking about, but precisely because he was sure that, on the whole, they did.²

2. On the medieval attitude toward teaching authority, see the fine discussion in Martin, *Thomas Aquinas*, 1–14.

Thomas's authoritative sources were many and various. First, of course, came the Sacred Scriptures, which because of the divine inspiration attributed to them constituted a class by themselves. Then there were the writings of the Church Fathers and other venerable Christian authors: Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory the Great, Boethius, Origen, pseudo-Dionysius, John Chrysostom, Nemesius, John Damascene, Anselm, Peter Lombard, and especially the one whom Thomas qualifies as *egregius*, outstanding: Augustine.³ Of non-Christian writers, certainly the most influential on Thomas was Aristotle. Of Plato's works he knew only the *Timaeus*. His conception of Platonic thought was based partly on what Aristotle says about it and partly on authors of more or less Neoplatonic inspiration—chiefly Boethius, Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius, and Proclus. In ethics, Stoicism was important for him, especially as presented in the writings of Seneca and Cicero. Also very influential were a number of Jewish and Islamic thinkers, especially Moses Maimonides, Avicenna (also strongly Neoplatonic), Algazel, and Averroes (called the Commentator, on account of his impressive commentaries on Aristotle). Thomas also cites a large number of lesser authors.

Naturally another major factor in the configuration of his thought was interaction with contemporary thinkers. Tracing this requires some expertise. He almost never names his contemporaries, even in polemical writings. Occasionally he will say that "some persons" hold a given position. And he has passages that seem to be echoing some other writer, but none is cited. At that time there was little or no notion of intellectual property.

Indeed, even though medieval thinkers were as prone to vainglory as anyone else, they seldom went out of their way to seem merely original. If anything, they would downplay their originality and stress their continuity with the tradition. They would almost never directly contradict an *auctor* if they could avoid it; that is, if they could plausibly interpret him in a way that was consistent with their own view. Precisely because the *auctor* was a teacher, the distinction between interpreting what he said on a given matter and inquiring into the matter itself was rather a fine one. A famous remark of Thomas's, that "the study of philosophy is not for the sake of knowing what men thought, but what the truth of things is," actually appears in the midst of a very painstaking commentary on Aristotle.⁴ The remark can hardly mean that he cared little for what his sources really thought or was

3. *Contra errores Graecorum*, pars 1, Proem.

4. *In De caelo*, I, lect. 22, §228[8].

ready to foist his own ideas on them whenever it suited him. On the contrary, the concern in his commentaries to get at the author's real meaning is so evident that some scholars have doubted whether these works can be assumed to give us his views about "the truth of things." Nevertheless he does sometimes take the opportunity to carry the discussion of the things well beyond what he thinks the author is saying about them; and on a few occasions, he even disagrees explicitly with the author's position. The most famous case is his rejection of Aristotle's would-be proofs of the perpetuity of motion and time.⁵ These points suggest that usually, if he does not say otherwise, Thomas accepts the author's view as true.

If today we tend to take Thomas's commentaries on Aristotle and other philosophers as having only the author's meaning, and not the truth of the matter, for their immediate object, I think it is partly because of how our own philosophy departments typically organize their curricula. In one group are the courses consisting in the direct study of some subject or topic, perhaps with a textbook produced by the professor or by one or more colleagues. Here indeed the aim is to get at the truth of the matter. But what are called the historical course are another group. Their aim is to understand past thinkers and to trace their influences. So we come to assume that is one thing to study metaphysics, and quite another to study Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

Now, in the medieval university, the courses of instruction were also mainly of two kinds or formats: *lectiones* and *disputationes*.⁶ In a *lectio* (whence *lesson*), the professor read directly from some established authoritative text (few students had their own copies!) and commented on it. The *disputatio* format was a sort of cross between a seminar and a debate, in which the students played a very active role. Generally the *disputationes* were for more advanced students, presupposing the knowledge acquired in the *lectiones*. But it is not at all that the *lectiones* were purely historical and the *disputationes* purely thematic. Both were historical, and both thematic. The *Metaphysics* was both a strange old tome for experts to interpret and a current textbook for everyone in the program to assimilate and argue about. Does this mean that medieval scholars were less alive than we are to the historical dimension of the old works? Perhaps so, but they were far from unconscious of it. Thomas himself displays a sharp critical sense

5. *In Phys.*, VIII, lect. 2, §986[16]–90[20].

6. See Torrell, *Initiation*, 87–90.

regarding the attribution of authorship.⁷ And his works are rife with accounts of how thinkers have handled a given topic over the course of time. (In this too he is following Aristotle.) In any case, it seems safe to say that medieval scholars were more alive to the historical dimension of their own textbooks than we often are.

But my concern is not with the value of the medieval approach. It is with Thomas's aim in his commentaries.⁸ He thought of Aristotle's works not only as historical documents, but also as philosophical sources (albeit human and hence fallible ones). He commented on the *Metaphysics* expecting it to be used as a metaphysics textbook. He was not just doing the part of metaphysics which is the history of metaphysics. He was doing metaphysics *tout court*.

How far Thomas's philosophical thought can be termed Aristotelian is disputed, and I suppose it always will be. While he certainly accepts Aristotle's criticisms of Plato, an influence of Neoplatonism on him is undeniable.⁹ The influence is especially strong in what regards the divine nature and its relation to the world. Aristotle says relatively little about that, and of course for Thomas nothing is more important. Still, it seems safe to say that in all areas of philosophy, including that one, he shows a constant and strong determination to keep his teachings in harmony with the principles he finds in Aristotle. Perhaps *determination* is not even the right word, since it suggests deliberate effort. Thinking like Aristotle seems to come almost naturally to Thomas, probably more so than to any other Christian theologian, before or since. At any rate, such is my impression. But what makes this point interesting theoretically, and not just biographically, is that thinking like a Christian also came quite instinctively to him. That, I take it, cannot be dismissed as a mere impression.

Teacher

When we paused to consider Thomas's relation to his sources, our narrative had reached the early 1250s, when he was doing advanced studies in theology and lecturing on Lombard's *Sentences*. At that time the secular clergy who controlled the university were waging a bitter attack on the young mendicant orders—the Franciscans and the Dominicans—and trying to

7. See below, 14, on the *Liber de causis*.

8. On this question see Weisheipl, *Thomas D'Aquino*, 280–85.

9. See Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism*.

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exclude them from the teaching staff. Moreover, the university's statutes set the minimum age for a master at thirty-five. Nevertheless, thanks to the intervention of Pope Alexander IV, in the spring of 1256 Thomas was granted the title of Master of Theology. He joined the faculty in 1257, the same year as his fellow student and (as it were) Franciscan counterpart, Bonaventure. By another notable coincidence, it was also during the early 1250s that the Arts Faculty obtained ecclesiastical permission to include in its curriculum the entire Aristotelian corpus. This would eventually lead to the controversies between Arts masters and theologians that we glimpsed in the Introduction and will see in more detail shortly.

For about three years Thomas occupied the university's Dominican chair in Theology. During this time he produced the lengthy *Disputed Questions on Truth*, which, despite its title, covers many topics in addition to truth: divine, angelic, and human knowledge; the good; free choice; the passions; grace and justification. He wrote several shorter works as well, including the philosophically important commentary on part of Boethius's *De Trinitate*, and quite possibly the no less important commentary on Boethius's *De ebdomadibus*. There is also a short disputed question *On the Immortality of the Soul* that Thomas may have composed in or around 1259.¹⁰

In June of 1259, Thomas was called to take part in a general chapter of the Dominicans at Valenciennes, in which important decisions were taken regarding the friars' studies. After the end of the school year he travelled south, spending the next ten years or so at various places in Italy. Between 1261 and 1265 he was mostly in Orvieto at the Dominican convent (not at the Papal court, as is sometimes said). Besides attending to heavy responsibilities as teacher, consultor, and preacher, he composed a long commentary on the book of Job and compiled most of his famous *Catena Aurea*, a "golden chain" of passages from Fathers of the Church connected to form a running commentary on the four Gospels, "as though by a single teacher."¹¹

In Orvieto Thomas also completed one of his most original and influential works, the *Summa contra gentiles*. Apparently this title is not his. What the manuscripts indicate is *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith against*

10. This work is usually tagged as of doubtful authenticity, but see Kennedy, "A New Disputed Question," and Torrell, *Initiation*, 619–20. Torrell calls for a comparison with other works of Aquinas. This has been done: Bergamino, "Quaestio disputata." The results favor authenticity, especially if the work's dating turns out to be fairly early. On the overall trajectory of Thomas's writings on the topic, see Dewan, *Form and Being*, 175–87.

11. Guilelmus de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, XVIII, 130.

the Errors of Unbelievers. Occasionally the work (or at least all but its fourth and final Book) has also been misrepresented in a more substantial way, as a kind of *Summa philosophiae*. This fits neither with the stated intention of manifesting the essential truths of the Catholic faith and eliminating contrary errors, nor with the numerous scriptural citations throughout, nor with the fact that it starts with the consideration of God, which for Thomas is where philosophy ends and only theology begins. Clearly its very subject matter is God and what pertains to Him. It is theology.¹² If it is laden with philosophical material, so are Thomas's other theological writings. For various reasons, in the present book I draw much more on the other *Summa*, but I do not in any way mean to belittle this one.

From 1265 to 1268 Thomas was mostly in Rome, setting up and directing a new Dominican house of studies. Here he composed his own commentary on pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names*, a commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, perhaps some of the commentaries on epistles of Saint Paul, and three sizable sets of disputed questions: *On the Soul*, *On Spiritual Creatures*, and *On the Power of God*. All the evidence indicates that he also undertook a new commentary on the *Sentences* during this period.¹³ But that project was halted, giving way to a theology textbook of his own devising: the *Summa theologiae*. He produced its First Part while still in Rome.

Though never finished, this work is generally, and justly, deemed Thomas's masterpiece. The only one that he himself called a *Summa*, it is not so much "against the errors of the unbelievers" as for the instruction of believers, although of course such instruction is partly about dealing with errors. Its proem says it is for "beginners" in Catholic truth. Nowadays this makes first-time readers laugh (or moan). For indeed it is no penny catechism. And even a quick skim leaves no doubt of its presupposing a serious philosophical training—if not on the students' part, at least on the part of the teacher basing his classes on it.

The *Summa* is divided into three Parts, with the Second subdivided into two. The work breaks off at Question 90 of the Third Part.¹⁴ The rationale of the *Summa*'s structure has been the object of much discussion.

12. See Torrell, *Initiation*, 598. On the method and purpose of the *Summa contra gentiles*, see *ibid.*, 148–70; also Tuninetti, "L'argomentazione dialettica." On how philosophical and theological treatments of God differ for Thomas, see below, 17–24.

13. Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura romana in primum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*.

14. There is also the *Supplementum*, a compilation of texts that some disciples of Thomas selected from his (first) commentary on the *Sentences* and arranged according to the apparent plan of the portion never written.

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This is surprising, since the work itself provides ample explanations of its structure, both overall and within specific sections.¹⁵ Sometimes readers are surprised by the fact that it leaves the thematic treatment of Jesus Christ for the Third Part. Thomas says that the First Part is about God; the Second, about man's movement toward God; and the Third, about Christ, who as man is our way of tending toward God.¹⁶ He also describes the Third Part's object as the "consummation of all things theological."¹⁷ The treatment of Jesus Christ comes last, then, because it is the most important. Christ is at the summit, and Thomas, we might say, has taken upon himself the task of leading us by the hand toward Him.

In 1268 Thomas was sent back to Paris to occupy the Dominican chair in Theology for a second time. The motive is uncertain, but he immediately found himself embroiled in serious controversies. One of them was a renewal of the struggle between the secular clergy and the mendicants. Others more directly involved philosophical matters. These highlight the extent to which Thomas's thought moved outside the prevalent currents at the university. Let me suspend the narrative again and explain some of the things at issue in these disputes.

Maverick

One of the controversies centered on certain views being put forward by some members of the university's Faculty of Arts. By then the restrictions on teaching Aristotle at Paris had been lifted for quite some time, and in fact the Aristotelian corpus dominated the philosophy curriculum. In expounding Aristotle, these Arts masters—the most prominent being Siger of Brabant—adhered rather closely to the interpretations of Averroes. For this reason, they are often referred to as Latin Averroists. Some scholars, however, prefer to call them radical Aristotelians, or even heterodox Aristotelians. These epithets better indicate the nature of the controversy. For the complaints were not coming from other Arts masters who disagreed with the Averroistic readings of Aristotle. They were coming from the Faculty of Theology.

15. For an account of the rationale based on these explanations, see te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 11–18.

16. *STh*, I, q. 2, Proem.

17. *STh*, III, Proem.

What troubled the theologians was not that Aristotle was being taken to say one thing or another. It was that everything he was taken to say was being presented as solid philosophy—whether or not it fit with Catholic doctrine. The Arts masters knew very well that some of the theses which they attributed to Aristotle were contrary to the faith. The three most notorious ones were that the world had no temporal beginning; that all human intellectual activity is seated in a single intellect, which somehow interacts with individual human beings but which exists apart from them; and that, inasmuch as the animating principles—the *animae*, souls—of individual human beings are not intellectual, neither are they immortal.

Now, contrary to what is often said about them, the Arts masters did not quite call those theses true. The Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, did eventually accuse them of speaking “as though” there were a “double truth”—one in theology, and a contradictory one in philosophy. And indeed their position seemed to imply such a view. But there is no evidence that they actually asserted it, and really their having done so is scarcely plausible. No self-respecting Aristotelian could uphold such a breach of the principle regarded by Aristotle as the most fundamental truth of all, that mutually contradictory assertions cannot hold together. What the Arts masters held was only that those theses, whether in contradiction with truths of the faith or not, followed validly from necessary rational principles. Naturally, however, this did not satisfy the theologians, or the Bishop. Near the end of 1270, he formally condemned thirteen propositions, most of which are traceable to the Arts masters.

Thomas wasted no time joining the controversy. Shortly before Tempier’s condemnation, he produced his most vigorously polemical tract, *On the Unity of the Intellect*. He aimed to show that the existence of only one intellect for all human beings was neither Aristotle’s view nor philosophically sound. With this, his theological colleagues could have no quarrel.

There is another tract of his, however, also apparently dating from the second Parisian period, called *On the Eternity of the World*.¹⁸ It too bears on one of those troublesome theses: that the world had no temporal beginning. In this tract, Thomas reiterates a position for which he was already famous, and which set him against not only the Arts masters but also most of the theologians. It was not Aristotelian enough for the former, and it was too Aristotelian for the latter. Aristotle, in his *Physics*, offers proofs of the world’s lacking a temporal beginning. Thomas found the proofs

18. On its dating, see Torrell, *Initiation*, 268–73.

inconclusive. In fact, he held that no such proof was even possible. Yet he did think it possible to prove that the world was produced by God, and indeed that it was produced by Him “out of nothing,” taking this expression in the sense of “not out of something.”¹⁹ This means that God made the whole world and whatever in any way enters into its constitution; nothing in the world is independent of Him. Nevertheless, Thomas insisted, God could have produced a world with no temporal beginning, and only by revelation do we know that He gave it one. Thomas knew quite well that most of the theologians opposed him strongly on this last point, and he aimed *On the Eternity of the World* directly against them.

Moreover, although he agreed with them about the intellectual nature of individual human souls, on other issues regarding the soul he and they differed sharply.²⁰ His views on the soul involved him in controversy especially during his second stay in Paris.²¹ The clash over the soul was complicated, but what particularly troubled the other theologians was how closely Thomas associated the highest dimensions of human life with mere physical matter. For he insisted that each person has just one soul, one fundamental vital principle. It would be at the root of all the person’s vital activity, from the contemplation of truth and the exercise of free choice, which are somehow Godlike, down to sensation, which we share with beasts, and even down to the vegetative functions that we have in common with plants. Thomas even insisted that if the human body itself holds together at all—if it is truly one body and not a mere heap—the cause is this one soul. To put it in his terms, the one soul is a human being’s sole *substantial form*.²² In all of this, Thomas was defending the fundamental unity of the human person. But many theologians feared that, despite his claims to the contrary, in making the intellectual soul so involved with the body, he was jeopardizing its immortality.²³

19. See below, 125.

20. For the general picture, see Pegis, *St. Thomas and the Problem of the Soul in the Thirteenth Century*.

21. We see this in some of the public disputations that he held during that period, the so-called Quodlibets (*Quaestiones de quolibet*, literally, “questions on whatever”). In these events, open to the whole university, a master held forth on topics of his colleagues’ choosing, and fielded objections to his views. See Torrell, *Initiation*, 273–78.

22. This notion will be discussed in some detail below in subsequent chapters.

23. Some also raised Christological issues. On Thomas’s mature approach to the soul’s immortality, see below, 114–16.

Thomas's views on matter itself also raised some concerns. For example, he insisted that prime matter was pure potentiality, with no actual existence of its own.²⁴ It could only have actual existence through some form. Otherwise it would already be a full-fledged substance, and its unity with any form would be merely accidental, not substantial. In itself this idea might not have been problematic. But a corollary that Thomas drew from it was that not even God could cause matter to exist without a form. Some theologians found this to be an unacceptable limitation on divine power.

Thomas also opposed the rather widely held view that all creatures, even the incorporeal or spiritual ones, contain matter. Proponents of this view argued that things are changeable only if they have matter, and that even spiritual creatures can change (with respect to what they understand and will). Thomas agreed that all creatures can undergo change, but he thought that some kinds of change do not require matter.²⁵ Some theologians also judged that spiritual creatures had to be composed of matter and form so as to differ from God, who alone would be perfectly simple, a pure form. Thomas handled this point with his famous and eventually even more controversial distinction between substantial form and act of being, *esse*.²⁶ In all creatures, these are really distinct and constitute a real composition. Only in God are they really identical, and so only He is utterly simple.

These and other tensions between Thomas and the more conservative theological majority would come fully to a head only after his death, as would the controversy regarding the Arts masters. In 1277, after what seems to have been a rather hasty investigation, Bishop Tempier condemned a much wider-ranging set of propositions, 219 in all. The Arts masters were again the main target, but several of the propositions sounded very much like things that Thomas was known to have taught. It was probably no coincidence that the condemnation was issued on March 7, his date of death. There is evidence that Tempier also initiated a separate inquiry into Thomas's works, which was cut short by orders from Rome. That same year, a more limited but similar condemnation was issued for Oxford by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Dominican Robert Kilwardby. Scholars

24. On prime matter, see below, 40–44.

25. See below, 79n73.

26. See below, 126–30.

usually see 1277 as a watershed in the story of Thomas's influence and of medieval thought generally. But this is beyond our scope.²⁷

Happy Ending

During the second Parisian period Thomas produced several important works: the Second Part and some of the Third Part of the *Summa theologiae*; commentaries on the Gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint John; the disputed questions *On the Virtues* and *On Evil*;²⁸ full commentaries on Aristotle's *De sensu et sensato* and *Physics*; large portions of commentaries on the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Metaphysics* (both completed at Naples); and unfinished commentaries on the *De interpretatione*, the *Politics*, and the *Meteorology*. Also at that time he composed most, if not all, of his commentary on the so-called *Liber de causis*. This difficult work had long been attributed to Aristotle. Albert already doubted this attribution, and Thomas correctly identified the work as a compilation, by an Arab author, of excerpts from the *Elementatio theologica* of the pagan Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus.

Thomas could make that identification thanks to a recent translation of the *Elementatio theologica* from the original Greek by William of Moerbeke (†1286). This learned Flemish Dominican translated numerous Greek philosophical works into Latin, including several of Aristotle's. Thomas certainly took ample advantage of his confrere's work. Contrary to what is often said, however, there is no strong evidence of direct collaboration between them.²⁹

On the other hand, Thomas's enormous output would have been impossible without a team of assistants helping to prepare his materials and to put his words on parchment.³⁰ Early biographies speak of his often dictating to three or four secretaries at the same time. This may strain credibility, but the facts are not easily explained otherwise. By a reasonable calculation, taking a page as three hundred words, during Thomas's four years in Paris he averaged about fourteen pages per day.

27. See Torrell, *Initiation*, 433–63.

28. The important sixth Question, which consists of a single article on free choice, is generally thought to be a separate composition, of uncertain circumstances.

29. Torrell, *Initiation*, 253–58.

30. *Ibid.*, 350–57.

In the spring of 1272 Thomas left Paris for the last time. His next and final teaching post was in Naples, at the head of yet another new Dominican house of studies. Its location seems to have been chosen by Thomas himself, possibly with the encouragement of king Charles II. Here, in addition to commentaries on Saint Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* and on the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, and perhaps the unfinished commentary on the *Psalms*, he continued with the Third Part of the *Summa theologiae*, brought to completion the commentaries on the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Metaphysics*, initiated a commentary on the *De generatione et corruptione*, and composed a substantial portion of a commentary on the *De caelo*. This last work presents an extraordinary display of both philosophical and astronomical erudition. Perhaps also in Naples, if not previously in Paris, he undertook a treatise, never finished, concerning the angels, the metaphysically penetrating *On Separate Substances*.

On or around December 6, 1273, while celebrating Mass, Thomas underwent an experience of some kind that left him visibly altered. Afterwards he showed no desire to continue writing. According to his closest companion, Reginald of Piperno, he offered only a very brief explanation: "I can do no more. Everything that I have written seems like straw in comparison with what I have seen." What he meant by this has invited many conjectures. A subsequent event, however, indicates that it was in no way a repudiation of his thought, and that the experience had not at all affected his mental faculties. After a few weeks of rest at his sister's home near Naples, toward the end of January or the beginning of February he set out with some other friars for Lyons, where the Pope had convoked a Council for May 1. On the way, Thomas was asked to stop at Monte Cassino and explain to the monks a passage from Gregory the Great on the compatibility of God's infallible knowledge of the future with human freedom. Unwilling to make the detour, Thomas instead dictated a response, the *Epistola ad Bernardum abbatem casinensem*. It is one of his clearest treatments of the topic.

Further on in the trip Thomas struck his head against a low-hanging branch. The incident left him stunned, but he brushed it off. Some days later they stopped at the home of his niece, where he fell ill. It is here that he is said to have expressed a desire for fresh herrings. Normally he did not request special dishes, but he had lost his appetite and was pressed by the physician about what he might be able to ingest. A passing fishmonger was found to have a basketful of them, even though they were unknown in that region and the fishmonger swore that he had been carrying sardines. This

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episode was recounted during Thomas's process of canonization. There is no indication that it influenced the process's outcome.

After a few days Thomas attempted to travel again, but fatigue forced him to stop at the abbey of Fossanova. There his condition worsened rapidly. On March 7, 1274, two or three days after receiving the Sacrament of Penance and Viaticum, and a day after receiving the Anointing of the Sick, he expired.

Despite the request of the Paris Arts masters, Thomas's remains were kept at Fossanova until 1369, when they were transferred to the Dominican church at Toulouse. Pope John XXII opened his process of canonization on August 7, 1316, and proclaimed him Saint on July 18, 1323. In 1325, the Bishop of Paris revoked the articles of Tempier's 1277 condemnation "insofar as they touch or are said to touch on the doctrine of blessed Thomas." His doctrinal authority grew apace. Until the mid-sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic liturgy celebrated only four Doctors of the Church: Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Gregory the Great. On April 15, 1567, Pope Pius V added five names to the list: Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Thomas Aquinas. It is striking that the most recent of the other eight Doctors, Gregory the Great, lived seven centuries before him.

According to testimonies given during his process of canonization, in manhood Thomas was of lofty stature, heavy, erect and well-proportioned; his large head was well-shaped and somewhat bald; his complexion, delicate and "like the color of new wheat." He was serenely cheerful and seldom in a bad mood, taciturn and given to abstraction but not aloof, capable of irony but never mordant or sarcastic, patient and kind with his students, modest but firm with his colleagues. Even his staunchest opponents acknowledged the nobility of his character. Although he travelled a good deal, outwardly his life was relatively uneventful, spent largely in prayer, study, preaching, teaching, and writing. He desired no other. In 1265, on being named Archbishop of Naples by the Pope, he begged—successfully—to be excused.

Thomas's staggering production displays a mind as tireless as it was quick. His extant, undoubtedly authentic works total about sixty; a number of others have been attributed to him over the centuries, some of probable authenticity, some dubious, and some spurious.³¹ His genres were common

31. A very informative catalogue compiled by Gilles Emery, O.P., can be found in Torrell, *Initiation*, 483–525, 611–32. The works have been classified in various ways. Probably the least disputable is by genre, as in Emery's catalogue.

enough in his time, but today readers need to be familiarized with them in order to read the works with ease and profit. Two of the major genres, the textual commentary and the disputed question, reflect those two most usual teaching formats in the university, the *lectio* and the *disputatio*. But not all of Thomas's works in these genres were the result of classroom activity, and the disputed question format is more or less explicitly present in several works of other genres, most notably the commentary on the *Sentences*, the commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*, and the *Summa theologiae*. Although his main views were remarkably constant throughout his career, he did change his position on some issues, and even when his conclusions remained the same, his ways of addressing many questions underwent significant development. At the very least, it is important not to lose sight of the chronology of his works.

In scholarly writing Thomas achieved a distinctive blend of rigor, clarity, simplicity, and elegance. The dryness of expression and almost total absence of references to himself are sometimes regarded as the unconscious symptoms of a mere want of feeling. But such a judgment is hard to square with the artful, theologically precise, yet movingly intimate eucharistic prayer, *Adoro te devote*.³²

Handmaid

The rest of this chapter is about the place of philosophy in Thomas's thought. He studied and wrote about philosophy because he considered it useful for his theological work.³³ His chief philosophical interests were in the areas that overlap with theology—God, the soul, morality, and so on—and theological issues were often what prompted his best philosophical thinking. Nevertheless, as is shown by his commentaries on Aristotle, he cultivated the philosophical sciences quite thoroughly.

In order to understand Thomas's view of the relation between philosophy and theology, a good place to begin is the very first article of the *Summa theologiae*. There he asks whether, in addition to the philosophical disciplines, human beings need any other doctrine. He is taking it quite for granted that philosophy is a valid and even necessary factor in human well-being. He is probably also assuming that his reader has already received

32. See Wielockx, "Poetry and Theology," and Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 239–59.

33. For a helpful synthetic presentation of the role of philosophy in theology for Thomas, see West, "The Functioning of Philosophy in Aquinas."

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a philosophical formation. On the other hand, his answer shows that he judges philosophy insufficient, even gravely so. Human beings need another doctrine as well, one that exceeds the power of human reason and is revealed by God; and they need it in view of their very end, the ultimate point and perfection of human life. For the end itself exceeds reason's comprehension. It is something supernatural, the heavenly vision of God "face to face," as He is in Himself.³⁴ If we are going to play any kind of intelligent role in the process of arriving at this goal, we need information about it, and about the way to reach it, that we cannot obtain on our own.

To be sure, even this thesis, that man's end exceeds reason, is known with certainty only by revelation. Thomas's fundamental account of the need for theology is itself theological. He does not base the need for theology, or what he more commonly calls sacred doctrine, on philosophical or any other non-theological truths. Quite generally, he holds that theology is altogether sufficient unto itself for its validity. Some of its teachings depend on others—it contains both principles and conclusions—but none of them depends on extraneous principles or needs to be verified in the light of non-theological knowledge. Its principles are not things proved by philosophy. They are held on faith, through belief in God's Word, as such.

Thomas also finds it significant that divine revelation has come to our aid even with regard to that limited body of truths about God and about our relation to Him that, at least in principle, reason itself can grasp. These truths, which Thomas calls preambles of the faith, include God's existence, many of His attributes, and the fact that worship is due to Him and to Him alone. Revelation itself teaches that reason can know such truths.³⁵ And Thomas is sure that some philosophers actually did hit upon them.³⁶ (He generally restricts the term *philosopher* to pagan thinkers—truth-seekers using reason alone.) But without revelation, these truths "would be known only by a few, after a long time, and mixed with many errors."³⁷

This is so even though, at least in Thomas's judgment, almost the whole point of the visible world is to display its Maker to us. The problem is not that the world is intrinsically cryptic. To recall Chesterton's quip, God is the most intelligible artist of all. The problem is that our minds have been dulled by sin. Even before the fall, Thomas grants, man and woman did

34. *STh*, I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

35. Rom 1:19–20.

36. *Scg*, I, cap. 3, §14. See McNerny, *Praeambula Fidei*.

37. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 1; cf. *De ver.*, q. 14, a. 10.

not actually see God in Himself, since otherwise sin—turning away from Him—would have been impossible. God in Himself is utterly irresistible. But instead of having to go through a process of reasoning, as we do, in order to know anything concerning Him, they understood at once what His created effects show about Him.³⁸ As for our present situation, Thomas often cites a comparison of Aristotle's: in relation to the things that are most evident or intelligible in themselves, our mind is like the eye of the bat in relation to sunlight.³⁹

And yet Thomas judges philosophy—sound philosophy, following its own principles—to be highly useful in theology. Its utility consists, surprisingly enough, in its coming to the aid of our mind's weakness as we grapple with divine truth. Even though theological knowledge does not intrinsically depend on it, it makes this knowledge easier for us to acquire and to manage, because it is rooted in the things that are most intelligible to us: "from the things that are known by natural reason," our mind "is more easily led by the hand—*facilius manuducitur*—into the things above reason that are transmitted in this science."⁴⁰ The philosophical sciences thus make for a "greater manifestation" of sacred teaching. They connect supernatural truth, to the extent that such connection is possible, with things that we can see for ourselves.

Thomas says that philosophy is useful to theology in three ways: for providing likenesses or analogies to supernatural things from things that are naturally knowable; for arguing against positions contrary to the faith, either by proving them false or by showing that they are not necessarily true; and for proving those preambles of the faith.⁴¹ We might also add a fourth way in which Thomas seems to find philosophy useful in theology: for weeding out bad arguments in favor of revealed truths, such as the attempts by some to prove that the world had a temporal beginning. Thomas thinks such arguments do more harm than good.⁴²

38. *STh*, I, q. 94, a. 1, corp. & ad 3.

39. *Metaph.* II.1, 993b9–11; see, e.g., *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 1; q. 12, a. 1.

40. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2. As mentioned in the Introduction, Thomas thinks teaching generally involves a kind of *manuductio*, or rather, various kinds. A full list of passages would include works spanning his entire career, especially the *Sentences* commentary and, above all, the *Summa theologiae*. Some of the *Summa* texts: I, q. 12, a. 12; q. 117, a. 1; I–II, q. 91, a. 5, ad 1; q. 98, a. 6; q. 99, a. 6; II–II, q. 2, a. 3; q. 81, a. 7; q. 180, a. 4.

41. *In De Trin.*, q. 2, a. 3.

42. *STh*, I, q. 46, a. 2.

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So, the fact that theology is self-sufficient does not at all mean that it is simply isolated from philosophy, as though they never spoke about the same things or as though their modes of discourse were so foreign to each other as to preclude communication between them. Thomas describes theology's overall relation to the philosophical sciences as that of a superior or architectonic discipline to inferior and subordinate ones. It is like the relation of statecraft to the military arts.⁴³

In fact, because the role of the philosophical sciences in theology is to help lead us by the hand, Thomas even goes so far as say that theology uses them all as *ancillae*, handmaids.⁴⁴ Does this clash with philosophy's autonomy and dignity? Some theologians might not take the question very seriously, but Thomas would; and his answer would be no. Autonomy is self-regulation. A discipline is autonomous to the extent that its rules and principles are intrinsic to it rather than imposed on it or dictated to it from the outside. Now, Thomas does think that some human sciences get their principles from other sciences. And he thinks that all the principles of the philosophical sciences are "determined"—definitively formulated and defended—by one of them, namely metaphysics.⁴⁵ But he flatly denies that any of the principles of the philosophical sciences come from or depend upon theology.⁴⁶ Sacred doctrine functions only as a kind of touchstone for them, though an infallible one: "anything in the other sciences that is found to be contrary to the truth of sacred doctrine is condemned as altogether false."⁴⁷ And Thomas is sure that any such conflict with theological truth in some other science must entail either a violation or at least an overstepping of that science's own principles. As we saw, some of the Arts masters seem to have held it possible that a heretical, and therefore false, proposition be reached as a rationally necessary conclusion. But Thomas insists that what reason necessarily concludes can only be a necessary truth.⁴⁸

As for the dignity of this handmaid, it should almost suffice to recall what was for Thomas the most famous use of that epithet (Luke 1:38). But besides that, the fact that philosophy is being used for the sake of some end

43. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2; see also I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

44. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 5, s.c. & ad 2; cf. *In De Trin.*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 7.

45. On the relation of metaphysics to the other philosophical sciences, see below, 101–3, 152–53, 166–71.

46. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 2.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *On the Unity of the Intellect*, ch. 5.

outside of it does not, for Thomas, exclude its having an intrinsic value of its own or its being desirable for its own sake. Indeed, as he sees it, theology can make philosophy itself even more lovable. “For when a man has a will disposed to believe, he loves the truth believed, and he reflects on it and embraces any reasons for it that he finds.”⁴⁹ More generally, since the theologian is sure that all truth comes from God, he can judge that “the study of philosophy, in itself, is licit and praiseworthy, on account of the truth that the philosophers have acquired through God revealing it to them, as stated in Romans 1 [v. 19].”⁵⁰ In this respect philosophy even constitutes a kind of germ or foretaste of man’s last end, which consists in the contemplation of the highest truth.⁵¹

Ancillary Theology

Thomas of course was by no means the first Christian thinker, nor the only one of his time, to reflect on the relation between revealed truth and philosophy. Thirteenth-century thinkers gave special attention to how philosophy and theology stand with respect to the conception of scientific knowledge that is laid out in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*.⁵² To compare what Aristotle and the medievals meant by *science* with what we usually mean by it would be a complicated affair. But at least some aspects of the Aristotelian conception are still familiar enough. A science was then, and still is, a body of knowledge about a specific subject matter, verified through rigorous proof. For present purposes this is a sufficient description.

Now, Thomas holds that theology is indeed a science in the Aristotelian sense (albeit with some peculiar features that need not detain us here), and in the *Summa theologiae* he makes a visible effort to observe the canons of the *Posterior Analytics*.⁵³ But making theology a science raises an issue for him, because, as his conception of the preambles of the faith suggests, he also posits a philosophical science that treats of God. It is the science that Aristotle himself sometimes calls theological.⁵⁴ The question is, how

49. *STh*, II-II, q. 2, a. 10.

50. *STh*, II-II, q. 167, a. 1, ad 3.

51. See *STh*, I-II, q. 3, a. 6; I-II, q. 57, a. 1, ad 2.

52. For an unpacking of the doctrine of the *Posterior Analytics*, very lucid, and staying very close to Thomas’s commentary on it, is Weisheipl, *Aristotelian Methodology*.

53. On the general topic, see Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*.

54. E.g., *Metaph.*, VI.1, 1026a19; XI.7, 1064b2.

can there be two sciences of the same thing? Of course there can be two (or more) sets of opinions, or of hypotheses, or of myths about God or the gods. But a science, by definition, is a set of truths. If they are truths about the same thing, why are they not all in the same set?

Part of the answer will be that one set is revealed supernaturally, while the other is the work of natural reason. But for Thomas that cannot be the whole answer. This is because, on his view, the very subject matter of a science is what chiefly decides how the science works. As he sees it, the subject itself is the principal source of the science of it; the way in which it is known is largely the way in which it makes itself known or presents itself to the mind. The science of numbers and the science of fish proceed in very different ways, and this is mainly because numbers and fish are very different things and present themselves to us very differently.

For Thomas, then, the reason why sacred doctrine is supernaturally revealed and not the work of natural reason is precisely that its proper subject matter is God Himself. God does not naturally present Himself, as He is in Himself, to natural reason at all. He naturally presents Himself in that way only to Himself. He can share His knowledge of Himself with others, but they cannot possibly acquire it on their own. He can also share it more or less perfectly. Sacred doctrine is a rather imperfect share in it, ordered toward the far more perfect share that awaits the blessed in heaven. It is like the way in which a student who has not yet mastered a subject shares in his teacher's knowledge of it, namely, by hearing what the teacher says about it and believing that. Even for the idea of belief or faith as a way of sharing in genuine knowledge, Thomas finds support in Aristotle, who says that "he who would learn must believe."⁵⁵

But what Thomas (rarely) calls philosophical theology is not a share in God's knowledge at all.⁵⁶ And despite that designation, neither is God its proper subject matter. Of course it does treat of God. But this is only because, and insofar as, He enters into the account of its own subject matter, which must be something that does present itself to the human mind.

What is the subject of Aristotle's "theological" science? This was itself a matter of dispute in the Middle Ages. Everyone agreed that this science was the one laid out in the *Metaphysics*. They did not know that the writings contained in the *Metaphysics* were put together as a single work only after Aristotle's death, and they simply assumed that all of this book pertained

55. Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, 2, 165b3; see *STh*, II-II, q. 2, a. 3.

56. He uses this expression in *In De Trin.*, q. 5, a. 4, *in fine corp.*

to one single science. In some parts of the *Metaphysics*, however, it sounds as though the science's subject is what Aristotle calls the first or primary causes. In other places, the subject seems to be being, inasmuch as it is being, and as common to all things. In still others, it seems to be the divine "separate substances"—that is, the incorporeal beings on which all visible reality depends, and which, being alive and immortal, are duly termed gods.

On this issue the great Arab commentators, Avicenna and Averroes, disagreed. Avicenna held that the subject of metaphysics was common being, *ens commune*. Averroes said it was the divine substances. Thomas sides with Avicenna. The subject of a science, he says, is that nature whose causes and attributes are investigated in the science. The causes are not the subject of the science; rather, knowing them is the science's end or goal.⁵⁷ By studying the nature of being, as such, metaphysics is led to the consideration of the divine, as that nature's first and proper cause. This consideration does not lead to an understanding the divine nature as it is in itself. What God is cannot be properly conceived in terms of what being is or of any other created nature. But many true judgments about Him can be formed in light of creatures, and they are the highest achievement of philosophical thinking.

There is still room, then, for another theology, whose very subject is the divine nature. In denying that such a theology can be a human science and insisting that it must be revealed, Thomas is again opposing Averroes. The opposition is strong, since Thomas in fact denies that natural reason can properly grasp the nature of any purely incorporeal reality—not only God's, but also that of the incorporeal creatures, the angels. This is not because we cannot think of such realities at all, but because we can think of them only by comparison and contrast with sensible, corporeal reality, which is where all our thinking begins. "Our natural understanding can extend just as far as it can be led by the hand by way of sensible things."⁵⁸ So now let us turn to the part of Thomas's philosophy that regards what is most proper to such things.

Perhaps, however, a preliminary caveat is in order, both for the next chapter and for much of the rest of the book. Thomas certainly thinks that the physical world and its occupants are worth studying, just for their own sake. He thinks that knowing about them is good and pleasant in itself. It is even a kind of wisdom. But it is only a secondary kind, and his strictly physical teachings, despite their considerable thoroughness, are ultimately

57. *In Meta.*, Proem.

58. *STh*, I, q. 12, a. 12. Cf. I, q. 88, a. 2; *Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 17.

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intended only as aids to a better vision of reality as whole and, especially, of non-physical things. These are the primary things and the concern of the primary wisdom. And it is only in light of them, Thomas judges, that physical things and physical teachings themselves become fully intelligible. The same holds for the other non-metaphysical parts of his philosophy that we will explore. As one works through them for the first time, one may therefore have the nagging sense of only half getting them. This may very well be as it should. The test, I suppose, is how they look once one reaches the summit and gazes back down.