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## THE PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS AQUINAS

COURSE GUIDE



Professor Peter Kreeft  
BOSTON COLLEGE

# **The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas**

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**Professor Peter Kreeft**  
Boston College



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The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas  
Professor Peter Kreeft



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Cover: Detail of *Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas*  
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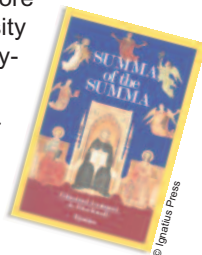


## About Your Professor

### Peter Kreeft

Peter Kreeft is a professor of philosophy at Boston College. He has written over fifty books, including *Fundamentals of the Faith*, *The Best Things in Life, Back to Virtue*, and *The Unaborted Socrates*. He received his bachelor's degree from Calvin College and his Ph.D. from Fordham University. Before teaching at Boston College, he taught at Villanova University for three years. Kreeft has been at Boston University for forty-four years.

You'll get the most from this course if you read *Summa of the Summa* edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft (Ignatius Press, 1990).



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### Ethics: The History of Moral Thought

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### Faith and Reason: The Philosophy of Religion

Through the ages, mankind has pursued questions of faith in something beyond the world of ordinary experience. Is there a God? How can we explain the presence of evil? Is there a hell?

The seeming conflicts between religion and science, and the different truth-claims of the world's most popular religions, are examined. By delving into the major characteristics of world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, mankind's association with the many different varieties of religious practice is brought to light.

A colored woodcut portrait of St. Thomas Aquinas from the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, 1493.



## Introduction

Why study Thomas Aquinas? Why am I making these recordings? Why are you listening to them?

My professional answer, as a philosopher, is simply that by almost everyone's admission Aquinas was the most important philosopher for the almost two thousand years between Aristotle and Descartes. But my personal answer is that I believe Aquinas was simply the wisest and most intelligent philosopher in history. And I want to show you why.

I make no apologies for my enthusiasm. If you want to understand any thinker, you'd better find a teacher who loves and admires him, not a critic. I've taken dozens of philosophy courses in four universities, and I've never taken a single course on any philosopher that was taught by an enthusiastic disciple that didn't deeply impress me, even if the teacher was unknown or young or an amateur; and I've never taken a single course on any philosopher that was taught by an unsympathetic critic of that philosopher that impressed me as being profound or fair or even useful, even if the teacher was brilliant and world-famous.

## Lecture 1: Aquinas's Importance and a Short Biography

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is G.K. Chesterton's *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*.

Everyone knows that Thomas Aquinas was a Catholic theologian as well as a philosopher. Some people may also know that he is the Catholic Church's favorite theologian. But religious authority is not the main reason I think Aquinas is great. I was a Thomist in philosophy for years before I became a Catholic in religion. Many of the greatest modern admirers of Aquinas are Protestants, Anglicans, or even agnostics.

Aquinas didn't think of himself primarily as a philosopher but as a theologian, an explorer and defender of what he believed to be the true divinely revealed religion. But we will not be focusing on purely religious topics in these talks. I'll be treating Aquinas purely as a philosopher, judging him by reason, not by faith. Of course, that includes exploring the things he said about *God* that he claims can be known by natural reason, as distinct from supernatural faith, by philosophy as distinct from religion.

### A Great Philosopher

The primary question for students of philosophy is not what makes Aquinas a great man, but what makes him a great philosopher.

First of all, there is his inclusive habit of mind. Aquinas was a synthesizer. His instinct was to combine everything true, good, or beautiful into a great "big picture." In modern philosophy you have to be either a rationalist or an empiricist, either an idealist or a realist, either ideologically Right or Left, but to be a Thomist you have to be a bit of everything: a Platonist and an Aristotelian and an Augustinian and a lot of other things too.

He combined faith and reason, without confusing them—which was the essential philosophical project of medieval thought, the marriage of Jerusalem and Athens, Jews and Greeks, religion and philosophy, the biblical and the classical traditions, which are the two sources of nearly everything that has lasted in Western civilization.

Aquinas also combined the two ideals of profundity and clarity, which no philosopher even tries to combine any more. Our philosophers write either profound, Germanic obscurities or careful, logically accurate English trivialities.

Aquinas also combined common sense with technical, abstract philosophical sophistication.

And he combined theory and practice. Some of his most theoretical, most abstract points have life-changing practical applications.

He combined an intuitive wisdom, what many call a "third eye," with demanding, accurate logic and a keen, detailed observation of nature.



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And he combined the one and the many, the “big picture” and many careful distinctions and definitions.

A second reason for Aquinas’s greatness is that because of his habit of inclusivism and synthesis, he stood at the center of the history of philosophy up to his time, tying together ideas from Heraclitus, Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, the Stoics, the Church Fathers, Augustine, Boethius, Abelard, Anselm, Bonaventura, Maimonides, Avicenna—just about everybody except the Sophists, those premodern postmodernists. He combined the insights of nearly every philosophical school for the eighteen centuries of the history of philosophy before him, and he held them together for one brief, Camelot-like moment before they all came unraveled again into separate, warring schools of thought for the next seven centuries.

A third thing that makes Aquinas stand out among philosophers is longevity. Aquinas not only preserved the insights of generations of his predecessors; he also built a philosophy that lasted for generations of his followers and can keep growing creatively. Thomism is still one of the few “living” philosophies. And this is partly because it is capable of assimilating new developments, like existentialism, personalism, and phenomenology.

A fourth unique feature of Aquinas is his Aristotelian habit of care and patience and avoidance of the temptation of exciting oversimplifications and extremes. Aquinas’s position on most issues is the “golden mean” between extremes, which is a large part of what we mean by common sense. Aquinas always agrees with common sense, and other philosophers always depart from it in one direction or the other. That’s the main point of G.K. Chesterton’s *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, the single best book ever written about Aquinas according to four of the greatest Thomist philosophers of the twentieth century (Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Thomas Owens, and Gerard Phelan).

An important part of what we mean by common sense is practical wisdom, and this is a fifth reason Aquinas stands out among philosophers: the close union between the theoretical and the practical sides of his mind. Aquinas was personally absentminded, as most geniuses are, but he was not out of touch, or removed from real life, as most geniuses are. He wrote hundreds of wonderfully practical answers to questions ranging from how princes should govern justly to how to cure depression. (His answer to that question was three things: a hot bath, a large glass of wine, and a good night’s sleep. But don’t tell that to your psychiatrist.)

Here’s another example of Aquinas’s practical wisdom following from abstract theory. He gave us a wonderful way to simplify our lives. He said, following Aristotle, that there are only three meanings to the term “good,” only three kinds of things that are really good, and thus worthy of our desire and attention: the moral good, the useful good, and the delightful good. So if it doesn’t make you a more virtuous person and if it isn’t a practical necessity that you really can’t do without, and if it doesn’t give you pleasure, fagettaboutit! You see, he preserved the wisdom of a child, and most of us have lost that, and I think we need to be reminded of that kind of wisdom more than we need to *add* another item to our busy list of things to remember.



A sixth point, a sixth excellence in Aquinas, is the clarity and simplicity and directness of his style, his argumentation, and his logic. Syllogisms are the simplest and most natural form of reasoning—anyone can follow them—and Aquinas habitually puts everything into syllogisms. He comes right to the point. You always know the “bottom line.”

A seventh feature is the profundity of his content. The nature of God, man, life, death, soul, body, mind, will, passions, good, evil, virtue, vice, truth, beauty, time, eternity, being itself—that’s pretty profound content to put in simple, straightforward syllogistic form.

And finally, most important of all for any philosopher, he told the truth. (Why do we forget that? It’s the whole point of philosophy, isn’t it?) Of course he didn’t tell the whole truth or nothing but the truth. No philosopher ever tells the whole truth (totality is a divine prerogative) and no philosopher ever tells nothing but the truth, without error (infallibility is also a divine prerogative).

### A Short Biography

Thomas was born the son of a powerful Italian count in 1225 and died forty-nine years later, in 1274. He was the pupil of St. Albert the Great, the greatest scientist of his age. He was the most revered teacher at the University of Paris, the most prestigious university in the medieval world. He was the first to assimilate and use all of the recently rediscovered works of Aristotle, and by doing this he came into conflict with the ultra-conservative local authorities, who preferred Augustine. Actually, so did Aquinas; he quotes Augustine more often than Aristotle. But where Aristotle was right, he used him. He was not afraid of pagan thinkers, or new scientific discoveries. He was open to truth wherever it could be found, and he habitually synthesized opposite insights that he found in other thinkers. He was not a party ideologue; he wasn’t into “isms.” He would hate the term “Thomism.” He wrote, “the object of the study of philosophy is not what philosophers have said but what is the truth.”

He taught theology at the new University of Paris, and he authored literally thousands of short treatises and two long Summas, notably the summary of theology entitled *Summa Theologiae* (which is almost always misspelled *Summa Theologica*). And since philosophy was called “the handmaid of theology,” this theologian used philosophy much as a quantum physicist uses mathematics. The formula “philosophy the handmaid of theology” is no longer popular, but it’s still true today that you can’t be a good theologian without being a good philosopher.

To conclude this short biography, the following story about Aquinas is incredibly telling, Brother Reginald, his confessor, swore that in the middle of the night he saw Thomas alone, lying flat on his stomach on the floor of the chapel, conversing with Christ. A voice came from the crucifix over the altar. It asked Thomas the greatest question in the world, and Thomas gave the greatest answer. It said, “Thomas, my son, you have written well of me. What would you have as your reward?” And Thomas answered, with characteristic brevity, “Only Yourself, Lord.” Those are the three most eloquent words Aquinas ever wrote. (He wrote about ten million words.) Nobody ever put the meaning of life in fewer words than that. Those were the most perfect summary of theology that he ever spoke. I think even an atheist can admire the perfect style of his answer.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What were some of the qualities that made Aquinas a great philosopher?
2. How did the “golden mean” inform Aquinas’s philosophy?

### Suggested Reading

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Chesterton, G.K. *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*. New York: Image Books, 1974.

### Other Books of Interest

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Panofsky, Erwin. *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*. Latrobe, PA: Archabbey Publications, 2005.

## Lecture 2: Philosophy and Theology, Reason and Faith

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 1, “Methodology: Theology as a Science,” pp. 31–50.

Since Aquinas was primarily a theologian, and since his primary work is the *Summa Theologiae*, we will follow the order of that work, which is a theological order, even while we evaluate what he says philosophically.

Aquinas was a philosopher in service of theology. His theology, in turn, was based on the Bible, not philosophy. He quotes scripture tens of thousands of times, from memory. Memorizing the entire Bible was not that unusual for a medieval monk or rabbi. When books were few, memories were many.

All three of these things, philosophy and theology and scripture, were for him only means to the single most important thing, which was being a saint, personal transformation, ultimately deification, participating in the very life of God.

The *Summa*’s primary aim is the improvement of the souls of its readers by theological education, but that fact does not compromise the logical integrity of his arguments. Why would a higher motive corrupt a deed?

Aquinas begins the *Summa* with God, as the origin or first cause of all things, and after talking about the Creator he explores the creation, centering on man, and on his two distinctively human powers of reason and free will, and man’s last end and greatest good, which is also God, and how to attain it. Thus God is the alpha and the omega, and the *Summa* is like a cosmic circulatory system, with God at its heart pumping the blood of being through the veins of creation, which is God’s love to man, and receiving it back through the arteries of man’s love to Him, man’s moral journey back to God.

This *Summa*’s first question is about the relation between theology, or “sacred science,” and philosophy, and thus between faith, the source of theology, and reason, the source of philosophy. Aquinas’s answer to this question is the foundation of the whole immense edifice of his authorship, whose “grand strategy” was to show the harmony, or marriage, of reason and faith, of philosophy and theology, of the Greek and the biblical traditions.

Philosophy is a work of human reason alone. There is a kind of theology that is also the work of human reason alone. Aristotle did it, for instance. The medievals called that philosophical theology, or natural theology. Aquinas’s famous five ways of proving God’s existence fit into that. They appeal only to reason—to sense observation and logical inference—not to faith. There is also another kind of theology that presupposes religious faith. That is the rational investigation of the content of what Christians believe to be divine revelation, essentially, the Bible and the Church’s authoritative summary of it in the Creeds.

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## The Five Parts of Aquinas's Questions

The *Summa* contains both kinds of theology. But its very structure distinguishes the two. In each of its separate questions, which Aquinas calls "articles," there are five structural parts.

First, the question is stated in a pro or con debate format, with only two logically possible answers.

Then come the objections, which argue for the answer Aquinas rejects. These are always summarized fairly, strongly, clearly, and succinctly.

Then come two parts to his argument for his answer to the question. The first part begins with a quotation from an authority, human or divine. And the second part is a purely rational argument.

Finally come his answers of each objection, usually by distinguishing two meanings of a key term, so that the objector is shown to be partly right and partly wrong.

The very first article of the *Summa* is entitled: "Whether, besides philosophy, any further teaching is required?" The following is his reason for saying "yes":

It was necessary *for man's salvation* that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, besides philosophical science built up by human reason. *For man is directed to God as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason.* But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation.

(But) even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation, because the truth about God such as reason could discover would be known only by a few, and after a long time, and with the mixture of many errors. But man's whole salvation depends on the knowledge of this truth.

You may be wondering at this point whether the *Summa* can be called *philosophy* as distinct from religious theology, since it begins by talking about God and salvation. The answer is yes, but it uses philosophy for theological purposes, because it's the *Summa Theologiae*, not the *Summa Philosophiae*.

When Aquinas says faith and reason are always in harmony, he means not the subjective, psychological acts of believing and reasoning but the objective truths known by them. He is comparing two batches of propositions: those that are knowable by human reason without reliance on divine revelation and those that are knowable only by faith. So his question at the beginning of the *Summa* is how these two classes of propositions are related.

Now there are five possible answers to the question of the relationship between any two classes of things. Think of two circles, A and B, which can be in five possible relationships to each other. A could be a subdivision of B, or B of A, or they could be totally separate, or totally identical, or mutually overlapping. Aquinas wants to show that they are mutually overlapping, so that there are some truths that are known by faith alone, like the Trinity, and some

that are known by reason alone, like natural science, and some that can be known by both faith and reason, like the existence of God and the freedom of the will and the immortality of the soul, which are the three things Kant called the three fundamental postulates of morality.

We've just looked at one of the two main questions about faith and reason that are the foundation of Aquinas's work: how much of faith can reason prove? And his answer is: Not all, not none, but some. The second, and more important question, is: Can there ever be any contradictions between these two things? Are faith and reason perfectly harmonious, or not? If they are not, then the best answer to the first question is not a marriage or an overlapping, but a divorce, or a separation. And that is the answer most modern philosophers give. So this issue is also the issue of medieval versus modern philosophy.

Medieval philosophy saw itself as a kind of apprentice or handmaid to theology. Modern philosophy, in contrast, sees itself as independent. But in fact it often apprentices itself to science, especially so-called analytic philosophy, or else to political ideology, especially postmodernism.

Here are Aquinas's two arguments for his foundational conviction about faith and reason: that no proposition known by reason can ever contradict any proposition known by faith; in other words, that the marriage of faith and reason will work.

Aquinas writes the following in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

The truth that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith. For that which the human reason is naturally endowed is clearly most true; so much so, that it is impossible for us to think of such truths as false. [He is referring to logical axioms or self-evident propositions here.] Nor is it possible to believe as false that which we hold by faith, since this is confirmed in a way that is so clearly divine. [In other words, if you believe the Christian faith is revealed by God, you must believe it is true because God doesn't lie. Then Aquinas draws his conclusion.] Since, therefore, only the false is opposed to the true, as is clearly evident from an examination of their definitions, it is impossible that a truth of faith should be opposed to those principles that the human reason knows naturally.

The argument is simple: if what reason tells us is true and if what the Christian faith tells us is true, then there can never be any real contradiction between the two, since no truth can contradict another truth.

That seems obvious. But the point here that might be controversial to people today is Aquinas's assumption that religion is not just a set of moral commands or ideals or psychologically helpful and hopeful hints, but a set of propositions that are just as objective as those of science and common sense, though they're known not by the scientific method or by sense observation but by faith. And what Aquinas means by faith is not something subjective and psychological, but simply accepting as true whatever is revealed by God. The assumption is that the Christian faith is among other things a set of objectively true propositions revealed by God.

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Aquinas's second argument also assumes that Christianity is true. The argument is that God is the teacher in both reason and faith, and this teacher never contradicts Himself:

That which is introduced into the soul of the student by the teacher is contained in the knowledge of the teacher—unless his teaching is fictitious, which it is improper to say of God. Now the knowledge of the principles that are known to us naturally has been implanted in us by God, for God is the Author of our nature. These principles, therefore, are also contained by the divine Wisdom. Hence, whatever is opposed to them is opposed to the divine Wisdom and therefore cannot come from God. That which we hold by faith as divinely revealed, therefore, cannot be contrary to our natural knowledge.

Even those who follow Aquinas thus far will often balk at his next step, even though this next step is a direct logical corollary of the previous arguments:

From this we evidently gather the following conclusion: whatever arguments are brought forth against the doctrines of the faith are conclusions that are incorrectly derived from the first and self-evident principles. . . . Such conclusions do not have the force of demonstration; they are arguments that are either only probable or fallacious. And so there exists the possibility to answer them.

In other words, every argument against every doctrine of Christianity has a rational mistake in it somewhere, and therefore can be answered by reason alone without appeal to faith.

Aquinas is not claiming that every Christian doctrine can be proved by reason, only that none can be disproved. He is also not claiming that any given person is bright enough to disprove it, only that there has to be some mistake in the argument that someone can discover.

There is a historically important point about this happy marriage of faith and reason. A strong reason why Christians, like the Jews before them, so closely related theology and philosophy, faith and reason, was the religious doctrine that God created man in his own image and that part of that image was rationality. Remember that Eastern religions do not have this concept of a personal God creating Man in His own image with human reason as a God-designed tool for finding objective truth.

The most practical and personal consequence of Aquinas's point about faith and reason is that it gives believers intellectual integrity and integration. Their thought can be at one with their prayer.

St. Bonaventura, Aquinas's Franciscan friend and contemporary, complained that Aquinas's use of Aristotle diluted the wine of the Gospel by the water of pagan philosophy. Aquinas replied, "No, I am transforming water into wine." For Aquinas, all reason is faith's ally because all truth is God's truth.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. What was the “grand strategy” of Aquinas’s authorship?
2. Why does Aquinas put forth that reason cannot contradict Christian faith?

### Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

Gilson, Etienne. *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000 (1938).



### Lecture 3: Can You Prove God's Existence?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 2, "Proofs for the Existence of God," pp. 51–70.

Aquinas's "five ways" are the most famous of all the arguments for God's existence. He calls them "ways" rather than "proofs" for two reasons: first, because their ultimate purpose is not just to have a valid logical argument but to be a real way of bringing real people to know the real God. Second, because the versions in the *Summa Theologiae* are only summaries of much longer arguments. The *Summa* was written for beginners, Aquinas says. So for instance, the first of the five ways, which takes only one paragraph here, takes twenty-one paragraphs in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

What difference does it make to believe God exists and what difference does it make to prove it? The first question is easy to answer. Just ask atheists. Let's ask the two most famous and brilliant atheists in philosophy, Nietzsche and Sartre. Here is the difference it makes to Nietzsche whether God exists or not, from the madman's speech from *The Joyful Wisdom*:

Where is God? I shall tell you. We have killed him, you and I . . . But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we all moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? . . . Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?

And here is the difference it makes to Sartre:

God does not exist and we have to face all the consequences of this. The existentialist is strongly opposed to a certain kind of secular ethics which would like to abolish God with the least possible expense . . . something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis; we are discarding it, but meanwhile, in order for there to be an ethics, a society, a civilization, it is essential that certain values be taken seriously and that they be considered as having an a priori existence. It must be obligatory a priori to be honest, not to lie, not to beat your wife, to have children, etc. etc. So we're going to try a little device which will make it possible to show that values exist all the same, inscribed in a heaven of ideas, though . . . God does not exist . . .

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of

ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an a priori good since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it . . . Dostoyevski said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be permissible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to.

But there was a different existential, personal payoff, or pragmatic point, of proving God's existence for Aquinas than for us. The point of Aquinas's arguments is for him more a justification of reason than a justification of God. They showed that on this primary question of God's existence, faith and reason converged.

Arguments for God's existence fall into three categories. Aquinas's five ways are cosmological arguments because they begin with sense observation of some feature of the cosmos, the physical universe.

A second class of arguments begins with premises from our own inner experience: for instance, religious experience—how can you adequately account for religious experience without a God to elicit it? Or the argument from moral experience—how can there be an absolute moral obligation if there are only relative, fallible beings? Or the argument from the "restless heart," from the experience of our desire for something more than we or the universe can supply: how can there be a natural desire for a nonexistent object? Or the existential argument: without God, life has no ultimate end and point and purpose and hope.

A third class of arguments begins simply with the definition of "God." This class of arguments has only one member: St. Anselm's "ontological argument," which Aquinas rejected.

All five of Aquinas's ways have the same logical structure. They begin with empirical observation of five features in the cosmos: motion, causality, contingency, imperfection, and order. They assume the logical principle that there are only two possible explanations of this data: either there is or is not an uncaused First Cause. They then argue that one of these two explanations fails to explain the data: if there is no uncaused First Cause, then there could not be any caused second causes. The conclusion is that there is a First Cause.

Then, only after the proof is over, Aquinas mentions the word "God" by adding that "this is what people call 'God.'" In other words, he claims to prove only that there exists some being that has at least a few of the attributes that Christians believe God has. They claim to prove only a thin slice of God, so to speak, but enough to refute atheism.

### **The First Proof**

The first proof is the longest one, and Aquinas calls it the "most manifest" only because its data is most manifest: that things change. Aquinas's word for this is "motion," which means not only movement in space but any kind of change.

It is certain and evident to our senses that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality, and nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality

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except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, such as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves it. Thus whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another.

Now if that by which it is put in motion is itself put in motion, then this also must be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first (unmoved) mover, and consequently no other mover, seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover, as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand.

Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other.

And this everyone understands to be God.

Why can't the first mover be the universe itself? Because if nothing can move itself, neither can the whole chain of moving things that we call the universe. The universe is like an enormously big and complex chain of dominoes. No matter how long the chain is, without a finger to push the first domino, none of the dominoes would fall.

This is true whether the cause comes before the effect or not, whether causality is like one billiard ball moving another or like an iron ball making an impression in a pillow. So the proof does not depend on whether or not the universe has a beginning in time.

In fact, Aquinas says, God is not in time and therefore His act of causing the existence of things is present, not just past. Aquinas is not a Deist. His God is alive and present, not dead and past.

The principle behind this argument is what philosophers call the Principle of Sufficient Reason: that nothing simply happens without a reason. Nothing just pops into existence.

So if everything requires a sufficient reason, then these five features of the universe—change, causality, contingency, imperfection, and order—also require a sufficient reason. They exist, but they don't just exist, they make sense, they have a sufficient reason.

## **The Second Proof**

Aquinas applies this principle of sufficient reason to *change* in the universe in his first proof, and to the very *existence* of the universe in his second proof, which is about efficient causes, or causes of existence:

In the world of sense we find that there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known, nor is it possible, in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for if so, it would be prior to itself, which is impossible.

Now in efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate cause is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate,

nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, either will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

This proof is different from the first in that it's about the cause of existence, not just the cause of change. That's why it's shorter: it doesn't include the analysis of change into potentiality and actuality.

It's really intuitively very simple. Suppose I tell you there is a book that you want, a book that explains everything. You ask me, "Will you give it to me?" I say yes, but I have to borrow it from my friend. You ask, "Does he have it?" and I say no, he has to borrow it from the library. Does the library have it? No, they have to borrow it from someone else. Well, who has it? No one actually has it, everyone borrows it. Well, then, you will never get it. And neither will anyone else.

Now imagine that book is existence. My children have it. They got it from me. I got it from my parents. If no one has it by nature and doesn't have to get it from someone else, in other words if there is no first, uncaused cause of existence, then it couldn't be handed down the chain, and no one would ever get it. Therefore someone has it. And the being that can give existence because He has it by his own essential nature is called God.

### The Third Proof

Aquinas's third "way" is a little more difficult:

We find in nature things that are able to either be or not be, since they are found to come into existence and go out of existence, and consequently they are able to either be or not to be. But it is impossible for any of these beings to exist always, for whatever has a possibility not to be, at some time is not. Thus if everything has the possibility not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. But if this were true, then there would not be anything in existence now, because that which does not exist cannot begin to exist except by means of something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist, and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore not all beings are merely possible but there must exist something whose existence is necessary.

And this is another attribute of God: necessary being, eternal being, being that cannot ever lose its being.

Aquinas again begins by observing a feature of the universe: that everything in it is mortal, that every being can cease to be. If there were no God, then given enough time everything would cease to be. Aquinas does not specify this next point, but I think he implies that if there is no God, then the universe must have no birthday, since it has no Creator to give it birth. But if it has no beginning, and has infinite time, then there has already been enough time for everything possible to become actual. And one of those possibilities is the death of everything. And once the universe dies, it can't start up again, because out of nothing comes nothing.

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You might think of the second law of thermodynamics, the principle of entropy, as an analogy here. All forms of energy tend to flow from higher concentration to lower, to dissipate. Eventually, the universe will be a homogeneous blob in which nothing happens. The only reason this has not happened yet is that there hasn't been enough time; the universe is only about fourteen billion years old. Aquinas, of course, didn't know about the Big Bang. Or, rather, he did, though he didn't know it was scientifically provable. He called it the creation of the universe. You might see Aquinas's third proof as a philosophical parallel to science's Big Bang cosmology plus entropy.

As Aquinas formulates it, this argument has at least one questionable premise: that "that which is possible not to be at some time is not," that given enough time, every possibility must be actualized. I think many modern physicists would question that.

### **The Fourth Proof**

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum . . . so there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest, and consequently something which is uttermost being . . . And this we call God.

This fourth way also has a premise that is questionable, though not by science but by some modern philosophies. It is the notion of objective values, that some things are really better than others. Every premodern society and philosopher in history, except the Sophists and the Skeptics, accepted this premise. Today, most of the intelligentsia of Europe and North America doubt it. So this is an argument whose appeal will be much more questionable in our time and culture.

But most of us still do rank things on a hierarchy. We don't think of dogwood, or even dogs, as equal to humans. If this value judgment is merely an expression of how we feel, we can't argue from that to anything about objective reality. But if this hierarchy is true, if people really are superior to vegetables, then Aquinas's fourth way can work.

The argument could be summarized very simply: one thing is better than another, and "better" presupposes "best," and "best" is another word for God.

### **The Fifth Proof**

Aquinas's fifth way is the most popular of all. It's the argument from design to a Designer:

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always (or nearly always) in the same way so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not by chance but by design do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move toward an end unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence, as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

Using Aquinas's image, the universe is like an enormous number of arrows. They don't move randomly, but to proper targets. Puppies become dogs and dogs have puppies. The universe is more like a book than like an explosion in a print factory. And if there is a book, there is an author.

The more design you find, the less likely it is that chance explains it. If you find a perfect letter "S" on the sand you think it was probably written by human hands, but it could have been the chance result of wind and waves. If you see "SOS," it's much more likely that it's intelligent design rather than random chance. If you see the whole first page of *Hamlet* written in the sand, you know there was a mind there.

Or do you? Someone—I think it was Bertrand Russell—said that a million monkeys writing at a million typewriters for a million years would type out the first page of *Hamlet* simply by chance. Perhaps so, but nobody explains *Hamlet* that way. The only reason they explain the universe that way is to avoid God. (Actually, one mathematician worked that out and corrected Russell: it would take something like a trillion years for a trillion monkeys to type out even the first paragraph of *Hamlet* by chance.)

The argument from cosmic design has in fact convinced many sophisticated scientists like Einstein and philosophers like the former atheist Antony Flew. Like the other four arguments, its conclusion doesn't go much beyond deism. But that's enough to refute atheism.

The so-called "intelligent design" theorists today claim that *science* can prove the existence of God from examples of intelligent design, for instance, "irreducible complexity" in the structure of simple organisms. I think Aquinas would disagree with that claim. His fifth proof is a philosophical proof, not a scientific proof. The notion of intelligent design is not something merely empirical or quantifiable, so it's not strictly speaking scientific but philosophical. But it's commonsensical.

The strongest example of design in the universe is the human brain, the very instrument by which we detect design and argue from it. The brain is more than a computer, but not less. Now if a computer were programmed by chance, you wouldn't trust it. So why trust your brain when you use it to do science, or argue philosophy? Why trust your arguments for atheism if you believe that the computer you're using to argue is nothing but the random result of blind, dumb molecules bumping into each other? How could the intelligence that understands the whole material universe be caused merely by unintelligent matter? How could more come from less? That violates the basic scientific principle of causality.

Human brains arrived in the universe by evolution, you say. Yes, and I think Aquinas would say that evolution is an excellent example of cosmic design, evidence for God. He'd say the arrow of evolution flies to the target of human brains only because it's guided by the intelligence of a divine archer. Aquinas would not be among the anti-Darwinian fundamentalists today. I think if he saw the atheist bumper sticker of the Christian fish with the word Darwin in it, he would not understand the intended irony, he would interpret it as an argument for theism.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What is the reasoning behind Dostoyevski's assertion that "if God does not exist, everything would be permissible"?
2. Why can't the first mover be the universe itself?

### Suggested Reading

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Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

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Moreland, James Porter, and Kai Nielsen. *Does God Exist?: The Debate Between Theists and Atheists*. Ed. Peter Kreeft. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993.

### Recorded Books

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Flew, Antony. *There Is a God*. Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, LLC, 2008. 5 CDs/5.75 hours.



## Lecture 4: The Case Against Aquinas's God and Proofs

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 2, "Proofs for the Existence of God," pp. 51–70.

Aquinas always tries to find at least three objections to every thesis. But he can find only two arguments against the existence of God, and throughout the history of philosophy these have been pretty much the only two: evil and science.

Of the two objections, only one actually claims to prove that God does not exist. That's the problem of evil. The other one only claims to prove that science can explain everything without God, so God is an unnecessary hypothesis.

Aquinas states the problem of evil with maximum economy:

It seems that God does not exist, because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word "God" means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

This argument against God is strong for the same reason Aquinas's five arguments *for* God are strong: both are based on factual premises, on observation of the world.

Good and evil are contraries, not contradictories. Opposite qualities are contraries; mutually exclusive propositions are contradictories. But opposite qualities are not always mutually exclusive. So what makes evil in the world contradictory to God? The claim that God is infinite good. If there is infinite goodness, it seems that there can be no room for evil.

Aquinas's answer to the objection is essentially that the existence of evil is logically compatible with a God of infinite goodness, wisdom, and power:

As Augustine says, 'Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil.' That is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist and out of it produce good.

Notice that Aquinas's answer is not a timeless logical formula but a story, an interpretation of the evil data in the universe that explains the data by the God-hypothesis: that God is wise and sees that allowing physical evils in nature will result in a better world, and allowing moral evils in human life by creating humans with free will, will result in a better history.

Evil means two very different things, of course. Physical evils are things like death, disease, pain, weakness. Moral evils are things like hate, injustice, and lies. The argument refers to both kinds of evil. And so does Aquinas's answer.

Notice also Aquinas's word "allow." God does not do evil, He allows it. He creates life, He creates living beings, and He does not kill, but He creates beings that are mortal, whose life is finite. And He does not sin, but He creates

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beings with free will who can sin if they choose. So He's off the hook for doing evil, but He's still on the hook for allowing it. He could disallow evil. Instead, He makes evil work for a greater good.

Aquinas does not say that one can prove that this is the case. All he has to do is show that it is possible, that the existence of evil is not conclusive evidence that disproves God.

To explain the need for physical evil, Aquinas sees the universe as a great work of art, like a picture or a story, and says God permits evil in the part for the greater good of the whole. A work of art subordinates the part to the whole, and that requires imperfection in the part.

When we come to moral evil, or sin, Aquinas's explanation for God allowing it is to preserve free will and to bail us out of our sin by the supreme act of love, giving His life to save us. It's a surprise, a drama, a fairy tale. Instead of a formula, God wrote a play and gave it to characters who goofed their lines. But a messy play is better than a perfect formula, especially if it ends happily.

That's the traditional theistic answer to the problem of evil; it's not original with Aquinas. And it's appealing because deep down we all agree with its principle: that it's better to have free human beings, even if some of them do terrible things by misusing their power of free will to choose to do great evils to other human beings.

But the God-issue remains open, because evil does count as evidence against Him, and why God allows so much of it remains a mystery, and our inability to justify and explain it all keeps us conflicted, and keeps open room for faith *and* for doubt.

The second of Aquinas's two objections to the existence of God is that the natural sciences can explain everything without a supernatural God. So God is a superfluous hypothesis.

The proof appeals to a principle that will come to be called the Principle of Parsimony, or Ockham's Razor, after William of Ockham, a medieval philosopher about a century after Aquinas: "It is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few causes has been produced by many."

This is an essential principle of scientific method—although you have to be careful how you apply it. The simplest hypothesis is not always the true one. Science almost always finds the universe more complex than we thought.

Ockham did not invent the principle of Ockham's Razor, but he made it famous by applying it to metaphysics and concluding that universals—Platonic ideas or Aristotelian forms—were unnecessary and therefore unreal; they were only names. The Latin word for "names" is "nomina," so this position is called Nominalism.

Aquinas is not a Nominalist, but he does not disagree with the principle of parsimony, which is the first premise of his objection, but he does disagree with the second premise, which he summarizes this way:

But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle, which is nature, and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle, which is human reason or will.

Aquinas's answer to the objection is essentially that his five ways show that it is necessary to suppose God's existence to fully explain natural things. To fully explain them—in other words, if you're a philosopher as well as a scientist, and if you want to find the first cause of the things in nature, then you need some sort of God. But if you do not ask the philosophical question, you don't need to arrive at the philosophical answer. If you ask only immediate questions whose answers can be verified empirically, in other words if you stifle your natural philosophical curiosity and limit your questions to scientific questions, you can be satisfied with merely scientific answers.

### **Five Objections to Aquinas's Five Ways**

Let's look now at five kinds of objections other philosophers have brought against Aquinas's five ways.

First, a scientist may ask, "Can we trust cosmological arguments formulated in an era when the science of the cosmos was still primitive?" Insofar as the arguments depend on premises refuted by modern science, we can't. But do they?

A little bit, yes. I already mentioned the questionable premise in the third way, that given infinite time, everything possible becomes actual. There is also the statement in the fourth way that "a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest"—as if there were some Hottest Possible Thing, which there isn't. But that's just a bad illustration, not a premise.

More seriously, the medievals, following Aristotle, misunderstood momentum, and this may cast doubt on an essential step in Aquinas's first argument, his claim that everything in motion must be moved by another thing. Aristotle knew that an object at rest tends to remain at rest unless acted on by another. But he didn't know that an object in motion tends to remain in motion unless acted on by another. He didn't know that space was a vacuum, or very nearly a vacuum, so that a planet could be in motion around a star forever if it had a stable orbit, without being pushed by another force. Many medieval astronomers thought the planets had to be moved by angels because they never slowed down, as everything on earth did.

But Aquinas's first way doesn't move on this scientific level but on a metaphysical level. Aquinas did not mean by "motion" simply "motion through space" but any kind of change; and his proof that nothing can move itself does not depend on the physical concepts of momentum or drag or vacuums, only on the metaphysical concepts of potentiality and actuality.

A second kind of objection comes from some philosophers, like Hume, who question Aquinas's metaphysical principle of causality, and in fact question the possibility of any metaphysical principles. For Hume, causality is only our subjective mental habit of associating things we've seen together over and over again. But that critique of causality eliminates not only metaphysics but also physics, science, and common sense.

Kant is also skeptical of the claim to have objective knowledge of causality. He says we can know only that we have to think in causal terms, not that things-in-themselves have to obey the principle of causality. But this is an even more radical skepticism of our knowledge of objective reality than Hume's; it seems to mean that perhaps my parents didn't really cause my biological existence, but I have to think they did.

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Another causal objection to Aquinas's proofs admits that the principle of causality works for nature but wonders whether it works for God if God is infinitely different than nature. Aquinas would reply to this that God is not "infinitely" different from nature, but that there is an analogy between them, as between an artist and his art, so that we can know something about the cause from our knowledge of the effects.

A third kind of objection to Aquinas's proofs is a skepticism of any rational knowledge of God, a kind of disconnect between God and reason. Some would go so far as to say that logic itself doesn't apply to God; but when you examine that statement you find that it simply literally makes no sense at all. It says that there's a being about which you can say nothing. But you've just said something: that it is, that it is a being, and that it is not the same as those beings about which you can say something; and that's saying at least three somethings. It's self-contradictory. To say: "So what? God transcends logic" is simply nonsense.

Many people are skeptical of rational proofs for the existence of God because they see reason and faith as very different. But that brings us back to the relation between faith and reason. You can't just separate the two things completely as if they were two different universes, because both reason and faith claim to tell us things that are true. It's simply not reasonable to assume that reason and faith can't ever meet, without looking at claims to show that they can, like Aquinas's five ways, and showing what's logically wrong with them.

A much more modest objection based on the gap between faith and reason is that the God Aquinas proves is so far removed from the God of religious faith, that it's like a ghost image. It's the remote god of deism, which, Pascal says, is almost as far removed from Christianity as atheism.

Aquinas would simply agree that this is a very thin slice of God. But it's a slice of the same God, the real God. It's not the God of deism because deism denies the "thicker" God.

Aquinas would agree that you can know God much better by faith than you can by logical proof. Aquinas, like Pascal, sees religious faith as much more than just belief, or opinion. He says faith is a virtue, one of the three "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and charity.

This brings us to another kind of objection, a kind of Freudian, psychological objection: that Aquinas's proofs are really camouflages of faith. He believed in God out of faith; he came to believe in God because his parents and priests taught him, and he trusted them. Then he looked for reasons later.

And that may be true, but it doesn't invalidate the logic of the proofs themselves.

You don't validate or invalidate a logical argument by discovering faith motives behind the arguments; that's what logicians call the "genetic fallacy."

And not all religious reasoning is rationalizing: Aristotle's wasn't. He had no faith; he came to the conclusion that one supreme God or First Cause existed by reason alone. And other people have made the same intellectual journey.

The same reply has to be given to Marxist objections, which are a kind of collective psychoanalysis. They don't show logical fallacies in the proofs; they just question their motives. They say that the proofs are just rationalizations of

the established economic regime to keep religion functioning as the opiate of the oppressed people. The answer to that objection is simply: so what? Even if that were true, if the logic of Aquinas's proofs works, then it works, and God's existence is proved.

Another psychological objection is much more serious, and, I think, much more common. It's the objection of Nietzsche, probably the most complete atheist in the history of philosophy. (And Sartre says something very similar.) It's that there can't be a God because He would thwart human freedom. Nietzsche writes: "I will now disprove the existence of all gods. If there were gods, how could I bear not to be a god? Consequently [and he underlines "consequently"] there are no gods." He writes elsewhere that God had to die because it would be unendurable to Him to see our dark side. This too does not invalidate the logic of the proofs, of course, but it reveals deep motives: not so much in Aquinas but in Nietzsche. Here are two absolute demands: to be God yourself rather than bowing to another, and to bow down to the objective truth that you are not God. Truth itself is a kind of God without a face, and Nietzsche realized that. That's why he wrote: "Why truth? Why not rather untruth?" That daring question is really unanswerable by reason.

Finally, there are a few objections that seem to be based on misunderstandings. One is against Aquinas's assumption that you can't have infinite regress. Why not? You can have it in mathematics. The series of whole numbers is infinite; there is no highest number.

But real things are not numbers; real things need causes, and if there is no first cause, there can be no second, or third, or any other subsequent causes. The analogy with numbers simply doesn't work.

Another objection is this: Why can't the universe be the first cause? And the answer is simply that nothing can cause itself. The third proof claims to show that contingent beings require a necessary being.

But then, the objector might say, why doesn't God need a cause too? Isn't there some sense in the child's question: "Who made God?"

No, there isn't, because it misunderstands the meaning of the word "God." It asks: "Who made the unmade maker, who caused the uncaused cause?" By definition God has no cause because God has no beginning. His essence is existence.

But the objector might say, then isn't there a self-contradiction in the proofs? They all conclude to a God who doesn't need a cause, but they begin with the principle that everything needs a cause.

This is actually an embarrassingly poor objection, although it's found in the writings of no less a genius than Bertrand Russell. And the answer is simply that Aquinas never says that everything needs a cause. He says that everything in motion needs a cause, everything that begins to exist needs a cause, everything contingent needs a cause, everything imperfect needs a cause, and every unintelligent being that acts for an end needs a cause. If you read the actual arguments carefully enough, these misunderstandings disappear.

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These answers do not mean that all objections are answered. The issue is still open simply because every issue in philosophy is open except issues that are closed by the law of noncontradiction alone, closed by showing that the proposition in question is logically self-evident and its opposite logically self-contradictory. And Aquinas does not believe that God's existence is self-evident to us; that's why he rejects Anselm's ontological argument. He says God's existence needs to be proved. And anything that needs to be proved, even if there are good proofs for it, is always still an open question for philosophers. Aquinas did not close the issue of God once and for all. No one can do that. Even God doesn't do that.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How does Aquinas answer the problem of evil?
2. Why is it nonsense to say that God transcends logic?

### Suggested Reading

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Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

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Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York: HarperOne, 2001.



## Lecture 5: Our Knowledge of and Language About God

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 3, “The Nature of God,” pp. 71–186.

The premodern mind is like the mind of a preteen child; it's interested in the world around it and the world above it, in objective reality. The modern mind is like the mind of a teenager; it's interested more in itself. It's more introspective, psychological, subjective. So medieval thinkers like Aquinas spend a lot of time on the objective question “What Is God?” and only a little time on the subjective question, “How do we know God?” and “How do we express that knowledge in language?” But the comparatively little bit that he has to say about this is very important to modern philosophers, because it addresses the typically modern question.

There are three questions about God, because there are three questions about anything: What is it?, How do we know it?, and How do we express it or communicate it? Just as the knowledge of being is an expression of being, so language is an expression of knowledge.

There's a single Greek word that means all three of these things: intelligible being, intelligent knowing, and intelligent communication. It's the word *logos*. It means objective order, or intelligible reality; and it also means human reason or intelligence or knowledge or wisdom or science. And thirdly, it means word or language or communication. *Logos* is the unity in those three concepts.

The three dimensions of *logos* are the three dimensions of philosophy. Ancient and medieval philosophy concentrated on the first dimension, on the nature of reality, and therefore on metaphysics. Classical modern philosophy, starting with Descartes, concentrated on the second dimension, human knowing, how we know and how we can be certain, and therefore it centered on epistemology. Contemporary philosophy concentrates on language more than ever before, on how words mean things, or even whether words mean things.

Aquinas himself organizes the *Summa* around these three questions. Right after proving the existence of God, he says:

When the existence of a thing has been ascertained, there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. [“Essence” means “manner of existence” for Aquinas.] Now . . . we cannot know what God is but rather what He is not . . . therefore we must consider, first, how He is not, second, how He is known by us, and third, how He is named.

We're talking about the *philosophical* knowledge of God here, knowledge by natural reason, not by faith in divine revelation and not knowledge by religious experience. Aquinas believes all of these ways of knowing God are valid, but we're confining ourselves to philosophical knowledge by natural reason here.

There are at least four metaphysical principles that form the basis for Aquinas's answer to how human reason can know God. They are the ideas of creation, cosmic hierarchy, the analogy of being, and human reason as participating in divine reason. If any of these principles were not true, Aquinas would say, we could *not* know God by natural reason.

### Creation

If God created the universe, that establishes a relation between God and the universe, and therefore the possibility of a relation between God and man, and between the Mind of God and the mind of man. Any creation tells us something about the creator. Just what the universe tells us about God has to be specified yet, and Aquinas will put severe limits on that; but there's at least something there to know.

But not much. Aquinas disagrees with both the extremes of rationalism and agnosticism, but he's closer to agnosticism:

From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of the cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of its cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects even though from them we cannot know God as He is in His essence.

But we can know something about God through the principle of causality, since creation is a kind of causality: to create is to cause the very existence of the effect.

### Cosmic Hierarchy

Implied in the notion that God created the universe is not only divine power but also divine intelligence, and thus design and order in the universe. And this brings us to a second metaphysical principle that Aquinas assumes: that the universe created by God is an ordered hierarchy, a cosmic ladder or "great chain of being." This was also an assumption of the fourth of his five "ways" to prove God's existence, that there are degrees of perfection in the universe. This also establishes the basis for his next principle, analogy along the rungs of this ladder.

### Analogy of Being

For instance, plant life is a weak and imperfect analogy to animal life, and animal life to human life and human life to divine life. You could say the same thing in terms of *logos*: the order, or *logos*, in an inorganic chemical is a lesser kind, a lower order, of the same thing—namely, intelligence, intelligent design—that we find in plant life or organic chemicals; but even in the simple hydrogen atom there is ordered activity of the parts to a common end. When you get up to the level of animals you find conscious intelligence, a knowledge of the world—you now find intelligence in the animal itself, not just in the mind of its creator and designer. And when you get to human intelligence you find that it is self-knowing, self-critical, and rational, unlike animal intelligence. Above human intelligence there is angel intelligence, which is purely spiritual, *a priori*, innate knowledge of Platonic ideas, a kind of limited mental telepathy with God.

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(By the way, Aquinas does not think the existence of angels can be proved by philosophical reasoning alone, but he does think reason can show that it is probable that this possible level of reality is filled by actual beings, by analogy to all the possible levels below us being filled.)

Finally, the highest level, divine intelligence, is unlike all others in that it is perfect, unlimited, and actually creates what it knows.

You see, along the rungs of this cosmic ladder there is both sameness and difference. The same thing—*logos*, design, intelligence—manifests itself in various degrees on various levels.

And these levels are analogous to each other: that is, they are not wholly the same and not wholly different, so you can know a little bit about one level from your knowledge of another level.

Since animal intelligence is analogous to human intelligence, or a little bit like human intelligence, therefore we can know something, but not everything, about human intelligence from studying animals—which is exactly one of the things psychologists do. And, similarly, from studying human intelligence we can even know just a little bit about God, because God is intelligent, though His intelligence is even more radically superior to human intelligence than our intelligence is superior to the intelligence of an ant. But there is at least some connection, however thin, because of analogy, and analogy is there because of the intelligently designed hierarchy in the cosmos, which is there because it was created.

## **Divine Reason**

The fourth metaphysical principle that grounds our knowledge of God is probably the one most difficult for the modern mind to understand. It is the conception of human reason as a participation, or sharing, in divine reason.

This doesn't mean mystical experience. Aquinas is talking about ordinary human reason when he says it is a share in the divine reason. This makes very little sense if we think of reason as merely inference, or arguing. Let's use the analogy of light, which was the medievals' favorite material image for immaterial intelligence. Medieval logicians distinguished what they called the "three acts of the mind," and light is an image of the first act of the mind. The first act of the mind is conception, or forming an intelligible concept, understanding an essence, a "what." For instance, "apple," or "man," or "animal." The second act of the mind is judgment, where we predicate one concept of another and say "man is an animal" or "man is not an apple." Only judgments are true or false, not concepts. Then the third act of the mind is reasoning from some judgments to others, arguing from premises to conclusions. So we have understanding, judging, and reasoning.

Aquinas means by "reason" all three acts of the mind, not just the third, and he sees all three as a dim reflection of divine intelligence, a sharing in a little bit of the power of the divine mind, since for Aquinas man is created in God's image. But it's especially the first act of the mind that's like divine intelligence. Judging and reasoning both take time, but understanding can happen suddenly. God doesn't have to judge or reason because He understands everything at once, while we do it bit by bit.

Only by divine power can we reason. God is like the electricity that powers our computer brains. Aquinas explains that by the notion that God created us “in His own image.” When you see an image of the sun in a window, that mirror image is a participation in actual sunlight, a tiny share in the actual energy, the actual photons, from the sun. And when we reason, we use divine sunlight.

This goes beyond merely a passive likeness or analogy; it’s an actual living participation in an ongoing active power that comes from God. Aquinas grounds this participation in creation. He says that the reason why human reason actually participates in divine reason is because every effect not only resembles its cause by analogy but also in some way participates in the power of its cause (when fire ignites paper, the paper-on-fire has the power of fire).

Another presupposition here is that God is rational, that God is mind, that God is not simply a blind force. You can always find many assumptions behind everything Aquinas says. You see, Aquinas’s philosophy is like the universe: it’s full of first-act-of-the-mind reason and intelligibility, but not all of it is deducible by third-act-of-the-mind reasoning. He uses a lot of deductive reasoning, but it’s not deduction but analogy that holds his system together. It’s not a deductive system, like most modern philosophies. Because it’s not first of all a system of ideas, but a system of things. It’s a map of the universe.

### Knowledge of God

Now in light of these four metaphysical assumptions, let’s see exactly what Aquinas says in the *Summa* about the knowledge of God.

Let’s look first at the two articles immediately before the five ways. One says that God’s existence is not self-evident to us, though it is self-evident in itself. So it has to be made evident to us. And the second says that this demonstration can be done. God is not directly and innately known—our mind is not that strong—but His existence can be made known by reason, can be demonstrated—our mind is not too weak for that.

Aquinas argues that we can’t know God directly in this life, yet we can know, even in this life, that we can know God directly in the next life:

Since the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest power, which is the operation of the mind, if we suppose that the created intellect can never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude or its beatitude would consist in something else besides God. This opinion is against reason, for there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees, and thus arises wonder in man. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, this natural desire would remain void. But no natural desire is in vain.

Aquinas frequently mentions this happy principle, that “no natural desire is in vain.” It seems empirically true. How could our nature desire something that our nature can’t possibly have? If we have a natural desire to know God, it must be possible to know God. If that desire can’t be satisfied in this life, it must be satisfied in the next life.

Aquinas distinguishes two degrees of knowledge here: comprehension and apprehension. He says that a finite mind can never comprehend, or surround, or fully understand the infinite Mind of God; but it can apprehend it.

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Just how far can we get in this life? Aquinas distinguishes four things that can be known about God by natural reason: first, that He exists; second, that He is the cause of creatures; third, that He has a certain number of deducible attributes; fourth, what He is not: that He is not a creature and not in the same genus as creatures, even as to His being, since He is infinite, unlimited being itself while creatures only *have* being in a limited way.

Aquinas says that the only two kinds of things we can know about God's nature are not what He is but what He is not and what He is like. We can have negative knowledge and analogical knowledge but we cannot have knowledge of God that is both positive and univocal, or non-analogical. All our univocal knowledge of God is negative, and all our positive knowledge of God is analogical.

The reason our univocal knowledge of God is only negative, according to Aquinas, is because we know, by experience, only what creatures are but not what the Creator is, since we are creatures but not the Creator. Because we're not God, we know, by experience, what time and finitude are but we don't know by experience what eternity and infinity are, except negatively.

And the reason all our positive knowledge of God is analogical, not univocal, is because we know, by direct experience, the universe, the art of God, but not the Artist. But the art only *resembles* the artist. So our positive knowledge is our knowledge of these resemblances to God.

Many philosophers today question whether language about God is meaningful at all. Do we know what we're talking about when we talk about God?

I suspect that most of the time, belief or unbelief in God's existence depends on understanding the meaning of the term "God." I never met an atheist who I thought fully understood what an intelligent theologian like Aquinas meant by "God." After talking for a while with an intelligent atheist I always find myself agreeing with him in denying the God he denies; only I claim that's not the God Aquinas is talking about. For instance, a God who moves around in time and changes, and therefore gets either better or worse in some way, or a God that's timeless and changeless by doing nothing. Both of these concepts of God are imperfect. Aquinas says God's perfection is pure act, pure actuality, and pure activity of knowing and loving. He doesn't change, He doesn't learn truth because He *is* all truth, and He doesn't fall in love for the same reason water doesn't get wet: because He *is* love.

Another attack on the meaningfulness of Aquinas's concept of God is this: Some say that the concept of omnipotence, or infinite power, is self-contradictory, and therefore meaningless. They ask whether God can make a rock bigger than He can lift, and if you say yes, then they say there can be something bigger than even God's power can lift, so God is not infinitely powerful; but if you say no, then they say there is something God can't do, so again His power is not infinite.

But the linguistic confusion is in that question, not in the concept of God that the question questions; for "a rock bigger than infinite power can lift" is a self-contradictory concept, but "infinite power" is not itself a self-contradictory concept. So the simple answer to the question is: No, God can't make a rock bigger than He can lift any more than He can make anything else that's self-contradictory and therefore meaningless.

Another serious question about the meaningfulness of Aquinas's concept of God would come from sources he never heard of, such as Hindu philosophical mystics like Shankara, who argue that God can't be a person because God is eternal and infinite; that if God is being itself, God can't be being *Himself*. That's a much deeper issue that's addressed by modern Thomists like the recent pope John Paul II, who was a personalist Thomist and who saw personhood as the very pinnacle of being rather than any kind of defect in being. If you want a good short introduction to personalist Thomist metaphysics, I recommend Fr. Norris Clarke's little book *Person and Being*.

Another critique of the meaningfulness of Aquinas's concept of God comes from so-called process philosophers or process theologians, who maintain that the concept of an eternal God who doesn't change is religiously meaningless, something we temporal persons can't meaningfully relate to. This is really a question of psychology rather than linguistics, though. Aquinas argues that God must be eternal because if He changes, then He's a mixture of actuality and potentiality, and therefore not purely actual, and therefore not absolutely perfect, but only in process to becoming more perfect. Then He's more like a philosopher or a saint than like the ultimate object of the philosopher's thought or the saint's love. And in that case, what is His object, His ideal, if He's still growing? It's only an abstract ideal of perfection, since there is no actually perfect being in this philosophy. But the traditional term for the philosophy that claims that there is no actually perfect being is atheism. It seems to be a linguistic confusion to call this theism.

More scientifically minded philosophers would object to the meaningfulness of Aquinas's language about God from another quarter: it's not empirical, it's all abstract, like geometry. Where is the empirical basis for all he says about God?

The answer is that there were five empirical bases for his arguments for God's existence in the first place, and from this small basis or foundation Aquinas erects a pretty tall building, like the Washington Monument. That's not the usual method of science, at least not empirical science. But to insist that theology must use the methods of empirical science is as unfair as insisting that empirical science must use the methods of theology. What's wrong with the logic of the arguments? The critic is attacking the very genre of not-strictly-empirical philosophy and theology in general. That's like attacking calculus for being mathematical, or Dante for being a poet, instead of showing an error in the equations or a fault in the poetry.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What four metaphysical principles form the basis for Aquinas's answer to how human reason can know God?
2. What objections could there be to Aquinas's principle that "no natural desire is in vain"?

### Suggested Reading

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Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

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Murray, John Courtney. *The Problem of God*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.



## Lecture 6: “What Is God?”: The Divine Attributes

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 3, “The Nature of God,” pp. 71–186.

The following are three features of Aquinas’s philosophical theology that may surprise you.

The first is how totally disciplined Aquinas’s theology is. It goes only as far as its logic allows it. It never substitutes piety for reasoning, or traditional beliefs for demonstrations.

The second is how fruitful abstract deduction can be. As I pointed out in the last lecture, Aquinas’s set of premises is very small, but he erects a kind of Washington Monument, a very tall structure, on this thin base. From a very few premises, or even from a single premise, many things can be validly deduced logically.

A third feature to notice here is that even though Aquinas is purely theoretical, there are practical, existential lessons everywhere implied in his metaphysical theory. There was a society of lay Catholics called “The Society for the Contemplation of the Divine Attributes,” and it gave believers a method of prayer by contemplating one divine attribute at a time and drawing some of the practical consequences for your life from this attribute. For instance, if God is omnipotent, then death and disease and disaster don’t come from God’s weakness, but from His power. So if we were logical about our faith and we believed that He was all-powerful as well as all-good, we would literally thank Him for every abscess and every zit and every hemorrhoid, because it’s all under His control.

In writing on God’s attributes, Aquinas is answering the question that haunted him as a child, the question none of his teachers could answer: What is God?

And Aquinas’s first answer is that we can’t know. We don’t know what God is, only what He isn’t.

Aquinas begins this section of the *Summa* with the attribute of God’s simplicity. He is not composed of parts of any kind.

By the way, although Aquinas is a Christian and therefore a Trinitarian rather than a Unitarian, he affirms the simplicity of the divine nature. The three Persons are not three parts of God. He’s talking here about the one divine nature.

He proves God’s simplicity by a long inductive argument. He enumerates nine possible kinds of composition and proves that each one cannot be in God. He is not composed of material parts, of matter and form, of subject and nature, or substance and attributes, of essence and existence, of genus and difference, of substance and accident, of any other composition at all, or of composition with other beings.

The next attribute of God that Aquinas proves, after simplicity, is perfection. He used this before as a premise, but now he deduces this from the premise

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that God is supremely actual, and not at all potential. He says, “the first active principle must be most actual and therefore most perfect, for a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality.”

He also says that “the perfections of all things are in God . . . all created perfections are in God, hence He is spoken of as universally perfect because He lacks not any excellence which may be found in any genus.” So whatever is perfect in earthly beauty, or goodness, or intelligence, or power, in any thing at all, is in God, but without those limits.

Aquinas argues that whatever good, whatever beauty, whatever perfection we love in creatures is to be found in God more perfectly. Detachment from worldly goods does not mean indifference or lack of appreciation of them—in fact, appreciation of the good things of the world is our only possible starting point for appreciating the goodness of God.

Aquinas next considers the attribute of goodness. He says, first, that all being is good. This is a cosmic optimism. And he proves it this way: He says, “the essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher [that is what he called Aristotle: simply “the philosopher”] says ‘Goodness is what all desire.’ Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only insofar as it is perfect . . . but everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it actually exists, for it is existence that makes all things actual . . . hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really.” In other words, all that is, is good. Aquinas also proves this more simply by arguing that all that is, is either the Creator or a creature, and the Creator is perfectly good, and any creature of God, anything created by perfect goodness, must also be good.

That doesn’t mean nothing is evil, it means that no *being* is evil. Nothing is ontologically evil, although some human acts and some human choices are morally evil.

Aquinas, following Aristotle, says that there are only three kinds of goodness: the pleasant, the useful, and the virtuous. All created things are pleasant somehow, and useful somehow, but only moral character and moral choices can be virtuous or vicious.

The next divine attribute Aquinas proves is infinity. This sharply distinguishes Jewish and Christian philosophy from ancient Greek and Roman philosophy: the pagans considered infinity an imperfection, not a perfection, because they thought in material terms, and it’s form that makes matter finite and beautiful and good. When Philo of Judaea went to Athens and dialogued with the philosophers in Plato’s Academy, they were impressed with his theology until he came to God’s infinity, and they just couldn’t understand how he could say that the perfect being was infinite, that infinity was a perfection rather than an imperfection of God. They were thinking of matter and material attributes. Infinite height or infinite weight is not a perfection but an imperfection. A perfect work of art has to have limits. But infinite goodness or infinite wisdom are not material attributes, but spiritual attributes, and infinity makes them perfect, not imperfect.

Aquinas next shows how God is omnipresent, or present in all things. He writes: “God is in all things not as part of their essence nor as an accident but as an agent is present to that upon which it works . . . And since God is being itself by

His own essence, created being must be His proper effect, as to ignite is the proper effect of fire. Now God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being (that distinguishes him from Deism), as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it. [Now watch what second premise he adds to this first premise to prove his stunning conclusion.] But being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in all things. Hence God is in all things, and innermostly."

You see, if being, or existence, is the innermost actuality in each thing, and if God is existence by His very essence, then God is actually, really, literally present most intimately in every thing. Nothing is more present to every being than God, activating each being to exist from within, so to speak, giving the gift or present of being because He is present in the present moment.

This immanent presence of God does not contradict God's absolute transcendence for Aquinas. In fact, it's made possible only by His absolute transcendence. You can understand this only if you stop thinking spatially about both His presence and His transcendence. He's transcendent in His nature, not His place. Transcendence means He's not limited. And presence means He's not absent. But He's present by His will and mind, not by being a body. And here's how these two things, transcendence and omnipresence, work together for Aquinas: God is infinite existence, transcending any finite essence, and that's why He can be intimately present to every finite essence, as light can be present to every color only because it transcends all colors. Similarly, our minds transcend our bodies; that is why our minds can be totally present to all matter, can know all matter, including our brains.

Next on the list of divine attributes comes immutability. That's easy to prove, from the premise that God is pure actuality, without potentiality. All mutability, all change, begins with something potential and actualizes it. If there's nothing potential in God, there's no change in God. If there were, then some new perfection would be gained or some old perfection would be lost, and then God would not be perfect at every moment.

Aquinas then goes on to prove that God is not only immutable, unchangeable throughout all time, but eternal, or timeless. He quotes Boethius's definition of eternity as "the simultaneously whole and perfect possession of endless life." Eternity has no duration, no past or future, only present. Our lives are mostly past and future, and therefore not fully real, because what's past is dead and no longer real and what's future is unborn and not yet real. But in God everything is real, including what to us is past and future.

The last divine attribute Aquinas proves is oneness, or unity, or uniqueness. He says, "The unity of God is proved from the infinity of His perfection. For it was shown above that God comprehends in Himself the whole perfection of being. If then many gods existed, they would necessarily differ from each other. Something therefore would belong to the one which did not belong to the other. And if this were a privation, one of them would not be absolutely perfect; but if it were a perfection, one of them would be without it. So it is impossible for many gods to exist."

Aquinas also proves this by observing the universe and its unity: "This [the unity of God] is also shown from the unity of the world (or the universe). For all

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things that exist are seen to be ordered to each other. [In other words, the universe is a single interacting whole, a system.] But things that are diverse do not harmonize in the same order unless they are ordered thereto by one."

Aquinas then adds a point about God's unity that is theological rather than philosophical, a statement of faith rather than proof. As a Christian, Aquinas believes God is a Trinity because He believes this is in the divinely revealed data in the Bible: the Father is God, and Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and they are three persons, not just one, yet there is only one God. He argues that the doctrine of the Trinity does not contradict the absolute unity of God by quoting Bernard of Clairvaux: "Among all things called one, the unity of the divine Trinity holds first place." Aquinas claims that the Trinitarian God is not less one, but more one because He is a Trinity. How can that be? Because, as Bernard explains, God is love, and the oneness of love holds loving persons together even more closely to each other than the oneness of mere arithmetical unity, mere quantity holds each one together with himself. For in deep love you identify with your beloved even more than with yourself. That's why the suffering or death of the beloved threatens you more than your own. So the oneness of love is a tighter ontological glue than the oneness of quantity.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Why did the pagans consider infinity an imperfection?
2. Why does Aquinas say that the immanent presence of God does not contradict God's absolute transcendence?

### Suggested Reading

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Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

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Sheed, Frank J. *Theology and Sanity*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993.

## Lecture 7: Aquinas's Cosmology: Creation, Providence, and Free Will

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 4, "Cosmology: Creation and Providence," pp. 187–240.

"Cosmology" means the *logos*, or rational science, of the cosmos, or the universe. It used to be a major division of philosophy, but many of its questions—questions about time, space, and matter—have been answered by modern science. Still, many philosophical questions remain, especially questions about the relations between God and the cosmos.

### About Creation

1. Why did God create the world? "Every agent acts for an end; otherwise one thing would not follow from the action of the agent more than another . . . Now to act from need belongs only to an imperfect agent . . . But this does not belong to God, and therefore He alone is the most perfectly liberal giver, because He does not act for His own profit." This means that God created the world for our needs, not His, because He has none. Our very existence is sheer gift. His only possible motive was pure generosity, unselfish love, charity—which according to Christian theology is the very essence of God.
2. But *how* did He create the world? He used no means, methods, or matter. Aquinas defends the traditional formula for creation, "ex nihilo," out of nothing—and that "nothing" doesn't mean space or formless matter or even potentiality. This contrasts sharply with the so-called creation stories of other religions and mythologies, where the creators form the world out of some previously existing matter; in the Jewish scriptures alone we have God creating matter itself, and time and space itself, out of nothing.
3. But is this possible? It seems that it's not, for (as Aquinas puts the objection) "an infinite distance cannot be crossed, but infinite distance exists between being and nothing." And his answer to the objection is that it "proceeds from a false imagination, as if there were some infinite medium between nothing and being . . . this false imagination comes from thinking of creation as a change between two states." For Aquinas, creation is not a change in time from one state to another. It's not a process in time at all. God created time itself. So there *is* no previous state. This is another concept that we simply cannot understand positively, because we're not God so we have no experience of creation in the strict sense. But we can understand it negatively, we can understand what it is not. And according to Aquinas we can understand God analogically as well as negatively, so we can also understand the act of creation analogically too, for instance by the analogy of our own intellectual or artistic creations when we have a radically new creative idea that seems to arise from nowhere instead of from previous ideas or experiences.

4. Is the universe infinitely old? Aristotle thought he could prove that the universe had no beginning. In Aristotle's philosophy, God did not create the universe, but only moves it by being its ultimate final cause or goal or standard of perfection. This view was a serious threat to the medieval synthesis of faith and reason, for here was *the* Philosopher, reason incarnate, contradicting Christianity. To justify that synthesis, it wasn't enough for Aquinas to believe that God had revealed the truth that the universe was created, and not eternal. He had to not only disagree with Aristotle but refute his arguments. And he did. Aquinas argued that we could not know by reason whether the universe was eternal or created, because "the newness of the world cannot be demonstrated from the world itself, nor from its efficient cause, God, for God acts by will, and the will of God cannot be predicted by reason."

Of course, we know now that Aquinas was wrong about the first of those two points. Scientists have demonstrated, from the world itself, that it is only about fifteen billion years old. Aquinas didn't know modern Big Bang cosmology. The Big Bang doesn't prove the universe was created by God, but it does prove the world has not always existed.

Aquinas makes a crucial philosophical move beyond Aristotle in distinguishing creation from change. Creation causes the very existence of a thing; change just changes its nature. Aristotle didn't distinguish a thing's existence from its essence or nature; he took the existence of the world for granted and wondered about its nature and its properties and its activities. The biblical teaching, in the very first verse of Genesis, that God created the world, was an answer to a question that no pagan had ever asked: why is there anything at all rather than nothing? But this answer led Jewish and Christian philosophers to ask that new question, "Why does anything exist?"—and thus to formulate the new distinction between essence and existence. And that distinction is the hallmark of Aquinas's metaphysics.

5. Since God is perfect, and acts perfectly, did God create the best of all possible worlds? Leibnitz argued that He did, and Voltaire brilliantly satirized that idea in *Candide*. Aquinas goes with Voltaire and common sense here, as he always does, and admits that this is clearly not the best of all possible worlds. He raises the question "Whether God can do better than what He does?" and answers yes, for "God could make other things, or add something to the present creation, and then there would be another and a better universe."

Possible worlds are like numbers: you can always add one more. There is no such thing as the best of all possible worlds, just as there is no such thing as the highest possible number. It's a self-contradictory concept.

6. Is this the only universe? Aquinas answers yes, because the cosmos is a single physical order with a single set of laws; that's what makes it a cosmos. I personally think he was wrong here, because even a human creator, a fantasy writer, can create different imaginary worlds with different physical laws in them; and modern scientists can dream up logically consistent universes with radically different laws than this one.

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7. What about evolution? Does it contradict what Aquinas means by creation? Clearly not, because the two ideas answer two very different questions: how did human biological life begin, and how did matter begin? Matter can't evolve into man until it first exists, and evolution says nothing about that.

Also, evolution says nothing about human souls. Souls leave no fossils. So direct divine creation of the human soul and biological evolution of the human body are quite compatible.

Aquinas solved most questions by making distinctions, and that's surely what he would have done here. He would also distinguish the question of the material cause from the final cause, and he'd reject the evolutionists' claim that evolution took place by chance, without a final cause or design; and he'd say that's not a scientific question, but a philosophical and theological question. Design isn't something science can empirically observe and mathematically measure. The current controversy between evolution by mere chance and intelligent design isn't a scientific question, but a philosophical question, and I think Aquinas would criticize both sides for confusing those two things.

### **The Relation Between God and the World**

8. Does God love everything in the world? Here is Aquinas's argument for answering yes: "God's will is the cause of all things. It must needs be, therefore, that a thing has existence, or any kind of good, only inasmuch as it is willed by God. To every existing thing, then, God wills some good. Hence, since to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing, it is manifest that God loves everything that exists."

Aquinas goes on to explain, "But our will is not the active moving cause of the goodness of the things it loves, but is moved by it. So our love is not the cause of good, but some good, real or apparent, is the cause that calls forth our love . . . but the love of God causes and creates goodness."

9. Aquinas then asks whether God loves all things equally, and answers no, because "since God's love is the cause of goodness in things, as has been said, no one thing would be better than another if God did not will greater good for one than for another." The universe, remember, is a hierarchy, and God willed it that way. God loves humans more than oysters; that's why humans are more valuable than oysters. Equality among persons is all well and good politically, but the cosmos is obviously not a democracy. Would we prefer that it was? Would we prefer a cosmos where every creature had an equal vote, including the mosquitoes?
10. Why did God make the universe so diverse? Aquinas asks "whether the multitude and distinction of things come from God?"—and his yes answer to this question makes him part company with all the pantheists and monists who are so common in both philosophy and religion. The reason for the diversity of things, Aquinas says, is God's will. And this is significant, because one feature common to all monism and pantheism is to see God merely as a being, or a force, or at most a consciousness, but never as a will, because will discriminates, will



chooses, will distinguish one thing from another. Aquinas derives the goodness of a diversity of things from the goodness of God's will.

And the practical applications of this are obvious. Diversity and inequality are good, in nature, in animals, in humans, in genders, in bodies, in souls, in minds, even in Heaven. How boring pantheism would be. Only one perfect, infinite being, and that's what we all are, according to pantheism. Aquinas praises plurality and finitude and imperfection—because God did, in creating it.

11. Do creatures lead us away from God or to Him? Many people are suspicious of the world because they see it as a temptation, to love the things in the world instead of God. You find this negative mentality even in very great saints and thinkers like Augustine. And you find it in modern people who like to talk about "spirituality" instead of sanctity as the goal of religion. But this "spiritualism" is not in Aquinas. In fact, he says "creatures do not withdraw us from God, but lead us to Him." He quotes St. Paul to prove this: "The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." And he explains, "If, then, they withdraw men from God, it is the fault of those who use them foolishly. And the very fact that they can thus withdraw us from God proves that they came from Him, for they cannot lead the foolish away from God except by the allurements of some good that they have from Him."
12. Aquinas next asks "Whether the cosmos as well as man has God as its end?" and answers yes. In his ethics, he will later try to prove that nothing less than God can be our final end, but here he says the same thing about the whole cosmos, because of final causality. The ultimate reason an acorn grows into an oak is because an oak is more like God. Everything that happens, happens because God is its ultimate good and final cause, its end as well as its origin.

The practical payoff of this idea, this ancient vision of a teleological, purposive universe, is that the universe is more like us than we usually think. It's not just a bunch of blind and dumb particles or energy fields; it's like a house for us to live in. And the point of that cosmology isn't just about the cosmos, but about us. Modern materialism reduces us down to something ultimately purposeless, like the merely material universe; but Aquinas's typically ancient cosmology raises the cosmos up to something purposeful like us.

### What Goes On in the World

13. Aristotle, the spokesman for ancient common sense, said that some things happen by chance, others by human art or by nature. When Christianity came into the world it added many categories to pagan thought, but here is one it subtracted. In a universe created, designed, and providentially cared for by an all-knowing and all-loving God, nothing happens by mere chance. Aquinas says that "*Everything* is subject to the providence of God." So chance can mean only human subjective ignorance, not anything objectively real. Aquinas gives this example: "Thus for instance the meeting of two servants, although to them it appears a chance circumstance, has been fully foreseen by their master, who has purposely sent them to meet at the one place in such a way that the one knows not about the other." So

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God might deliberately include in His design for the universe factors that appear random to the human mind. Just substitute “a scientist” and “a subatomic particle” for the two servants in Aquinas’s example, and you get room for quantum theory. The scientific concept of randomness in areas such as quantum physics, natural selection, or a roulette wheel would be logically compatible with divine omniscience and divine providence. Nothing is really left to chance, but some things may necessarily appear that way to us.

14. How does divine providence work? Aquinas answers this question by using the principle that grace perfects nature. Like a good manager, God governs the world by His subordinates. Aquinas says: “Since things which are governed should be brought to perfection by government, this government will be so much the better in the degree that the things governed are brought to perfection. And it is a greater perfection for a thing to be good in itself and also the cause of goodness in others than only to be good in itself. Therefore God so governs things that He makes some of them to be causes of others in government; as a master, who not only imparts knowledge to his pupils but also gives them the power of teaching others.”

This is the most basic reason why Aquinas would have no theological difficulties with evolution. In fact, he would see the use of natural forces such as “natural selection” as showing more perfection in God than special creation of each species by miracle. Miracles happen, but rarely. Providence differs from miracle mainly by its use of “second causes,” or natural rather than supernatural forces.

Aquinas is opposed to the rather popular religious idea, associated with fundamentalism, that there is some sort of rivalry between God and nature. He writes: “Some have understood God to work in every agent in such a way that no created power has any effect in things, but that God alone is the immediate cause of everything done . . . But this is impossible. First, because the order of cause and effect would be taken away from created things, and this would imply lack of power in the Creator, for it is due to the power of the cause that it bestows active power on its effect. Second, because the active powers which are seen to exist in things would be bestowed on things to no purpose if these powers really accomplished nothing through them.”

15. Since grace perfects and uses nature, this applies also to human free will, which also comes under divine providence. In fact, literally everything does, according to Aquinas; but this is not threatening to the natural order of things, but precisely fulfills it. That’s the basic reason why human free will is not threatened by divine providence or predestination. Aquinas writes, “nothing can happen outside the order of the divine government,” but “it is part of the divine government that natural things happen by nature and free human choices happen by free will.”
16. But this still leaves room for miracles. Aquinas asks “whether God can do anything outside the established order of nature,” and answers yes, because “He is not subject to the order of secondary causes, but on the contrary this order is subject to Him.”

Aquinas had no elaborate defense of miracles because no one in his time questioned them. It seemed to him, and to the whole of medieval Christendom, that it was perfectly logical to believe in miracles since they believed in a God who could perform them. If there is a God who can do the big miracle of creating the universe in the first place, it seems illogical to balk at little miracles. Aquinas, as a disciple of Albert the Great, certainly championed science. He never defended miracles against science because he never saw any problem, any conflict, there.

17. Does the cosmos include angels, pure spirits? Yes, because the cosmos is not merely material. Even man has spirit as well as body, and it's logically possible for spirit to exist without body. Aquinas says we can't prove the actual existence of angels, but we can prove they are logically possible, and also that they are probable, because we see that every possible level of being is made actual below us—minerals, plants, and animals—so it's probable by analogy that the possible level above us—pure spirits—is also actual.

By the way, almost all ancient religions and philosophies believed in something like angels. So they're also probable according to opinion polls of the sages, according to tradition, which Chesterton called "the democracy of the dead." But Aquinas doesn't use that argument.

### Good and Evil

18. Aquinas asks whether the evils in the world are willed by God. That is obviously the primary theological question about evil: the relation between evil and God. And his answer is that God wills all beings, all things that are; but evil is not a being, not an entity. It is not a mere absence, and certainly not an illusion, but it is a privation, or deprivation, of good in a being. It is not a being, so God did not create it, though it is in beings, which God created. But God does not directly create it or cause it, but causes all the beings in which it is found. So indirectly He does, because only real things that He created can be causes, but all real things are good, and God wills all good things directly. He does not will evil directly, but He deliberately allows it, "for the sake of the order of the universe."

Aquinas uses Aristotle's four causes to explain what kind of reality evil has: he says it has no formal cause or final cause, but it has a material cause, because evil is in good as its subject or container or matter. But that material cause is good, because God made it. God gave the murderer Cain a world full of stones and two healthy arms and the strength to pick up a stone, and Cain used all these things to kill Abel; and these things—arms and strength and stones—are all good. No evil can be done by evil things, only by good things, because there are no evil things, only good things.

19. Another question about evil is whether it can ever win, or, as Aquinas formulates it, "whether evil corrupts the whole good." And his answer is that "evil cannot wholly consume good" because it cannot exist without good as its subject, and all subjects, all beings, are good.

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20. A final question is which of the two kinds of evil is worse, pain or fault. Almost all arguments against God from evil concentrate on pain, assuming it is the worst evil. But Aquinas argues for the opposite. He says: "A wise workman chooses a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater as the surgeon cuts off a limb to save the whole body. But divine wisdom inflicts pain to prevent fault. Therefore fault is a greater evil than pain." And though we shudder at this, we agree. Socrates taught that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. For suffering hurts the body, but doing evil hurts the soul. So the criminal's primary victim is always himself.

You may wonder what this has to do with cosmology. It's how divine providence runs the cosmos: the same way we run a penal system, justly punishing evil for the good purposes of rehabilitation or deterrence, inflicting pain to prevent fault.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. What mistake did Aquinas make in his view on the age of the planet?
2. What are the practical applications of diversity in the universe?

### Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

Gilson, Etienne. *God and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

## Lecture 8: Aquinas's Metaphysics

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 4, "Cosmology: Creation and Providence," pp. 187–240.

We now begin a series of lectures that follows the philosophical order rather than the *Summa's* theological order. Philosophy's four most important divisions are metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, epistemology (or theory of knowledge), and ethics. Metaphysics is the most basic because it deals with what is, with what is real. Everything depends on that. For instance, if you believe that only matter is real and not spirit—if you are a materialist in your metaphysics—then your philosophical anthropology will follow that and you will deny that humans are essentially different from animals, you will deny the existence of a spiritual soul. And your epistemology will be a strict empiricism, with no independent level of immaterial, intellectual, rational knowledge distinct from sense knowledge. And your ethics will concentrate on material goods only.

Many philosophers today deny the legitimacy of metaphysics. They argue that it has no distinctive subject matter, as all the sciences do and all the other divisions of philosophy do.

Aquinas's answer is that even though metaphysics does not have a distinctive subject matter, or "material object," it has a distinctive point of view, or "formal object." All sciences look at beings, but metaphysics looks at them from the point of view of their universal properties and laws and principles.

A second part to Aquinas's answer is that metaphysics is not about what everything is but that anything is. Heidegger claimed that the whole of Western metaphysics, from Plato on, is guilty of a "forgetfulness of being" because they focused on what things are and neglected the fact that they are, neglected to ask that question. But Aquinas escapes this criticism. The primacy of the act of existence is the very center of his metaphysics.

Other modern philosophers object to metaphysics because they say it claims a kind of God's-eye point of view, claiming a knowledge of the whole of being as if from outside, forgetting that we are only parts of the whole. Aquinas's reply is to quote the famous saying of Aristotle that "philosophy begins in wonder," and to note that we wonder not only about some beings but about being as a whole. And the very fact that we can raise questions about being as a whole shows that we are not just parts of that whole. The questioning of a thing is not one of the parts of that thing. The act of wondering about x can be done only by something that is more than x.

Most modern philosophers object to metaphysics because of their restrictive or skeptical epistemologies. Hobbesian or Humean empiricism, for instance, forgets the very mind that's doing the reducing of itself to "the scout for the senses," as Hobbes calls it, and can't account for the very self that's asking the questions. And Kantianism reduces what can be known to phenomena or appearances and denies the possibility of a knowledge of "things-in-themselves,"

and thus contradicts itself, for that's saying that it's really true and not just an appearance that we can't know reality, but only appearances.

Our demand to know all of being is one of the two bases of Aquinas's metaphysics. The other is the intelligibility, or knowability, of all being. If any being were intrinsically unintelligible, in principle unknowable, that would frustrate this innate, natural desire in us, which would be simply absurd. For then this would be a hunger for a food that simply did not exist. It's such a hunger that does not exist. Instead, Aquinas asserts that intelligence and intelligibility are ordered to each other, open to each other, like a cosmic Romeo and Juliet. In fact, mental conception and sexual conception are analogies of each other.

And this brings us to the great principle of analogy, which for Aquinas was a property of the term "being," and the concept of being, and being itself. An analogical concept is not wholly the same in all its uses and not wholly different. A concept like "two" or "Boston, Massachusetts" is univocal: it means the same thing in all its uses. A pun or an ambiguity is equivocal: it means two or more unrelated things, like the bark of a tree and the bark of a dog. But an analogical concept has a range of related meanings, like "know" when said of a goldfish "knowing" where its food is, a dog "knowing" its master's voice, a man "knowing" the philosophy of Aquinas, and God "knowing" the universe He designed. For Aquinas, "being," or "existence," has a similar analogical range of meanings.

One problem analogy solves is how we can know anything of God. If we understand all the attributes of God as univocal terms, then our theology is anthropomorphic: we're dragging God down to a human level, if those terms mean the same thing when said of us and when said of God. On the other hand, if the terms are equivocal, then they tell us nothing about God and our theology is agnostic. But if the attributes are analogical, then we know some real reflections of God, or analogies to God, however pale and remote—something like parables.

If a term is analogical, we have to distinguish the many different but related meanings of it. And the first distinction Aquinas makes is between real being and mental being. And the criterion of the distinction, the standard he uses for distinguishing these two is the act of existence. Real being exists by itself; mental being does not. The only kind of existence a concept, or an abstraction, or a dream, or a mental construct has is the existence of the thinker. Real beings exist, and they can generate concepts, but concepts can't generate real beings. Since they don't have existence themselves, they can't make anything else exist.

The principle Aquinas uses here is that real being acts because it is actual. "*Agere sequitur esse*": Activity follows the act of existence. Aquinas calls activity "second act" and actuality of existence "first act." And this very abstract principle means that existence is always acting, always giving itself to something in an act of ontological generosity—as if self-giving is built into the very nature of existence. Why this should be so is a great mystery, but Aquinas's theological explanation is that it's rooted in the very nature of God as self-giving love, and the fact that all other beings are analogical images of God.

One of the so-called transcendental, or absolutely universal, properties of all being is to be one. Even a group or a collection or a division is one group, or one collection, or one division. Aquinas defines it this way: "to be one is to be

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undivided in itself and divided from every other," to cohere together and to be distinct from other beings.

This unity is also analogical: God is more one than a human soul; and a human person is more one than an animal, because we can meaningfully say "I"; and an animal is more one than a plant. And even a plant is more one than a rock, or an atom, or a subatomic particle.

But beings are many as well as one, an apparent contradiction. Old Parmenides answered it by simply denying one half of the paradox, manyness, and therefore also change, which is manyness in time, manyness of before and after, and he became the first philosophical monist or pantheist. His opposite was Heraclitus, who denied oneness and permanence, and famously said that reality was like a river that you could never step into twice. Plato solved the problem by distinguishing two worlds, the lower world of matter, which was many, and the higher world of Platonic forms, where you found oneness. Aristotle joined Plato's two worlds with his doctrine that a substance was matter and form together.

Aquinas diagnosed the error of Parmenides and the monists this way: "they fell into error because they dealt with being as though it were a univocal concept and an essence . . . this, however, cannot be done, for being is analogous . . . Parmenides argues as follows: outside of being there is nothing but nonbeing, and that which is not being is nothing. Since being is one, whatever is outside the one is nothing.' From this argument of his it is clear that Parmenides was thinking of the *concept* of being, which appears always to be one and the same, and univocal, for it is unthinkable that something be added to the concept of being so that one concept of being be distinguished from another. For that which would be added to being must necessarily be something outside of and distinct from being. But the only thing outside of or extraneous to being is nonbeing or nothing. Hence it appears that the notion of being cannot be modified, cannot be anything but one, unique, and univocal."

But if there is only one being, then individuality is an illusion, and also individual responsibility. If the universe of many things is only a dream, who's dreaming it and why? Aquinas was far too commonsensical to be tempted by monism.

On the other hand, radical pluralism is nominalism: it denies the reality of any universal terms like being, and reduces them to mere words or mental abstractions. And if being refers to nothing real, metaphysics is impossible, or a myth or error inherited from the primitive superstition that every word must refer to a real thing.

But our experience shows us both oneness and manyness. As in science, a good hypothesis has to account for all the data, not just part of it.

Aquinas explains the oneness of beings by the fact that they all share the act of existence, which is itself one and the same simple act. But beings are different because this act of existence is received into many different essences.

Matter, for Aquinas as for Aristotle, means not actual atoms and molecules but potentiality to receive form. Form is actuality in relation to matter. When I make a statue of a horse or of a man out of a ball of relatively formless clay, I impose determinate form on indeterminate matter. Actuality is more perfect than potentiality, so form is more perfect than matter.



But that same form is only potential to existence. The form of unicorn is quite perfect as an essence but it lacks the most important perfection of all, actual existence. Because that's the supreme perfection, Aquinas calls God the pure act of existence unlimited by any finite essence.

But calling God the act of existence sounds like reducing a real divine Person to a metaphysical abstraction. It evokes Pascal's passionate protest: "give me the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the god of the philosophers and scholars."

That's because Pascal, like most of us, takes existence for granted and looks at it just as a fact, instead of an act. That's the key insight: the act of existence isn't some abstract truth but the dynamic, actual energy of existing. But essences aren't positive additions to existence, but limits on existence, as banks limit a river. That's why Aquinas says God is pure, infinite existence. Creatures are only finite beings because their existence is limited by finite essences.

This means there is a kinship of all beings in the act of existence. Everything is real by the same ontological energy. If that's God, that's why God is present everywhere.

Thus what Gilson calls "the great syllogism": God is existence itself, and existence itself is most intimately present at the heart of every being. Therefore God is most intimately present at the heart of every being.

If the heart of philosophy is penetrating to the supreme reality, and if the heart of religion is the practice of the presence of God, then this is where philosophy and religion meet.

God is everywhere, but this is not pantheism, because it's only by the transcendence of the act of existence over all essences that it can be so intimately present to every essence. No actor in a play can be present in every scene and present to every other actor all the time, but the transcendent creator of the play, the author, is present to every actor and every act.

The next level of the problem of the one and the many is the level of form and matter. The form or species of man, or dog, or star is one, but there are many men, many dogs, many stars, because matter multiplies form, makes many beings of the same form.

Form does not mean shape, something external and material and visible to the senses. Form means essence. Form is what is common to all the members of a species.

If you deny universal forms, if you're a Nominalist and you reduce universals to mere names, as many modern philosophers do, then you have a serious problem explaining how we're all essentially equal if there is no such thing as a universal essence. Then nothing prevents us from saying there are essentially superior individuals or superior races. Only a universal form gives you a real basis for essential equality. If there is no universal essence, we can't be essentially equal.

A consequence of the matter-form composition is that if there are angels, finite but purely spiritual beings without any matter at all, then each of them must be a separate species, because it's matter that distinguishes different individuals of the same species and angels have no matter, therefore only form

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can distinguish them. Angels differ from each other not as humans or animals do but as animal species do, as dogs differ from cats.

There's a problem with Aquinas's form-matter composition when it comes to human individuality. Aquinas says it's matter that distinguishes many beings of the same species; but are we distinct from each other only by matter, by our bodies? Aquinas does not mean that; but the first thing that differentiates the species humanity into many humans is numerically different bodies. Then we are further differentiated by numerically different souls. But you can't have numerically different souls unless you first have numerically different material bodies to receive them. Human souls are essentially related to bodies, so much so that after the death of the body, the soul is incomplete until it gets a new body in what Jews and Christians and Muslims call the resurrection.

One of the earliest puzzles in the history of philosophy is the puzzle raised by Parmenides: To say that a thing changes seems self-contradictory, for it seems like saying that that thing, since it changes, is no longer that thing; but if it's no longer that thing, then it's not that thing that changed. Parmenides's solution to the puzzle was simply to deny change, to declare that it was an illusion and our senses deceived us. Aristotle solved the puzzle by distinguishing the two metaphysical principles of act and potency, or actuality and potentiality, and Aquinas borrowed this from Aristotle. He reasoned this way: a changing being has to be different somehow at the end of the process of change, otherwise there is no change. Yet it has to be the same being, so there has to be some underlying continuity and permanence. Aristotle called this source of continuity *potency* or *potentiality*: the aptitude in a being for receiving new kinds of being.

Potentiality is not visible to the senses, so it's not observable to science. It's closely connected with another premodern idea that modern science is often skeptical of, the idea of the nature of a thing. Aquinas defined nature as "the abiding center of acting." So a nature is a set of potentialities for action. The nature of fire is to burn, and the nature of birds is to fly, and so on.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas defines change as the transition from potentiality to actuality, and he distinguishes two different kinds of change: accidental change and substantial or essential change. When I get older, smarter, or fatter, that's only change in accidents, but when I die, that's a change in essence.

In accidental change there has to be something that remains identical throughout the change. We know this by direct experience from within, for we know that we remain the same person when we undergo accidental change, for instance when we wake up or remember something. So we have direct experience of the fact that we have a substantial identity.

That doesn't mean substance is inert. It's the substance that changes. Yet it remains itself. It keeps its identity. "Self-identical" isn't the same as "unchanging."

The other kind of change is substantial change, or essential change. This happens twice to each one of us: first when we are born, or rather when we are conceived, and then when we die. A corpse is not a person any more, not any kind of a person. Yet there's still some principle of continuity even in substantial change. In accidental change, that principle is the substance, composed of essential form and matter. In essential change, or substantial

change, the essential form is gone, so what is the source of continuity and identity then? It has to be the matter.

“Matter” here doesn’t mean actual atoms and molecules; that always has some form or other: for instance hydrogen or nitrogen. That’s formed matter; this is formless matter, or “prime matter,” as Aquinas calls it. It’s potential, not actual. You can’t see it, but you have to posit its reality to explain continuity in essential change. It’s a totally abstract idea. You’ll never find prime matter in a test tube or on your dinner table. Yet whenever you eat an apple, it’s there: it’s what has lost its appleness and is becoming a part of your human body. You are not an apple, yet you ate an apple. That’s the commonsense fact that this very abstract concept explains.

The most important metaphysical principle Aquinas uses in the *Summa* is the principle of causality. We’ve seen him use this in his five ways to demonstrate the existence of God. Now let’s dig a little deeper into the metaphysical principle itself.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas distinguishes four causes, four kinds of causality: form and matter are the two intrinsic causes, the formal cause and the material cause; and the efficient and final causes are the two extrinsic causes. We don’t usually use the word “cause” any more to refer to intrinsic causes. We might call the four causes the four explanations, or the four explanatory factors that we need to totally understand a thing: two inside the thing and two outside. The two inside are the form and the matter and the two outside are its origin and its end.

This last kind of cause, which Aristotle and Aquinas call final cause, is another notion that has dropped out of most modern philosophies because it’s not a scientific notion. But there’s a good commonsensical argument for it. We notice that all things act in definite ways, in definite directions. Puppies always grow into dogs and birds fly and fish swim. Puppies never become cats and rocks never swim. Final causality is simply the explanation for this fact: things are directed to specific ends. Efficient causality provides the power, but final causality directs it. If the cause is intelligent, we say it *designs* its acts. But the beings in nature, beings without intelligence, also move toward ends even though they don’t have the mind to design that. Perhaps this fact proves the existence of a designing Cosmic Mind, or God, as Aquinas claims in his fifth way; and perhaps it doesn’t. But in either case, it’s a fact, it’s data, that the behavior of things in nature is structured to move to specific ends.

Finally, an important point about the efficient cause. Aristotle saw this merely as the source of change, but Aquinas sees it also as the source of existence. He argues that everything that begins to exist needs an efficient cause to account for its existence. This is, of course, one of the key premises for his arguments for God. If the thing itself were its own sufficient reason for existence, it would have to exist always (and that’s only true of God), or else it would have to give existence to itself—which is logically impossible: nothing can give what it doesn’t have.

Efficient causality is a kind of self-giving of the cause to the effect, a kind of metaphysical love. Dante called it “the love that moves the sun and all the stars.”

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Why is form more perfect than matter?
2. What are a few of the categories that metaphysics and common sense use, but which are not usable in modern science?

### Suggested Reading

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Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

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Clarke, W. Norris, S.J. *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001.

## Lecture 9: Aquinas's Philosophical Anthropology

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 5, "Anthropology: Body and Soul," pp. 241–266.

Aquinas's first point in the part of the *Summa* that deals with man is the spirituality of the human soul.

The word "soul" (*anima* in Latin) doesn't necessarily mean something spiritual. It means simply "life force," or "source of life." So in Aquinas's Aristotelian language system, animals and even plants have souls too. Biological life mediates and softens Descartes's dualism between pure matter and pure mind.

Aquinas defines soul as "the first principle of life in things which live." (Remember, "principle" means "source," not "formula.") So in animals too, and even in plants, there is something that is more than mere matter.

But human souls have three properties that plant and animal souls don't have: they are immaterial (or incorporeal or spiritual), and subsistent, and immortal. Those are the three most important claims Aquinas would make against modern materialists.

By means of the intellect man can have knowledge of all corporeal things. Now whatever knows things cannot have any of them in its own nature, because that which is in it by nature would impede the knowledge of anything else. Thus we observe that a sick man's tongue, being vitiated by a bitter humour, is insensible to anything sweet, and everything seems bitter to it. [In other words, if your tongue is shriveled by lemon juice, you can't taste candy. Another example of the same principle would be light: if light is received through red colored lenses, all the colors look red.] Therefore, if the intellectual principle [the knowing mind] contained the nature of a body it would be unable to know all bodies.

Therefore the intellectual principle is not a body.

In other words, the mind is not the brain. The mind is an immaterial, spiritual power of the soul. The brain is a physical organ of the body.

This is Aquinas's refutation of materialism. Knowledge is a relationship of a mind to the object it knows. In knowledge you have not just a funny kind of object, but a subject knowing an object. So there is more than the object of knowing. Knowing is a relationship of transcendence, of moreness. The knower is more than the known. To know *x*, you have to be more than *x*, outside *x*. So souls can know bodies but bodies can't know souls. The knowledge of a thing can't be one of the parts of that thing. And since we can know truths about all the matter in the universe, for instance the laws of physical science, we must be more than all the matter in the universe and not just part of it.

Whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the recipient. If the intellectual soul were composed of matter and form, the forms of things would be received into it materially and

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individually, and so it would know only the individual, as happens with the sensitive powers which receive forms in a corporeal organ . . . It follows, therefore, that the intellectual soul is not composed of matter and form.

If the soul were material, like the eye, it would be able to receive only material things like photons of light energy, and not immaterial forms or formulas like energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. Formulas aren't made of photons; they are about photons.

Aquinas's next step is to prove that the human soul is "subsistent," that is, exists as a substance, not as an accident of something else, an accident of the body; that it exists independently, and is not dependent on the body for its existence. We can't think without a brain. But we can exist without a brain. So the mind is not just a bodily part or a bodily act.

The intellect has an operation of its own apart from the body. [He means abstract thinking, as distinct from concrete sensing or imagining.] And only that which subsists [or exists on its own] can have an operation on its own. Therefore . . . the human soul, intellect, or mind is something subsistent.

Aquinas's next step is to prove that this soul is immortal, or ontologically incorruptible. (It is, of course, quite corruptible morally. He means by "corruption" death, ceasing to be.)

A thing may be corrupted in two ways: by itself or accidentally. Now it is impossible for any substance to be generated or corrupted accidentally, that is, by the generation or corruption of something else . . . Therefore whatever has existence by itself [and that's the definition of a substance] cannot be generated or corrupted except by itself. Now it was shown above that whereas the souls of brute animals are not subsistent, the human soul is; and so the souls of brutes are corrupted when their bodies are corrupted, while the human soul could not be corrupted unless it were corrupted by itself.

But this is impossible as regards anything subsistent that is a form alone without matter. For it is impossible for a form to be separated from itself.

In other words, corruption happens when a form is separated from its matter; for instance, we die when the soul is separated from the body. But the soul is a form without matter, so it can't die. It's a form, not matter.

This is essentially Plato's argument for immortality in the *Phaedo*, put into the Aristotelian categories of form and matter. And also into the categories of substance and accident. Accidents, like the whiteness of a seagull, can be corrupted by the corruption of the substance they inhere in—the seagull. But a substance, like one seagull, is not corrupted by the corruption of another substance (another seagull). Soul and body are different kinds of things. What corrupts the one (bullets, or cancer) can't corrupt the other. And what corrupts the other (lack of wisdom and virtue) can't corrupt the one.

Aquinas does not say that the body and the soul are two substances, as Descartes does. We are one substance, not two. The soul is the form of the body, and the body is the matter of the soul. But the soul is also a substance, as well as being the form of the body. If it were only the form of the body, it couldn't survive the death of the body. But the human soul is subsistent.

(Subsistence is the act of existence of a substance.) The soul does not decay when the corpse decays.

Here is a second argument for the soul's incorruptibility:

Everything aspires to existence after its own manner. Now in things that have knowledge, desire ensues upon knowledge. The senses know existence only under the conditions of here and now, whereas the intellect apprehends existence in itself and for all time; so that everything that has an intellect naturally desires always to exist. But a natural desire cannot be in vain. Therefore every intellectual substance is incorruptible.

The key premise of this argument is that no natural desire can be in vain. Why did Aquinas believe that? Isn't that naïve?

Perhaps you just have to be natural instead of cynical to appreciate this. Aquinas's mind was too natural, innocent, sane, and healthy to doubt the principle that "no natural desire is in vain," because to doubt that principle is to suspect that human beings are living jokes, programmed by their nature to desire things that don't exist. If objective reality simply doesn't contain anything at all that answers to our deepest subjective desire, then we would be living in a world designed for frustration, a world of a dark and devious and devilish design; a world in which man was designed not by a good God but by a bad God.

We want life, not death. We want that by nature, naturally; it's an innate desire. A universe that supplied food for every hunger except that one would be a trick universe, like a trap that lured an animal by treat after treat before killing it.

That's my argument, not Aquinas's, for his principle that no natural desire is in vain. Aquinas doesn't offer any such argument because he doesn't even consider such an existential absurdity as the trick universe.

But if the soul is immortal, why is it united to a mortal body? Not as a punishment, or an imprisonment, as Plato thought. It's for the soul's own good, not because of some evil, that it's united to a body, says Aquinas. The body supplies the soul with opportunities for acting in a material world. The bodily senses supply the mind with all the data that we then interpret and abstract from. All mental learning begins with physical sensing. We're not meant to be bodiless. We're not angels, we're rational animals.

Aquinas is just as strongly opposed to an angelistic anthropology as an animalistic one. True, he sees man as essentially different from animals because his soul is spiritual, substantial, and immortal; but he also sees man as essentially different from angels because his spirit is the form of his body. This middle position between materialism and spiritualism allows Aquinas to validate both the soul's immortality and our sense of psychosomatic unity. Aquinas says that "the intellectual soul is properly united to the body"—in other words, the body is not an obstacle or alien or enemy to the soul but a helper, an aid, a good for the soul. Only by beginning with bodily sense experience can the intellect know anything.

Since the form is not for the matter but rather the matter for the form, we must gather from the form the reason why the matter is such as it is, and not conversely.

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This principle—explaining matter by form, explaining empirical details by unifying purpose, explaining the material by the non-material—sharply distinguishes the typically medieval notion of what a rational explanation is from the typically modern one, which tends to materialism and reductionism, explaining love by hormones and thought by brain chemistry. Aquinas explains the body, explains the fact that the soul is united to a body, from the viewpoint of the good of the soul.

In Aquinas's day there was a controversy about whether we had one soul or three: the vegetative, animal, and rational. In other words, is it the same soul that keeps the body alive, that has animal instincts, and that thinks, or is it three different souls? This issue has an application in our day that it didn't have in Aquinas's day. Today many people justify abortion—terminating the life of an unborn child—on the grounds that it's not yet a human person because it can't *think* yet. But if it's the same human soul that lives, grows, senses, feels, and thinks, then abortion kills not a young human body with a sub-human soul but a young human body with a young human soul. But if there are three different souls, then abortion at an early stage only kills a vegetative soul, and at a later stage only an animal soul, and only at a later stage a rational soul.

Aquinas quotes Aristotle's argument:

Against those who hold that there are several souls in the body, he asks, What contains them? That is, what makes them one? It cannot be said that they are united by the one body, because the body does not contain the soul and make it one, but rather the reverse, the soul contains the body and makes it one.

To use an analogy, the words of a book, which are its matter, are grammatically and thematically unified by the book's point or meaning or message, which is its form. The form contains the matter. Remember, the play contains the setting, not vice versa.

We have ourselves inside out if we look for the soul somewhere in the body. Where would it be?

So we have one soul with three powers, not three souls.

Aquinas explains the different powers this way:

The vegetative power acts only on the body to which the soul is united. The sensitive regards a more universal object, namely every sensible body, not only the body to which the soul is united. [In other words, an animal soul, or sensitive soul, can sense and desire *any* body; a plant soul cannot.] And the rational soul regards a still more universal object, namely not only sensible bodies but all being universally.

But if the soul is not in the body, are these powers of the soul located in particular parts of the body? No. The intellect is not inside the brain. What's inside the brain is grey matter.

Aquinas says the whole soul is in each part of the body.

If the soul were united to the body merely as its mover, we might say that it is not in each part of the body but only in one part through which it would move the others.



For example, as a pilot is in the cabin of the plane or the captain at the wheel of the ship. This is what Descartes thought when he said the soul was in the pineal gland. That's no less silly than saying that the mind is in the brain. But Aquinas is more sophisticated than that:

But since the soul is united to the body as its form, it must necessarily be in the whole body, and in each part thereof. A proof of which is that on the withdrawal of the soul, no part of the body retains its proper action.

Aquinas then contrasts the relation between the soul and the body with the relation between the rational and the animal powers of the soul, or between the intellect and the sensory appetites. He calls the relation between reason and the senses a political and royal relation, while the relation between soul and body is a despotic relation. He gets this analogy from Aristotle, and explains its point this way:

A power is called despotic whereby a man rules his slaves, who have no right to resist the orders of the one who commands them since they have nothing of their own. But that power is called political or royal by which a man rules over free subjects, who although subject to the government of the ruler have nevertheless something of their own by reason of which they can resist the orders of him who commands. And so, the soul is said to rule the body by a despotic power because the members of the body cannot in any way resist the sway of the soul . . . but the reason is said to rule the appetites by a political power because the sensory appetite has something of its own by virtue of which it can resist the commands of reason.

Aquinas says we have two levels of cognitive powers, namely, the sensory powers and the intellectual powers, and we also have two parallel levels of desiring powers, or appetitive powers, namely, the sensory appetite and the rational appetite, or the animal instincts and the will. Aquinas calls the will the rational appetite.

This will be a crucial psychological foundation for Aquinas's ethics because the good is the object of the will, just as the true is the object of the intellect. And of all the objects of the will, the supreme good, the supremely desirable thing, is happiness: not just momentary subjective contentment but permanent, true, real happiness. This, Aquinas says, all desire with necessity—not the necessity of coercion or violence, which Aquinas says is altogether repugnant to the will, but the necessity of end. What he means by “necessity of end” is simply that everyone necessarily desires the supreme good as his or her end. But the will is free to choose between different conceptions of what that happiness “consists in” and also free to choose different means to that end.

There are individual goods which do not have a necessary connection with happiness because without them a man can still be happy, and to such the will does not adhere of necessity. [He means things like money or art or fame.] But there are some things which do have a necessary connection with happiness [he means things like wisdom and virtue], and only by means of these things can man adhere to the God in Whom alone true happiness consists. Nevertheless, until the necessity of this connection is shown through the certitude of the vision of God in Heaven, the will does not adhere to God of necessity.

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In other words, the true God is in fact the only game in town, but because we may not know this, we are free to worship any number of false gods. We want our own true happiness necessarily, but we don't necessarily want God, even though God is in fact our true happiness, because we don't necessarily know or believe that God is our true happiness. Also, we don't necessarily want wisdom and virtue, even though these are in fact necessary to bring us to happiness and to bring us to God, because we don't necessarily know or believe that they are necessary.

A last important issue is the will's freedom. Aquinas's argument for free will is extremely simple and empirical: it is the meaningfulness of moral language:

Man has free will; otherwise, counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments would all be in vain.

If we don't have free will, then we are different from animals only in degree, not in kind. So if there is no free will, mere "behavior modification" replaces moral persuasion.

But wait. How can Aquinas believe our wills are free, like sovereigns? Doesn't he believe in the sovereignty of God? He quotes a kind of proto-Calvinist objection to free will:

What is free is cause of itself. So what is moved by another is not free.  
But God moves the will. Therefore man does not have free will.

In our day the arguments for determinism and against free will come from below, from matter and the physical sciences. In Aquinas's day they came from above, from divine determinism, from predestination. And his answer to the divine determinism objection is *not* to deny predestination but to reconcile it with free will by an application of the fundamental principle that grace always perfects nature rather than demeaning it:

Free will *is* the cause of its own movement, because by his free will man moves himself to act. But it does not necessarily belong to liberty that what is free should be the *first* cause of itself, just as for one thing to be the cause of another it does not have to be the *first* cause. God, therefore, is the first cause, and He moves other causes, both natural causes and voluntary causes. And just as by moving natural causes God does not prevent their actions from being natural, so by moving voluntary causes God does not deprive their actions of being voluntary. In fact, He is the cause of this very thing in them [their freedom], for He operates in each thing according to its own nature.

I know of no simpler or more elegant solution to the puzzle of fate and free will than that. Fate and free will are both always implied in every story we ever tell about human activity, so we believe in both, but we think they're a puzzle, a contradiction. Aquinas shows us why they're not, and validates our instinctive wisdom in seeing ourselves in the stories we tell, seeing stories as the fullest expression of our nature, since they always combine fate and freedom, while philosophies sometimes don't.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. What is the relation between mind and brain? Between soul and body?
2. What are the three powers of the soul?

### Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

Adler, Mortimer J. *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1993.

## Lecture 10: Aquinas's Epistemology

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 6, "Epistemology and Psychology," pp. 267–344.

When we explore Aquinas's epistemology we will not find an answer to what many modern philosophers think is the most important epistemological question of all, because Aquinas never asked it. That is what has been called "the critical problem," the critique and justification of human reason. This is the crucial problem of classical modern philosophy from Descartes through Kant. One of the principles of the scientific method is to assume nothing, to doubt everything, and this seems to require beginning with epistemology instead of metaphysics. That's more critical because it's like a carpenter examining his tools before he builds a house. The carpenter is the philosopher, and the house is metaphysics, and the tools are reason, and the examination of the tools is epistemology.

If he were challenged to answer the critical question, Aquinas would probably say you can't do epistemology without doing metaphysics, because what knowledge is depends on what IS. For instance, if only matter is real, only material knowing, sense knowing, is real knowing. I think he would also say that the modern question is logically unanswerable because it contains a built-in self-contradiction. Whatever act of reasoning we use to justify reason also needs to be justified; and the same thing will be true of that justification, et cetera ad infinitum.

Aquinas is a realist, not an idealist. He believes that reason reaches objective reality, not just our own ideas. And this epistemological realism distinguishes him from all three of the major schools of modern epistemology, all of which, in three different ways, are idealist rather than realist. First of all, Aquinas does not begin by assuming nothing and trying to prove something by deducing something about objective reality from our ideas, as Descartes's rationalism does. Second, he does not begin by defining an idea as the first object of our knowledge, as Locke's Empiricism does. And third, he does not agree with what Kant calls the "Copernican Revolution in philosophy," which claims that in all our thinking the thinking subject forms and structures and determines the known object rather than vice versa. Aquinas is a realist because he believes that from the beginning reason is open to reality and reality is open to reason. But he does not try to prove this, he assumes it, and he would argue that we *have* to assume that from the first moment we claim to know any truth at all.

Aquinas does, however, offer a critical account of human knowledge once this assumption is granted; he explains how we know. And here too he comes up with a philosophy that differs from all three major modern answers, Rationalism, Empiricism, and Kantianism. For he knew two of these philosophies, at least, as options in ancient Greece: rationalism from Plato and radical empiricism, or hard empiricism, from ancient materialists like Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius; and like Aristotle he navigates between these two extremes. His

position is sometimes called moderate empiricism, or soft empiricism, because it says that all human knowledge begins with sense experience but it is not limited to sense experience.

Aquinas would say that the hard empiricist confuses man with animals, in reducing all knowledge to passive sensation, and the rationalist confuses man with angels, in believing that we have innate ideas, a kind of mental telepathy with the divine mind. Man's middle position on the cosmic hierarchy between animals and angels is the constant metaphysical background to Aquinas's typical Aristotelian "golden mean" between two extremes.

There are three grades of the cognitive powers. For one cognitive power, namely the sense, is the act of a bodily organ. There is another grade of cognitive power which is in no way connected with matter; such is the angelic intellect. But the human intellect holds a middle place, for it is not the act of a bodily organ, yet it is a power of the soul which is the form of the body.

Aquinas agrees with the empiricists that we have a so-called "passive intellect," that is, that the human mind is in potentiality, or passive, or receptive of knowledge. It does not have innate ideas. He explains this by comparison with the divine intellect:

We may see whether the intellect is in act or potentiality by observing its relation to universal being. For there is an intellect whose relation to universal being is that of the act of all being; and such is the divine intellect, in which originally all being pre-exists as in its first cause. And therefore the divine intellect is not in potentiality but is pure act. But no created intellect can be in act in relation to all of being . . . the human intellect is in potentiality with regard to things intelligible, and is at first like a clean tablet on which nothing is written, as the Philosopher says. This is clear from the fact that at first we are only in potentiality to understanding and afterwards we are made to understand actually. And so it is evident that with us to understand is in a way to be passive.

So Aquinas, like Aristotle, disbelieves in Plato's innate ideas. And he shows the derivation of his epistemology from his metaphysics:

Aristotle did not allow that the forms of natural things exist apart from matter [in other words, no separate Platonic ideas] . . . so we must therefore assign on the part of the intellect the power to abstract these forms from material conditions.

And that's the reason there is also an "active intellect," and not merely a passive one, as the hard empiricists hold.

Matter can't enter the mind, only form can. If forms don't already exist freed from matter, as Plato thinks they do, then our mind has to act to abstract them from matter before they can enter the mind.

So Aquinas combines passivity and activity in knowing:

The intellect is already actually immaterial but is in potentiality to receiving determinate forms. But phantasms [sensory images] are actual images of certain determinate forms but are only potentially immaterial. So nothing prevents one and the same intellect having one power by which it makes forms actually immaterial by abstraction from individual matter,

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which power is called the active intellect, and another power, receptive of such forms, which is called the passive intellect, by reason of its being in potentiality to being determined by such forms.

A material apple can't enter a spiritual mind, only the appleness of the apple can. But we have to first abstract the appleness from the apple.

What is truth? You expect Aquinas, as a realist, to hold a correspondence theory of truth, but he's subtler than that. A concept is not just a picture or copy of the real form in the world. If that were so, how could we ever know which pictures were true? It's the very same form that both structures the matter outside our mind and structures the idea in our mind. So this is an identity theory of truth. He says, quoting Aristotle, that "the soul of man is in a way all things." This is because the forms of all things can exist in the mind.

Humanity is like six billion mirrors in an enormous room, the universe. Each mirror can reflect anything in that room, including the other mirrors. The whole universe, and not just pictures of it, reappears six billion times when human minds know it.

The mistake with correspondence theories is that they "thingify" ideas. They treat ideas as things, like pictures, or copies, of real things in the world. In Aquinas's technical language, that means treating ideas as material signs rather than formal signs. Material signs are signs that are also things, like signposts or maps: things that point to other things. Formal signs are pure signs, not things at all. Only ideas are formal signs, mental acts of pointing to things, not things themselves like fingers. They're acts of the knowing subject, not objects. If ideas were things, then we would know ideas first and things second, as in both rationalists like Descartes and empiricists like Locke. But then skepticism is the inevitable conclusion, for then we would be like prisoners in jail cells who see only what's in their cell, including the pictures on the TV sets in the cell, which claim to be pictures of the real world outside—but there would be no way to know which pictures are true if there is no direct knowledge of objective reality. For Aquinas, when you know things, you're having a kind of rational out-of-body experience.

That's why Aquinas says that ideas are not things that are understood, but means by which we know things. He asks "whether the intelligible species [or form] abstracted from the phantasm [sensory image] is related to our intellect as that which is understood?" And he answers: No, it is the means of knowing, not the object known.

He offers two arguments for this conclusion.

First, if what we understand is merely the intelligible species [that is, form] *in* the soul, it would follow that every science would not be concerned with objects outside the soul, but only with the intelligible species within the soul.

In other words, all sciences would be subdivisions of psychology.

Second, it is untrue because it would lead to the opinion of the ancient Sophists who maintained that "whatever seems, is true," and that consequently contradictions are true simultaneously. For if a faculty knows its own impression only, it can judge of that only. Now a thing seems according to the impression made on the cognitive faculty. Consequently,

the cognitive faculty will always judge of its own impression as such, and so every judgment will be true: for instance, if taste perceived only its own impression, then when anyone with a healthy taste perceives that honey is sweet, he would judge truly, and if anyone with a corrupt taste perceives that honey is bitter, this would be equally true . . . thus every opinion would be equally true.

That absurd conclusion is exactly what many modern thinkers happily embrace, and call toleration: the equality of all opinions. They say that “true” means only “true for me” or “true for you.” Thus no one is ever wrong, and we should never be judgmental, except of being judgmental. In other words, truth itself is relative.

This, of course, is simply absurd. Aquinas doesn’t even feel the need to explain why it is absurd that every opinion is equally true. For it’s immediately self-contradictory, like all forms of universal skepticism: if every opinion is equally true, then the following opinion is also equally true, namely that *not* every opinion is equally true.

Aquinas says we understand “by composition and division,” and this means that we know truth only in a judgment which affirms or denies one concept—a predicate—of another concept—a subject. Then we reason from some judgments, as premises, to others, as conclusions. These are the three acts of the mind: understanding the meaning of a concept, making a judgment of truth, and reasoning.

Aquinas says, surprisingly, that the first act of the mind, the act of understanding, the intellect’s simple apprehension of a concept, cannot be false. Why? Because only judgments can be true or false. Your concept of an apple may be confused, but it’s not false until you make a judgment, like “apples are poison” or “apples are vegetables.”

A next point is that “one person can understand the same thing better than another can.” Intellects are not equal in their power to understand, even though the laws of logic and mathematics are the same for all minds. And our judgment follows our understanding, which varies, as well as following our reasoning, whose principles do not vary. The laws of logic are the same for everyone, but the ability to understand is not. This explains why people always will have disagreements, including philosophers.

Descartes tried to end the endless disagreements between philosophers by using only the scientific method, which he saw as essentially the mathematical method. And the use of this method has in fact produced remarkable agreement in science. In fact, the scientific method is probably the greatest discovery in the history of science, because it’s like a skeleton key that opens all the doors. Medieval scientists disagreed as much as philosophers did because their method was essentially the same as that of philosophers. But modern scientists now agree much more than they disagree, while philosophers still disagree more than they agree. Why? Descartes would say it’s because philosophers don’t use the scientific method, as he proposed in the *Discourse on Method*. Aquinas would give a different reason. He’d say that it’s because of an innate inequality. Even though we are all equal in our ability to reason and in our knowledge of the laws of reasoning, we are not equal in our understanding or our judgment that follows our understanding. That’s why

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Descartes's hope to end philosophical and even religious and political disagreements, and perhaps even war, by using the scientific method, is probably an impossible utopian dream.

Another point Aquinas makes is that "the intellect cannot know singulars [or concrete individual things], only the sensory powers can know singulars." So without the senses we can know only forms, species, universals. We need the senses to know singulars, or individuals, because matter is the principle of individuation, as we saw in metaphysics, and we need the senses to know matter.

But Aquinas also has a high regard for the intellect, and says that "infinity is potentially in our mind through its knowing one thing after another, because never does our intellect understand so many things that it cannot understand more." So our intellect is potentially infinite, like the number series. (God's mind is actually infinite.)

How do we know ourselves? Aquinas says it's by reflection on our knowledge of the world. The sensory knowledge of some material thing has to come first; only then can we reflect on the fact that we knew that thing, and then come to understand that we are intellects, not just material things. Unlike Descartes, Aquinas does not begin with "I think therefore I am" but with "I see a tree therefore I am not just an object seen but a seer." Self-knowledge comes last, not first.

Aquinas does not think we have any innate ideas, although we have innate powers; and he thinks that we come to know immaterial forms, or what Plato called Ideas, only by abstraction from material things. (Platonic Ideas, of course, are not subjective opinions but real forms.) Aquinas says they exist in three places: *ante rem*, *in re*, and *post rem*: before things, in things, and after things; first in the mind of God before they are in the things in nature; second, in those things in nature; and third, in our mind after we abstract them from things.

And even after the forms are in our mind, by abstraction, Aquinas says, we cannot understand them without the help of the imagination, or what he calls turning to the phantasm, or sensory image. We need concrete illustrations or analogies to understand abstract principles. Aquinas is very commonsensical, and closer to empiricism than to rationalism.

But he's not merely an empiricist. He also says that the soul when separated from the body by death still has its own proper act of understanding. That power is not a sensory power. This would explain how out-of-body experiences are possible even before death. The mind is not the power of a bodily organ, not even the brain.

On the other hand, it's conditioned in its exercise by the body and the brain. Aquinas would not be surprised or upset by recent discoveries about the power of brain chemistry to alter mental states. That's exactly what he'd expect on his hypothesis that the soul is the form of the body.

One last point is the relation between the intellect and the will. Aquinas treats this in the anthropology section of the *Summa*, but it's about epistemology too because it's about the intellect. He asks "whether the will is a higher power than the intellect." That's a crucial question because there seems to be a central disagreement between pagan Greek philosophers and Christians here, which Matthew Arnold called "Hebraism and Hellenism," the biblical view and



the classical view. Aristotle as well as Plato identified our true and highest self, and our highest power, with reason, with mind. But the Bible identifies it with love, which is an act of the will. Pagans are intellectualists; Christians are voluntarists, it seems, so the great experiment of the medieval synthesis between classical and biblical wisdom won't work, right?

You will probably not be surprised to learn that Aquinas's answer is that there's truth in both traditions, and he does synthesize these two anthropologies. He says that both sides are right in different ways. He makes two important distinctions to solve the problem. The first one is between different objects of the two powers, and the second is between two different ways they act on each other.

When the thing in which there is good is nobler than the soul, the will is higher than the intellect. But when the thing which is good is less noble than the soul, then the intellect is higher than the will. Thus the love of God is better than the knowledge of God, but the knowledge of material things is better than the love of them.

This is so, he explains, because love draws you out into the object and conforms you to it, while knowledge does the opposite, because a thing is known only according to the powers of the knower. When we know God, we have to drag Him down to our level of knowledge, but when we know ice cream, we raise it up to our level of spirituality, of intellect, mind. The ice cream enters our mind only as an idea. But loving works in the opposite way from thinking. When we love God, we try to become like Him, we conform ourselves to Him. And the more we love ice cream, the more our thoughts and desires, our souls, become like ice cream. So knowledge is higher than love in relation to the world, but love is higher than knowledge in relation to God. The Greeks were right about the world and the Jews and Christians were right about God.

The second distinction Aquinas uses to compare the intellect and the will is how they cause or move each other. Each has the power to move the other in different ways, with two different kinds of causality.

A thing is said to move in two ways: first as an end or final cause, for instance when we say that the end moves the agent. In this way the intellect moves the will, because the good understood is the object of the will, and moves it as an end. Secondly, a thing is said to move as an agent or efficient cause, as what alters moves what is altered and what impels moves what is impelled. In this way, the will moves the intellect and all the powers of the soul.

In other words, the intellect is the soul's only navigator and the will is the soul's only captain. Each needs the other.

We can easily understand why these powers include one another in their acts, because the intellect understands what the will wills, and the will wills the intellect to understand. In the same way good is contained in truth inasmuch as it is understood, and truth is contained in good inasmuch as it is desired.

Intellect and will require each other also, for union with God in Heaven. This is a union of love only because it is also a union of mind. In fact, the actual glue

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that unites us to God in the Beatific Vision is mind, not will. Here is Aquinas's argument for that conclusion:

The attainment of our last end does not consist in the very act of will, for the will is directed toward the end in two ways: when absent, it desires it and when present it takes delight in resting in it. Now it is evident that the desire itself for the end is not the attainment of the end, but is a movement towards the end; while delight comes to the will only from the end being already present.

So the will is just as important as the intellect in attaining our last end but the act of union itself is an act of the mind. That's what Jesus said: "This is eternal life: to *know* you, the only true God" (Jn 17:3).

Of course this is not merely rational knowledge by concepts, but personal knowledge, by experience. But it is knowledge. It's what causes the greatest delight in lovers: their knowledge of each other, their intimacy, both physical and emotional. If they're completely in love, they could just sit and stare happily into each other's eyes forever. That's the cause of their bliss; their knowledge is the cause of their delight.

So on the classic problem of intellectualism vs. voluntarism, the bottom line is that Aquinas straddles the line between them, transcends the either/or. Intellect and will are like man and woman: made for each other and indispensable for each other's fulfillment.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. Why must there be both active and passive intellect?
2. How does Aquinas agree and disagree with Empiricism?

### Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

Gilson, Etienne. *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*. Trans. Mark A. Wauck. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986.

**Lecture 11:**  
**Aquinas's Ethics:**  
**What Is the Greatest Good?**

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 7, "Ethics," pp. 345–400.

Pretty much all of ethics is about three words: good, right, and ought. A philosopher can concentrate on any one of these three. Concentrating on the good means starting with the question of what is really good, and thus the question of what is real, and thus starting with metaphysics. Concentrating on the right means focusing on rights and the laws that guarantee them, and the social interactions laws regulate. Concentrating on ought means focusing on psychology and moral experience, especially the experience of duty and obligation.

When we think of ethics today we usually think first of social ethics, how to treat each other, and second we think of individual ethics, character building, virtues and vices, and we seldom think of the end, the good, at all. But Aquinas begins his ethics there, and makes everything else in ethics relative to this question. Clearly, the question of humanity's mission, or purpose, or goal, or greatest good, is the most important question of all. That's basically what we mean when we ask, "What is the meaning of life?"

Aquinas's first answer to this question is the same as Aristotle's: happiness. There are three reasons for saying that happiness is our good, our end. First, because that's what everyone wants, not just some people. Second, happiness is what everyone wants as an end, not a means to any further end. Third, happiness is what everyone seeks by means of everything else, so everything else is a means to that end.

Aquinas means by happiness here not simply satisfaction or contentment, but real, true blessedness. It's objective, not just subjective. We want more than mere feelings of contentment. We want not just to feel happy but to be happy: truly happy, blessed. We want not just to get what we desire but we also want to desire, and to get, what's desirable.

In Aquinas's terms, the "formal cause" of happiness is clear, but what is its "material cause," its content?

He proves next that it must be just one last end, or final end, or ultimate end, of everything we do, and that we can't have more than one final end, and that it motivates everything we do, and that we all have the same last end. These are the four preliminaries to his treatise on what the last end is, or consists in.

He proves that there is just one last end by an argument that's parallel to his arguments for the existence of God: that there can't be an infinite regress here, in final causes or ends, any more than there can be an infinite regress in efficient causes. No one would lift his little finger, unless motivated by the desire to attain an end that was final and self-justifying. No matter how many means there are in the chain, there has to be an end to pull it.

He proves that we can't have more than one final end because the final end, complete happiness, has to satisfy all our desire, with nothing else left over. Means are many, the end has to be one.

He then proves that this one final end motivates everything we do, at least unconsciously. Premoderns knew the power of the unconscious; we didn't learn about that first from Freud. In a sense, we're all fanatics unconsciously about one thing. We all want to sell everything we have for the sake of happiness.

Finally, Aquinas proves that "all men have the same last end" because we all have the same essential human nature.

Now Aquinas is ready for the most important question in the *Summa*: "Of Those Things in Which Happiness Consists"; in other words, What is the true meaning of life? Why was I born? Why am I living?

Aquinas's treatment of this question, in eight short articles, is the most masterfully condensed and clearly argued summary of the basic answers people give to the question that I've ever seen. Aquinas's treatment of it is the most objective and scientific treatment you could imagine: a perfect example of how he combines profundity with clarity. His method is to rely on empirical observation and logical argument alone. There's no emotional appeal, no rhetoric, no personal winks or kicks or preachings.

He ranks the candidates in an order, beginning with the most external, obvious, inadequate, and foolish one, and proceeding to the wisest and completest one. And he rejects them all.

By his process of eliminating all the other answers, Aquinas finds himself left with God alone. And he assumes, without arguing the point, that any sane person will at least make a Pascal's wager and choose God rather than nothingness.

The eight candidates are wealth, honors, fame or glory, power, bodily good or health, pleasure, good of the soul or virtue, and any created good at all, in other words, everything in the whole world.

Of all the answers to the greatest and wisest of questions, wealth is the smallest and stupidest. So Aquinas puts it first on the ladder, farthest away from the end. Wealth, or money, is by definition only a means—a means of exchange—so it could not possibly be our end. Yet it is probably the most popular of all answers. And that is an argument for it: "all things obey money."

His answer to this argument is unusually sharp: "all things obey money so far as the multitude of fools is concerned."

But fools are common. If your friend suddenly shows up with a great big smile on his face, what's the first thing you say: "Hey, what happened? Did you just win the lottery?" If that's the first thing you say, it's the first thing you think of too. So you're one of Aquinas's "multitude of fools."

Wealth doesn't look so foolish when you look at the argument for it, which says that "happiness is a state of life made perfect by the aggregate of all good things, and money seems to be the means of possessing all things, for it was invented that it might be a sort of guarantee for the acquisition of whatever man desires. Therefore happiness consists in wealth."

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But as Aquinas points out in his answer, that's what disqualifies it, because it's not universal. The best things in life are free. As Aquinas says, "all things saleable can be had for money but not so spiritual things, which cannot be sold." For instance, wealth doesn't make you wise. In fact, it tends to make you stupid. If power tends to corrupt, so does wealth.

The reason for identifying wealth with happiness was only a clue, a quality found in both. This is a logical fallacy, called the fallacy of the undistributed middle term: Happiness is *x*, wealth is *x*, therefore happiness is wealth. One could equally say that you are white and a cloud is white, therefore you are a cloud. A common feature does not prove an identity.

Aquinas's refutation of wealth comes in two parts. The shorter argument is that "man's good consists in retaining happiness, but wealth shines in giving it rather than in hoarding it, for the miser is hateful while the generous man is applauded. Therefore happiness does not consist in wealth." In other words, money, unlike happiness, is not good when kept, only when spent.

Then comes a deeper analysis and argument. "Wealth is twofold, namely natural and artificial. Natural wealth is that which serves man as a remedy for his natural wants, such as food, drink, clothing, dwellings, and suchlike, while artificial wealth, such as money, is not a direct help to human nature but is invented by the art of man for the convenience of exchange."

He then proves that happiness, our ultimate end, cannot consist in either kind of wealth, because both are means, not ends. Not natural wealth because "this is sought for the sake of something else, namely as a support of human nature . . . all such things are below man and are made for him." So we violate the real order of values and the dignity of our own nature when we serve things below us instead of using them, or when we try to use things above us like truth, goodness, beauty, or God, and make them serve us instead of respecting them for their own sake. In other words, three kinds of love should conform to three kinds of things: we should use things, love man, and worship God.

Aquinas goes on, "as for artificial wealth, it is not sought save for the sake of natural wealth." Money that can't buy anything is worthless. So it's only a means to exchange those natural goods which in turn are only means. Money can't be our end because it's only a means to a means.

He also points out that greed for artificial wealth is not only more foolish but also more dangerous and addictive than greed for natural wealth, because, as he says, "the desire for natural riches is not infinite because they suffice for nature in a certain measure. But the desire for artificial wealth is infinite for it is the servant of disordered concupiscence, which is not curbed." You can't enjoy more than three or four gourmet meals a day, so your desire for food is limited; but you can always desire another million dollars.

The second candidate for happiness is honors. This is a less popular candidate in our egalitarian society than in pre-modern hierarchical societies. Yet we still do want to be thought highly of by others, even if it takes the form of being accepted not because you are superior but because you are not, because you're one of the lonely crowd.

But Aquinas dismisses this candidate with two quick and simple arguments. One is that "happiness is in the happy person, but honor is not in the honored person but rather in the one who gives the honor." In other words, honor is

internal to the honorer and external to the honoree, while happiness is internal. My happiness can't be dependent on your opinions.

Aquinas's second argument is that "honor is given to a man on account of some excellence in him, and consequently it is a sign and attestation of the excellence that is in the person honored." So identifying honor with happiness mistakenly identifies the sign with the thing signified, like working for a grade in a course rather than for the education and the wisdom.

The third candidate is fame or glory. We certainly respect this today; look at all the attention given to movie stars. This is similar to honor but not identical, since we can be honored by a few but famous only if many know us. So fame is honor multiplied.

His shorter refutation of fame is simply that "happiness is man's true good, but it happens that fame or glory is false." Again, they don't match. But then comes a second, longer, and profounder argument:

Man's happiness cannot consist in human fame or glory, for glory consists in being well known and praised . . . but the thing known is related to human knowledge otherwise than to God's knowledge; for human knowledge is *caused by* the things known, whereas God's knowledge is *the cause of* the things known. Therefore happiness cannot be caused by human knowledge, but rather human knowledge of another's happiness is caused by the other's happiness itself. On the other hand, man's good does depend on God's knowledge as its cause.

This is a metaphysical surprise. God's knowledge is literally creative. He created the universe simply by thinking it into existence. We can only think thoughts into existence, not real things. Things conform to God's thoughts, but our thoughts conform to things. And since our mere thoughts can't create real things, they can't create real happiness. (Fame is in other people's thoughts.)

The fourth candidate is power. Unless we are tyrants, terrorists, or totalitarians, we tend to be suspicious of power. We often say "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." But many people today would identify happiness with freedom, yet freedom and power are very similar concepts. Slavery, paralysis, and imprisonment take away both, if freedom means simply the power to do what I want, liberation from physical evils rather than liberation from moral and spiritual evils.

One of Aquinas's arguments for power here is revealing to us: it is that "It would seem that happiness consists in power, for all things desire to become like to God . . . but those in power seem to be most like to God." After all, what's the adjective we first think of when we name God? "Almighty God," we say.

Aquinas's refutation of this argument is that "God's power is his goodness; hence He cannot use His power otherwise than well. But it is not so with men. Consequently it is not enough for man's happiness that he become like God in power, unless he become like God in goodness also."

Here again a piece of theological metaphysics has practical human consequences. God is absolutely simple. There is no composition in Him. And that means there is no composition of substance, or essence, plus accidents. And since each of His attributes is one with His single unitary essence, each is identical with each other. In us, justice and mercy differ and they can compete;

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in God, they're identical. So with us not only is power not identical with goodness, but there is even a natural tension between the two, a temptation for power to corrupt us.

Aquinas proves that power is not happiness for three reasons. First, happiness is the perfect good, but power is most imperfect. He quotes Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*: "The power of man cannot relieve the gnawings of care, nor can it avoid the thorny path of anxiety. And: Think you a man is powerful who is surrounded by servants whom he inspires with fear but whom he fears still more?" It's the famous master-slave dialectic: the master is really innerly enslaved to his slaves.

A second argument is that "power has the nature of a principle, or beginning, while happiness has the nature of the last *end*."

And third, "because power is open to either good or evil, whereas happiness is man's proper and perfect *good*."

Again, there is no match.

Aquinas then moves from external to internal goods and asks in the fifth article "whether man's happiness consists in any bodily good." He means here not pleasure, which is not primarily bodily but psychological—he'll consider that in the next article—but bodily power and health.

Aquinas gives three reasons for not identifying happiness with goods of the body. The first comes from comparing man with animals. He says, "man surpasses all other animals in regard to happiness. But in bodily goods he is surpassed by many animals, for instance by the elephant in longevity, by the lion in strength, by the stag in fleetness." So a trip to the zoo can prove that our greatest good is not bodily good.

That should be obvious even to a materialist. We can be more deeply happy than any animal. What ape can fall in love or weep with joy at a symphony? We can also be more deeply unhappy than any animal. Remember, Aquinas is talking about happiness here, not contentment. The lower the animal, the less discontentment and the less happiness.

The second argument is that "if a thing be ordained to another as to its end, its end cannot consist in the mere preservation of its being. A captain does not intend as a last end the preservation of the ship entrusted to him, since a ship is ordained to something else as its end, namely sailing. Now just as the ship is entrusted to the captain that he may steer it, so man is given over to his will and reason. And man is ordained to something as his end, since man is not in himself the supreme good. Therefore the last end of man cannot be the mere preservation of his being."

The third argument is that "man's being consists in soul and body, and though the being of the body depends on the soul [thus the body dies when the soul leaves it], the being of the soul depends not on the body. Also, the very body exists for the soul, as matter is for its form and instruments are means for work. Thus the goods of the body are ordained to the goods of the soul as to their end, and happiness, which is man's last end, cannot consist in goods of the body."

Aquinas is not a spiritualist. The body is good. But he is not a materialist either: the body is not the supreme good. As usual he avoids opposite extremes.



Aquinas's sixth candidate is pleasure. This makes more sense than any of the previous answers, for two reasons, which he lists in his first two objections:

Since happiness is the last end, it is not desired for anything else but other things for it. But this answers to pleasure more than to anything else, for it is absurd to ask anyone what is his motive in wanting to be pleased.

Pleasure and happiness are alike in being desired as ends, not means. Second, all desire delight, as all desire happiness.

Aquinas's argument against this identification first distinguishes bodily pleasure from others, and says, "Because bodily delights are more generally known, the name of pleasure has been appropriated to them, although other pleasures excel them." This claim can be tested by experience, and everyone who has performed the experiment report the same result: just as spiritual miseries can exceed physical pain, spiritual joys can exceed physical pleasures. The soul is much more subtle and sensitive to both than the crude and simple body.

But even spiritual pleasure cannot be the greatest good, because pleasure means being pleased, and there is a reason why we are pleased; so pleasure is a byproduct or "property," or "proper accident," of what makes us happy. Aquinas says: "Every delight is a proper accident resulting from happiness, or from some part of happiness, since the reason a man is delighted is that he has some fitting good, either in reality or in hope or in memory. Therefore it is evident that delight, which results from the perfect good, is not the very essence of happiness but something resulting from it."

You can't get the property without the thing, because the thing is the cause of the property and you can't get the effect without the cause. You can't be pleased, or pleased, by nothing, only by something. We still have not found that something. When we find it, we will also find the greatest pleasure in it. So pleasure is an ingredient in it, but not its essence.

The seventh candidate is "some good of the soul." Aquinas is thinking of intellectual and moral virtue, which are the perfections of the human soul. And of course the state of happiness is in the soul. But what makes the soul happy? We still have not found that.

The end means two things: first the thing itself which we want to attain, and second our attainment, possession or use of it. If we speak of man's last end as to the attainment or possession of it, then man attains happiness through his soul. But if we speak of man's last end as to the thing itself which we desire as last end, it is impossible for man's last end to be the soul itself or something belonging to it. For the soul is in potentiality, since it becomes actually knowing from being potentially knowing, and actually virtuous from being potentially virtuous. Now since potentiality is for the sake of actuality as for its fulfillment, that which is in potentiality cannot be the last end. Therefore the soul itself cannot be its own last end.

The point is really very simple, despite the abstract metaphysical categories of potentiality and actuality: if the soul were its own last end, that would be like a moving arrow being its own target, or like a worm eating its own tail.

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Each of the candidates has brought us closer to the adequate answer, and the eighth and last one is “any created good,” the entire creation, everything except God. Aquinas asks “whether any created good constitutes man’s happiness?” Can we be perfectly happy with natural goods or must our happiness be supernatural? And he lists a very strong argument for natural happiness as adequate. For we are not supernatural beings, and everything in nature has a natural end, so why must we be satisfied only with a supernatural end? The objection is worded this way:

Man is made happy by that which satisfies his natural desires. But man’s natural desire does not reach out to a good surpassing his capacity.

Since then man’s capacity does not include the good which surpasses the limits of all creation, it seems that man can be made happy by some created good.

Aquinas’s answer to this argument is to deny the premise that “man’s natural desire does not reach out to a good surpassing his capacity.” Like Augustine, he would say that God has made us for Himself, and that is why our hearts are restless until they rest in Him. There is in us an inherent dissatisfaction with anything less than God, an inherent desire for God. “I am miserable therefore God exists”—it’s almost a sixth argument for God’s existence.

He says: “It is impossible for any created good to constitute man’s happiness. For happiness is the perfect good, which satisfies the appetite altogether; else it would not be the last end if something yet remained to be desired. Now the object of man’s will is the universal good, just as the object of the intellect is the universal true. Hence it is evident that nothing can satisfy man’s will but the universal good. This is to be found not in any creature but in God alone. Therefore God alone can satisfy the desire of man.”

This is the rational justification of his answer to the voice that asked him in the middle of the night in the chapel what he wanted as his reward: “Only yourself, Lord.” His logic and his life coincide perfectly. Aquinas’s treatise on happiness, or the last end, has the same logical structure and strategy as his five ways. The five ways try to prove that God alone is our sufficient beginning or origin, and the question on happiness tries to prove that God alone is our sufficient last end or happiness.

A problem remains: we are not capable of attaining this end by our own power and our own nature. It’s hard enough to climb the foothills of power or pleasure or health; how can we climb the Everest of God with human legs? But if we can’t, then why do we want to?

Aquinas’s answer is strictly theological, not philosophical. It is Augustine’s: that God has designed us that way, made us for Himself, because He intended to give us the supernatural grace to do the impossible, to become united to God, to attain the unattainable. We are made “to dream the impossible dream” because that deepest desire in us is our divinely designed road map through life.

God designed us to want Him because He intended from the beginning to make Himself attainable. But how? Aquinas’s answer to that question, thus his complete concrete, practical answer to the question of human happiness, is the same as any Christian’s answer: Jesus Christ.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. What are the three reasons for saying that happiness is our end?
2. How is “happiness” more than *contentment*?

### Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

Gilson, Etienne. *Moral Values and the Moral Life: The Ethical Theory of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. Leo Richard Ward. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2007.

## Lecture 12: Aquinas's Ethics: Right and Wrong

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 7, "Ethics," pp. 345–400.

Aquinas makes the role of intellect crucial for ethics. Ethics is a matter of reason from beginning to end. He means by reason not just logical consistency plus knowledge of empirical facts, but knowledge of values, an understanding of what is really and truly good.

The two most important powers of the human mind are reason and free will. So Aquinas calls it simply "the *rational* soul." And one of the most important powers of that reason is moral conscience. Aquinas distinguishes two parts of this power: he calls them synderesis and conscience. In Aquinas "synderesis" means the immediate, direct knowledge of moral principles, and "conscience" means the applying of these principles to situations.

Both powers, synderesis and conscience, are powers of the intellect. For Aquinas we have no special, distinct moral power, or moral sense, as some modern philosophers say. The power is called the intellect. Synderesis and conscience are not mere feelings, but seeings, understandings. They tell us objective truth.

Of course, that doesn't mean it's infallible. We can make mistakes here as well as anywhere else. But mistakes are made by thinking, not feeling.

That's why Aquinas calls ethics a science, in the ancient, broad sense of the word. If you look at the word "conscience" you can see the word "science" in it. Its root word, "scio," means "I know." As Aquinas says, "conscience, according to the very nature of the word, implies the relation of *knowledge* to something."

He doesn't deny that there's also an emotional dimension to conscience. In fact, he says: "Conscience is said to bind, to incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke, and all these follow the application of knowledge to what we do." He's saying that these moral feelings are there only because the moral knowledge is there.

The power Aquinas calls synderesis is intuitive, or direct seeing—parallel to the mind seeing intellectual first principles like  $2 + 2 = 4$ , or the whole is greater than the part, or  $x$  does not equal non- $x$ . In synderesis the mind sees the goodness or badness, the rightness or wrongness, of an act, not a concrete particular act but a species or kind of act, a virtue or a vice like greed or justice. That's the first part of moral knowledge. Then comes the second part, which he calls conscience, where the mind applies these values to situations.

Then, because of this rational judgment of conscience, comes the emotional force of feelings of obligation or guilt. So you could say there are three aspects of conscience for Aquinas: the intuitively intellectual, the rationally and judgmentally intellectual, and the emotional.

Is there one ultimate moral principle that everyone knows intuitively? If so, that would be the single most fundamental moral principle for living. Aquinas says there is. It is *Do good and avoid evil*. That's like the law of non-contradiction in theoretical thought: it is self-evident. It cannot be proved by anything else because it is presupposed in all other moral arguments.

There's a close parallel between the two orders of knowledge, theoretical and practical, or intellectual and moral. In both there are four levels.

First there is the single first principle that governs everything else. The first theoretical principle is the law of non-contradiction, that a thing can't both be and not be, that everything is what it is and not what it isn't. And the first practical principle is *Do good and avoid evil*.

Then on a second level there are a number of more specific principles that are always true because this first principle is true. And in the practical order these are the most basic moral principles or values or virtues or commandments. These are also known intuitively, by *synderesis*, but they can be justified by appealing to the first principle.

Then there is a third level, which is derivative principles, which can be deduced from the second level by reasoning, but which are not immediately known. Why pay your taxes? Because stealing the money that belongs to your government is a form of stealing. Why not have an affair? Because adultery is injustice against the golden rule and also dishonesty, against your solemn promise, and all injustice and dishonesty is evil.

Finally, there is a fourth level, and that's a potentially infinite number of applications of all three of these levels of knowledge to many changing situations; and this power is what Aquinas strictly means by conscience. How shall I report my tips on my tax form? Why report all of them and not just some? Because the government commanded it and expects it. Or perhaps not, perhaps the expectation is to give you some wiggle room, in which case it's not wrong to take as much wiggle room as the law gives you. But if it's explicitly commanded in the law, you should obey the law, unless the law violates some higher moral law.

This most specific level is where most moral arguments and disagreements take place, because of what Aquinas calls the obscurity and variation of circumstances. Perhaps I can honestly wonder whether the government really expects me to report all my tips. Maybe it's acting like a lawyer suing for three times what he really expects to collect. Or is it? What's a moral absolute is the need to find out, to inform your conscience by the truth. But what's often morally relative is what conclusion you will come to when you do that. So Aquinas's ethical epistemology makes room for both absolute principles and relative, changing applications; for certain and uncertain moral knowledge, for demonstrative moral reasoning and for probable moral reasoning.

What makes a human act good or evil? That's one of the most basic questions of ethics. It's much more important than questions we naturally feel more passionate about, like: Is it ever right to fight a war? To abort a baby? To tell a lie? To divorce? To have sex outside marriage? Those are obviously important questions, but the question of what makes any act good or evil is a kind of skeleton key question, since you can use the answer to unlock all the other ethical doors.

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Aquinas's first answer to the question is voluntariness. This doesn't distinguish good from evil acts, but it distinguishes acts which can rightly be called either good or evil from those that are neither.

Aquinas first establishes that some of our acts are voluntary. He then proves that violence cannot be done to the will. Not that it should not but can not be done. He argues, "what is compelled or violent is from an exterior principle. Consequently it is contrary to the nature of the will's own act that it should be subject to compulsion and violence." By definition, Aquinas says, "violence is directly opposed to the voluntary."

But can't God move our will from without? Yes, but even God cannot do violence to our will. Aquinas says, "God, who is more powerful than the human will, can move the will of man, but if this were by compulsion, it would no longer be by an act of the will, nor would the will itself be moved, but something else *against our will*." It's almost the definition of compulsion that it's "*against our will*." A corollary of this is that only our body's external freedom can be taken from us, but never our will's internal freedom. Aquinas has no room for determinism, not even a divine determinism. Influencing, yes, conditioning, yes, but not determining.

So when God's grace or inspiration moves us, that is not against our will and it does not lessen or remove our free will. It turns our will on, not off, since grace perfects nature, not sets it aside.

Aquinas notes that fear, however, can lessen, though not totally abolish, voluntariness and freedom. He says that "things done through fear are of a mixed character, being partly voluntary and partly involuntary . . . but that which is done through fear is voluntary inasmuch as it is here and now chosen under the circumstances to hinder a greater evil which was feared." Thus throwing the cargo into the sea during a storm is voluntary, though it is done through fear of the danger of drowning.

What about disordered passions, such as addictions? Aquinas's word for that is concupiscence. It does not cause involuntariness, he says, for "the involuntary act deserves mercy or indulgence, and is done with regret. But neither of these things can be said of that which is done out of concupiscence [for instance, lust or greed]. For a thing is said to be voluntary from the fact that the will is moved to it. Now concupiscence inclines the will to desire the object of concupiscence. Therefore the effect of concupiscence is to make something to be voluntary rather than involuntary." So there goes the addict's excuse. An addict loses his liberty, but not his choice. He's not free from enslavement to his addiction, but he's voluntarily obeying it. Passion does not remove responsibility because it does not remove voluntariness. You can't give the excuse that it's something else outside you, even though it may feel like that when you say you're "driven" by passion. But it's not somebody else's passion, it's your own.

What about ignorance? Some ignorance does remove voluntariness, and therefore moral responsibility. "Ignorance causes involuntariness insofar as it deprives one of knowledge, and knowledge is a necessary condition of voluntariness. But it is not every ignorance . . . ignorance *consequent* to the act of the will [that is, willed ignorance, ignorance that comes about through *ignoring*] is voluntary . . . as when a man wishes not to know so that he may have an excuse for sin . . . this is called affected ignorance."

We have distinguished acts that are moral or immoral from acts that are amoral by the criterion of voluntariness. What distinguishes the moral from the immoral?

Aquinas says there are three moral determinants, which he calls the object, the circumstances, and the end. He means by the object the act that is willed, he means by the circumstances the situation, and he means by the end the motive.

All three of these, he says, need to be good in order for the act to be morally good. You could say they're like the different dimensions of a work of art, say a play: it has to have a good plot, good characters, good style, and a good theme; if any of these is bad, that makes it a bad play. So the three dimensions of moral acting: what you do, when and where and how you do it, and why you do it.

Like just about everything in Aquinas, this agrees with common sense. Common sense says everything counts. So if you say that only the act itself counts, you're saying "just do the right thing," and you have a list of moral laws that include good and evil acts, but situations and motives don't count—well, then you're a legalist. And if you say everything is relative to the situation, and there is no list of right and wrong acts in themselves—well, then you're a relativist. And if you say the only thing that matters is your heart, your subjective motive, not the objective thing you do or the objective situation—well, then you're a subjectivist. Aquinas is not a legalist or a relativist or a subjectivist in morality. To be morally good, you have to do the right thing, in the right way, and for the right reason.

Today there are few legalists, but there are many subjectivists and relativists. Here is Aquinas's argument against subjectivism. He asks "whether the external action adds any good or evil to that of the interior act [or motive]?" In other words, how could the external physical deed be important if your heart and motive are all-important? And his answer is: "If by the external action no further good or evil were added, it would be to no purpose that he who has a good will should do a good deed or refrain from an evil one, which is unreasonable."

And he has a similar reason for adding situations or circumstances to the mix. He asks "whether the consequences of the external action increase its good or evil?" Consequences are one kind of circumstance; preexisting conditions are another kind. And he says that although "the consequences do not make a good act evil or an evil act good, yet if they are foreseen, it is evident that they increase the good or evil. For when a man foresees that many evils may follow from his action, and yet does not for that reason desist from it, this shows that his will is all the more disordered. But if the consequences are not foreseen, if they follow by accident, then they do not increase the good or evil of the action." Aquinas's moral judgment, here again, turns out to square with common sense.

The fact that all three dimensions have to be right for the act to be right might sound more severe and more worrisome than any one of the three oversimplified moralities it's distinguished from (legalism, relativism, and subjectivism). But Aquinas then says something refreshing and liberating: he asks whether there are only two kinds of human acts, good and evil, or three, good, evil, and indifferent. And he answers that many acts of a man are morally indifferent, like breathing, but every distinctively human act, every act that proceeds in any

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way from reason, is either good or evil, and that most of them are good. He says: "if the object of an action includes something in accord with the order of reason, it will be a good action." And therefore most rational acts of most people most of the time have positive moral value—like choosing to eat, or read, or work—because they are doing the right thing at the right time and for a right reason. So there's much more good than evil in ordinary human life.

Aquinas then asks a tricky question about the relation between an act and the reason and conscience that directs the act. Human reason can err, and that includes moral reason, or conscience. So is it right to act according to an erring conscience? He asks, "Whether the will is evil when it is at variance with erring reason?" If your conscience mistakenly tells you that something is wrong when it isn't, should you follow your conscience? And Aquinas's answer is that you must always follow your conscience. It's always wrong to deliberately disobey your conscience, even when your conscience is wrong, because you don't know it's wrong. Aquinas says, "To ask about whether the will is evil when it is at variance with erring reason, is the same as to inquire whether an erring conscience binds." And his reason for answering yes is that "from the very fact that a thing is proposed by the reason as being evil, the will by tending to it becomes evil." And then he says something quite striking: "When erring reason proposes something as being commanded by God [even though it isn't], then to scorn the dictate of reason is to scorn the commandment of God." So our conscience has the authority of God behind it even though it's not infallible. Obedience to conscience is an absolute. And one of the things your conscience commands is to sincerely seek the truth, to try to inform your conscience. Remember, conscience is not a mere subjective feeling, it's an attempt to see the objective truth.

A related question is "Whether the will is good when it abides by erring reason?" He says, "whereas the previous question is the same as inquiring whether an erring conscience binds, so this question is the same as inquiring whether an erring conscience excuses." And his answer is that it depends on whether or not the ignorance is deliberate. If so, you are to blame for your ignorance, and your act is wrong because you are voluntarily acting against reason. So it depends on which came first, the reason's ignorance or the will's wrong choice. If the ignorance comes first, you have a genuine excuse, but if the choice came first, you don't. If I give candy to a diabetic baby, and harm him, without intending to, I'm responsible for that harm because I should have taken the trouble to know whether that was safe or not. But if I'm out in the woods and pee on the grass and someone says I just violated a sacred Indian burial ground, that's not my fault because I had no way of knowing that. Thus Aquinas writes, "when ignorance causes an act to be involuntary, it takes away the character of moral good and evil, but when ignorance is in any way willed, it does not cause the act to be involuntary, for instance ignorance that is due to negligence, by reason of a man not wishing to know what he ought to know." He's fingering our comfortable habit of just not mentally paying attention to the moral law that we know but want to disobey. Attention, after all, is an act of the will, not just of the mind.

Many readers of Aquinas who expect him to be a cold, logical rationalist are surprised to see him write so much about love in the *Summa*, and so eloquently, and even passionately. He says, for instance, "a thing can be loved more than it



is known, since it can be loved perfectly even without being perfectly known.” He’s obviously thinking of loving persons here, human or divine, rather than things, and loving them with unselfish love rather than selfish love. He also says “ALL the other emotions of the soul are caused by love.” And not only emotions but also actions, for he asks “whether love is the cause of all that the lover does?” and answers yes, for “every actor does every action from love of some kind.” Augustine made this point with a remarkable image: he said “my love is my weight,” *amor meus, pondus meum*, “my love is my gravity, my density, my destiny.”

Even hate is due to love, and never vice versa, says Aquinas. He asks “whether love is a cause of hatred,” and answers: “All emotions are caused by love, therefore hatred also, since it is an emotion of the soul, is caused by love. For nothing is hated save through being contrary to a thing that is loved. Hence it is that every hatred is caused by love.”

He then asks “whether hatred is stronger than love?” and answers, “It is impossible for an effect to be stronger than its cause. Now every hatred arises from some love as its cause, as stated above. Therefore it is impossible for hatred to be stronger than love by itself. Nevertheless hatred sometimes seems to be stronger than love because it is more keenly felt than love.” You see, Aquinas does not take feelings as an infallible index to being.

A psychologically profound question comes next: “Whether a man can hate himself?” And his answer is: “Properly speaking, it is impossible for a man to hate himself, for everything naturally desires its good, nor can anyone desire anything for himself save under the aspect of apparent good. But accidentally it may happen that a man hates himself, for it happens that some men take themselves to be something they are not, wherefore they love themselves according to what they take themselves to be, while they hate that which they really are.” This is very similar to what Kierkegaard says in *The Sickness Unto Death* about a self not willing to be itself.

He further explains that this is possible because it is possible to hate the truth, even though the mind by nature loves truth as the eye by nature loves light. He writes, “all men by nature desire to know, as stated in the beginning of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* . . . but a man may hate some particular truth when he wishes that what is true were not true, or when truth hinders him from getting an object loved, such as is the case with those who wish not to know the truth so that they may sin freely, or when a man wishes to remain hidden in his sin, then he hates that anyone should know the truth, as Augustine says, ‘They love truth when it enlightens them, they hate it when it reproves them.’”

He has a lot of romanticism, in a spiritual sense. Aquinas borrows notions from the troubadours, from chivalric love. The Dominicans and the Franciscans, after all, were often called “God’s troubadours.” We forget that dramatic, rebellious, countercultural streak in Aquinas that led him to join the Dominicans. He was not a cold fish; he was a lover, and if you think that spiritual love can’t be even more passionate than physical love, then you don’t know Aquinas or, more importantly, Aquinas’s God.

Here are some of the things about love that he takes from the troubadours. He says that among the effects of love are “a mutual indwelling—love makes the beloved to exist in the lover and vice versa.” So even ordinary human love

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is to some extent literally a mystical, ecstatic, out-of-body experience. He says that “one of the effects of love is ecstasy,” or standing outside yourself, and he says that “God himself suffered ecstasy through love.” God lives not only in himself but also in us whom He loves, just as we live not only in ourselves but also in all those we love. Obviously this doesn’t mean physical location. But it means that the lover finds his identity in his beloved.

Aquinas also says that “zeal is an effect of love,” and that “God is said to be a zealot.” God is a crazy, passionate, romantic lover, not a proper philanthropist.

He also says that “love is a passion that wounds the lover,” and that “melting, as opposed to freezing, is one of the effects of love.”

Aquinas’s map of good and evil is not just about human acts, and their motives, which is what we’ve been looking at, but also virtues and vices, which are good and evil habits and make up a person’s moral character. He takes over the traditional lists of the four cardinal moral virtues, the three intellectual virtues, the three theological virtues, and the seven deadly sins, and gives them clearer explanations and outlines. For instance, here are two typical passages where he explains why there are four cardinal virtues, in a very logical outline:

The principle of virtue is the good as defined by reason, and this good can be considered in two ways: first, as existing in the very act of reason, and thus we have one cardinal virtue, prudence, or practical wisdom; secondly, according as the reason puts its order into something else, either into operations [actions], and then we have justice, or into passions. And then we need two virtues, for the need of putting the order of reason into the passions is due to their thwarting reason, and this occurs in two ways: first, by the passions inciting to something against reason, and then the passions need a curb, which we call temperance or moderation or self-control, and secondly by the passions withdrawing us from following the dictate of reason, e.g. through fear of danger or toil, and then man needs to be strengthened for that which reason dictates, lest he turn back, and to this end there is fortitude, or courage.

In like manner, we find the same number if we consider the *subjects* we find virtue in. For there are four subjects of the virtue we speak of, viz. the power which is rational in its nature, and this is perfected by prudence, and that which is rational by participation, and is threefold: the will, subject of justice, the concupiscible, desiring, faculty, subject of temperance, and the irascible, averting faculty, subject of fortitude.

The moral virtues, especially these four cardinal virtues, are different from the intellectual virtues, and here Aquinas parts company with Socrates and Plato, who taught that if you know the good, you will do it, so all evil comes from ignorance, and is curable by moral education.

Plato’s position seems very logical, for everyone loves happiness, and if you know yourself well enough to know that virtue is as necessary for happiness as food is for health, then you will love virtue. So if you don’t love virtue, that could only be because you don’t know that necessary connection between virtue and happiness because you don’t really know yourself. Therefore “know thyself” is the key to virtue and happiness. All who lack virtue, lack knowledge. The sole cause of wickedness is ignorance: not of facts, but of values and of yourself, of what a human self needs to attain happiness.

Plato's position here is perfectly logical, but we aren't. We are creatures of passion as well as reason. Aquinas justifies our commonsense disagreement with Plato by noting the power of the passions in our lives. That's what Plato forgot. For instance, he writes, "No man can live without joy. *That* is why one who is deprived of true, spiritual joys goes over to carnal pleasures."

The body cannot rebel against the soul but the passions can rebel against reason. He writes, "because the appetitive faculty obeys the reason not blindly but with a certain power of opposition . . . the habits or passions of the appetitive faculty cause the use of the reason to be impeded. Therefore for a man to do a good deed it is requisite not only that his reason be well disposed by an intellectual virtue but also that his appetite be well disposed by means of a moral virtue." In other words, the causality sometimes works backwards: instead of reason leading passion, passion leads reason. Freud says this happens always; all reasoning is rationalizing of desire. Plato says it happens never. Aquinas, in the middle as usual, says it happens sometimes, and that is why most of the virtues are a matter of training the passions, notably courage and temperance.

The Stoics also recognized the importance of the passions, and their power to blind reason, but they wanted to eliminate them. Aquinas does not. He says "If the will is perverse, the passions are perverse also, but if the will is upright, they are not only blameless but even praiseworthy." He quotes that from Augustine, who has a greatly undeserved reputation of being a Stoic. Aquinas also points out that "Christ was perfect in virtue, but there was great sorrow in him."

Aquinas then modifies the noble dictum of the Stoics this way. He says "the Stoics [following Socrates] held that no evil can happen to a wise man, for they thought that man's only good is virtue and bodily goods are no good to man, so man's only evil is vice. But this is unreasonable, for man is composed of soul and body."

As for the positive importance of the passions, Aquinas goes so far as to say that "No man is just who does not rejoice in just deeds. But joy is a passion." Therefore there cannot be moral virtue without passion. Right order, or health, in our emotions is an essential part of moral virtue. Saints are so happy partly because their emotions are so healthy.

Another classic philosophical problem that Aquinas mediates is the one between the optimist and the pessimist, between Rousseau and Hobbes: are we by nature good, evil, or neutral? He argues that "whatever is in man by nature is common to all men, but virtue is not in all men, therefore it is not in man by nature." However, he is closer to optimism than pessimism. For one thing he does not say that vice is in us by nature, for the same reason virtue is not, but he says that our nature is "adapted" to the virtues. He writes, "virtue is natural to man insofar as in man are to be found instilled by nature certain naturally known principles of both knowledge and action which are the nurseries of intellectual and moral virtues [what a nice image!], and insofar as there is in the will a natural appetite for good in accordance with reason. Therefore virtues are in us by nature according to aptitude but not according to perfection."

What are the greatest virtues? Aquinas says that wisdom is the greatest of the intellectual virtues, and wisdom also spills over, so to speak, into the moral virtues, because practical wisdom, or prudence, is the first and most necessary

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of the four cardinal moral virtues, though justice is the most complete moral virtue in action. Among the three theological virtues, charity takes the first place. So wisdom and charity are the two greatest virtues. This agrees with the teaching of all the great sages in other world traditions that Aquinas did not know about, for instance Buddha's *prajna* and *karuna*, or wisdom and compassion. It also tallies with what the millions of people say who have had near-death experiences: their value system always changes, and gets a new focus, and they always mention these two things as the only things that carry over into the next world, and the only two things that matter absolutely in this world. Truth and Goodness are the meaning of life. And I think we all know that, deep down. Once again, Aquinas lands his philosophical helicopter squarely on the landing pad of common sense.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. What is the distinction between synderesis and conscience?
2. What is Aquinas's answer to the question of whether a man can hate himself?

### Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

Fagothey, Austin, S.J. *Right and Reason*. 2nd ed. Rockford, IL: TAN Books & Publishers, 2000.

## Lecture 13: Aquinas on Law

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 7, “Ethics,” pp. 500–532.

Aquinas’s ethics certainly cannot fairly be called legalistic. He does not reduce morality to a set of rules or laws. Of his three moral determinants, only one is directly defined by moral law, the nature of the act itself. The others are the motive and the circumstances. Motives are subjective and circumstances are relative, so only one of the three factors is both objective and absolute. For Aquinas, law is not the whole of morality, or even the most important part of it. Virtue is more important, especially the virtue of charity. Love is much more important than law.

But law is a basic and essential topic in his ethics. And his first question is the metaphysical question: what kinds of law exist? Obviously human laws, or positive laws, exist—laws that are posited, or made by human wills. They’re important, but if there is also a higher law that judges human laws and human actions, then that will be much more important. And that’s what Aquinas calls the natural law, or the law of human nature.

The issue of natural law is highly controversial today. No premodern philosophers except the Sophists, and no traditional culture in the world, ever rejected it, in some form or other. But in modern Western European and North American culture, it’s rejected today by most influential modern thinkers and teachers in the educational and media establishments. And most of the most influential modern philosophers reject it.

We are living in a radical social experiment: the very first civilization in history whose most influential teachers no longer believe there is any natural moral law. Whoever is right on this issue, the party that is wrong is very wrong. Either philosophers like Aquinas are enslaved by an ancient superstition or the other side is cutting down the very trunk of the whole moral tree.

An idea that for a thousand years was taken for granted as common sense has become very questionable and controversial today. Some law schools even teach that it is illegal to base any legal decision on natural law, not only directly, but even indirectly: that you may not appeal to natural law to justify your agreement or disagreement with a particular positive law.

Aquinas looks at law through the four causes. First the formal cause. Aquinas asks “what is the essence of law?”—any kind of law. And his answer is that “Law is a rule and measure of acts whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting, for ‘lex,’ law, is derived from ‘ligare,’ ‘to bind.’ Law ‘induces’ us. That’s stronger than merely informing or advising or requesting but weaker than necessitating or forcing. Law has a binding force, but only morally, not physically. It obligates but it does not guarantee. It appeals to free will to obey it, and free will depends on reason, so law appeals to reason, not force. Law is “an ordinance of reason.” (That is its formal cause.)

Its material cause is human behavior. That's what it regulates. The details are almost infinitely variable.

What is its final cause or purpose? Aquinas answers: "law is always something directed to the common good," and by "good" here Aquinas says he means principally "happiness," which is the greatest good and final end.

If the common good of happiness is the final cause of law, what is the efficient cause of law? That can be deduced from its final cause. Aquinas says "to order anything to the common good belongs either to the whole people or to someone who is the representative of the whole people." So even in a monarchy, the king exists for the people and their common good, not the people for the king. Aquinas saw the universe as a monarchy ruled by God, but even God rules it for our good, not His.

Incidentally, Aquinas said that the best form of government is one that combined elements of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy together.

One last ingredient in the definition of law is promulgation, or making known. Since law is an ordinance of reason, Aquinas argues, "in order that a law obtain the binding force which is proper to a law, it must needs be applied to the men who have to be ruled by it. Such application is made by its being notified to them by promulgation. Therefore promulgation is necessary for a law to obtain its force."

So the complete four-part definition of a law is "an ordinance of reason for the common good made by one who has care of the community, and promulgated."

Aquinas next distinguishes four kinds of law: eternal law, natural law, human law, and divine law.

Eternal law follows from the premise of divine providence. He writes, "Granted that the world is ruled by divine providence, and that the whole community of the universe is governed by divine reason, therefore the very idea of the government of things in God the ruler of the universe has the nature of a law. And since the divine reason's conception of things is not subject to time but is eternal, therefore this kind of law must be called eternal law." So the eternal law is in God's mind. He means by this both physical laws and moral laws. By physical laws, or the so-called laws of nature, God governs the activities of the physical universe which happen by natural necessity. And by moral laws God governs the choices and actions of men that happen by free will.

Natural law he defines as "the creature's participation in eternal law." Aquinas derives natural law from eternal law, from above, so to speak. It can also be arrived at from below, from observing people. People always implicitly appeal to natural law when they argue about moral good and evil. We expect each other to play fair, which is justice, and to help out those in need, which is charity, and to not lie, steal, cheat, or kill. And we expect each other to know these same rules and to obey them. We appeal to natural law in practice even if we deny it in theory.

Aquinas derives natural law from eternal law in the *Summa*, because that's a book about theology. But that doesn't mean natural moral law depends on religion any more than natural physical law does. Aquinas also derives the natural laws of physics from the theological premise that God created the universe according to divine reason, but that doesn't mean he thinks our knowledge of the

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laws of physics depends on our knowledge of theology, or that our belief in the laws of physics depends on our belief in theology. That's because you can know the effect without knowing the First Cause, and you can do that in ethics just as in physics.

What does Aquinas mean when he says that natural law is a participation in eternal law? He writes, "Among all others, the rational creature is subject to divine providence in the most excellent way, insofar as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the eternal reason . . . and this participation in the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law . . . the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing less than an imprint on us of the divine light."

That, ultimately, is why for Aquinas conscience is sacred and inviolable, and why it is always morally wrong to disobey your conscience: because conscience is an echo of the voice of God. Here too, we can know the effect without knowing the cause. Even moral relativists usually agree that it is always morally wrong to deliberately disobey your conscience. Even atheists usually agree that we should treat conscience in this morally absolute way.

Aquinas then adds the two other kinds of law, which he calls human law and divine law. They are both what we today call positive law, laws that were posited or made by a will at some time or for some time, and which can be revoked. That distinguishes them from both eternal law and natural law, which cannot be revoked. Human law is man-made law, and obviously differ with time, place, and culture.

Divine law is law posited by God and given to man not through human nature and natural reason but by divine revelation. Most of divine law, such as the Ten Commandments, is only a repetition or reminder of eternal law or natural law. God added these reminders, Aquinas says, "on account of the uncertainty of human judgments." But other examples of divine law, such as the civil and ceremonial laws God gave to ancient Israel, in the book of Leviticus, were for one people, time, and place only. God doesn't require us all to eat kosher.

Aquinas next asks "whether an effect of law is to make men good." We often hear the slogan, "you can't legislate morality"; in other words, you can't make men good by law. Aquinas disagrees. He says that's precisely the point of law. If you can't legislate morality, what do you legislate? What else is worth legislating? Of course, you can't guarantee moral behavior by law—even God can't do that—because we have the free will. But law can certainly make a great difference in making us good. I think St. Thomas would agree with Dorothy Day's definition of a good society as a society that makes it easy for you to be good. And how does it do that? Mainly by good man-made laws.

How does law do this? By sanction, by fear of punishment. Aquinas says positive law needs to be added to natural law because "it is not always through perfect goodness or virtue that one obeys the law but sometimes it is through fear of punishment." And he says this lower motive can lead to higher motives: "from being accustomed to avoid evil and fulfill what is good through fear of punishment, one is sometimes led on to do so likewise with delight and of one's own accord. Accordingly, law, even by punishing, leads men on to being good."



Aquinas states a principle here that's widely questioned by modern philosophers: that "the common good of the state cannot flourish unless the citizens be virtuous." Our politics shies away from moralizing. Yet I think what Aquinas says here is the most obvious and important truth in social science. You can't build a good building unless you have good bricks. A good school depends on good teachers and students, and a good society depends on good rulers and citizens.

Is even positive law so sacred that it cannot be changed? You might think that Aquinas is so big on law that he's a stick-in-the-mud conservative who is always suspicious of rebellion. But it's precisely his belief in a higher law, a natural law, that justifies rebellion against unjust positive laws in his mind. He says, "insofar as it deviates from reason, a law is called an unjust law, and has the nature *not* of law but of violence." An unjust law does not bind, he says. So it's really the opponents of natural law, who today usually are called liberals, who are the stick-in-the-mud conservatives, since they have no rational basis for rebellion against the laws of the state; they won't appeal to any higher law.

Natural law has levels of importance and levels of being known.

The first and most basic level is the single principle of *Do Good and Avoid Evil*. This is the moral equivalent of the law of noncontradiction in logic.

Together with this single first principle we find other self-evident first principles of morality, which are like the other self-evident axioms that can be reduced to the law of noncontradiction in the logical order. These are what Aquinas calls the first "precepts of the natural law, which are to the practical reason what the first principles of demonstration are to the speculative reason, because both are self-evident principles."

He explains the parallel this way: "as being is that which before anything else falls under intellectual apprehension simply, so good is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action, since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently the first principle in the practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, namely that good is that which all things seek after. Hence this is the first precept of law, that good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided. All other precepts of the natural law are based on this." He doesn't mean they can be deduced from this alone, any more than we can deduce anything from the law of non-contradiction alone, but that they can all be reduced to this. The ultimate answer to the question "Why should this be done?" is "because it is good."

The meaning of this key term "good" for Aquinas is unequivocally metaphysical. For him ethics is about the real good, about objective reality. The term "good" makes that much clearer than the word "values," which is ambiguous, and can suggest subjectivity: "my values" or "your values." You can translate Aquinas's ethics into modern value language, but the effect will be to take away the edge, to leave it open to a subjective interpretation. Phenomenologists usually deliberately prefer to do just that: to "bracket" metaphysical questions, to leave their descriptions of human experience open to either objective or subjective metaphysical interpretations, rather than demanding closure on the metaphysical issue first. In that sense Aquinas was not a phenomenologist. His ethics is a metaphysical ethics.

It's also a rational ethics. And that's a second assumption in Aquinas's centering his ethics on the good. This contrasts with some modern ethical

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philosophies: we know the good by reason, not by feeling or will or some vague “experience.” And the term “reason” also bears a heavier weight for Aquinas than it does for most modern thinkers, in at least two ways: it means intellectual intuition as well as reasoning, and it means not just thinking, or consciousness, but knowledge of being, of reality. Epistemology is just as relative to metaphysics as ethics is for Aquinas.

There is a third assumption in Aquinas’s term “good”: it has a built-in relation to human nature: what is good for us depends on our nature and its needs, its fulfillment, its purpose, its end. So this will be a teleological ethics. He says, “In man there is an inclination to good in accordance with its nature, as there is in everything.” The most important question in ethics is man’s final end, because man’s nature is to act for an end, and that’s because it’s the nature of everything to act for its natural end. Ethics is teleological because all reality is teleological. Man and ethics fit the universe; human nature fits the nature of things.

Aquinas next asks “whether the natural law is the same in all men?” and answers yes because human nature is essentially the same, and therefore natural needs and natural inclinations based on these needs are essentially the same in everyone. *Do not steal* is based on our nature’s need for property, *do not kill* on the need for life, *do not lie* on the need for truth.

And since these precepts are based on human nature, they are also known by nature, and therefore known by all. But Aquinas also admits that there are some precepts of the natural law that are not known by all. And again he explains this by the comparison between speculative and practical reason. But this time he sees a contrast rather than a parallel.

Since the speculative reason is busied chiefly with necessary things, which cannot be otherwise than they are, its proper conclusions, like its universal principles, contain the truth without fail. [In other words, the conclusions of a logically valid argument are as certainly true as its premises.] The practical reason, on the other hand, is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned; and consequently, although there is a necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects.

In other words, the application of the unchanging principles of the natural law are diverse and changing because situations are diverse and changing. And this means that we can easily make moral mistakes about concrete choices. We know we should not murder, but is it murder to drop a bomb on an enemy city in war? We’re not sure.

Aquinas says it is a “proper conclusion that goods entrusted to another should be restored to their owner. But this is true only for the majority of cases, but it may happen in a particular case that it would be injurious and therefore unreasonable to restore goods held in trust, for instance if they are claimed for the purpose of fighting against one’s country.” So we have to qualify the principle. How? By reason, of course. Reason is always the standard.

Aquinas says that the natural law is “altogether unchangeable in its first principles; but in its secondary principles, which, as we have said, are certain detailed proximate conclusions drawn from the first principles, some special cases may hinder the observance of such precepts,” and thus the precept

does not bind. For instance, taking away by force a madman's own property—weapons—is not theft.

Aquinas next asks “whether the natural law can be changed?” And he answers that it can be changed by “addition, but not subtraction, because many things for the benefit of human life have been added over and above the natural law.” For instance, modern military morality has to take stricter account of civilian casualties than medieval military morality, because there was no total war and no saturation bombing in the middle ages. Changing circumstances add new rules not only to positive law but also to natural law, but not new fundamental rules, like the Ten Commandments, but more specific rules, level three rules for applying level two rules.

Aquinas next asks “whether the natural law can be abolished from the heart of man?” Can we ever descend as far as *Brave New World*? We may seem to be getting pretty close, and no less a great mind than C.S. Lewis seems to say we can and warns us against it in *The Abolition of Man*. But Aquinas is more optimistic, not by temperament but by conviction, not by feeling but by reason. His answer is no, the Natural Law can never be abolished from the heart of man.

But even here he makes a distinction. He says “as to those general principles, the natural law in the abstract can in no wise be blotted out from men's hearts. But it can be blotted out in the case of a particular action, insofar as reason is hindered from applying the general principle to a particular point of practice on account of concupiscence or some other passion, by vicious customs and corrupt habits, and even unnatural vices which, as the Apostle Paul says [in Romans 1], were not esteemed sinful,” that is, not by the decadent pagans Paul was writing about in Rome. This not esteeming evil to be evil, this non-judgmentalism, Aquinas would say, is the greatest harm done by immoral habits: this blinding of the reason against even knowing good and evil, this self-righteous justification of evil as good.

By Aquinas's standards, there are in the modern world certainly many such decadent pagans who have suppressed their own knowledge of even basic principles of natural law. Thus horrible deeds like genocide and terrorism and suicide bombers deliberately targeting innocent civilians are not only done but justified by their perpetrators. Aquinas would not be surprised by that. He is not a naïve optimist. But even when this moral knowledge is repressed, it's there, just like repressed feelings.

Aquinas finally asks some questions about human law, or positive law. These man-made laws always have man-made sanctions, that is, threats of concrete, clearly known punishments, as the natural law does not. And that's why they are necessary to supplement the natural law in a morally unnatural world.

As to those young people who are inclined to acts of virtue by their good natural disposition or by custom or by the gift of God, the moral training they receive from their parents suffices, which comes by admonitions. But since some are found to be depraved and prone to vice, and not easily amenable to mere words, it was necessary for such to be restrained from evil by force and fear, in order that, at least, they might desist from evil doing, and leave others in peace, and also so that they themselves might be improved by being habituated in this way, and might be brought to do willingly what hitherto they did from fear, and

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thus become more virtuous. Now this kind of training, which compels through fear of punishment, is the discipline of human laws.

But Aquinas also says, on the other hand (with his usual balance), that “it does not belong to human law to repress all vices, [for] human law is framed for human beings, the majority of whom are not perfect in virtue, and therefore human laws do not forbid all vices but only the more grievous vices from which it is possible for the majority to abstain, and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others.” So he would say that it’s not the government’s job to be your number one moral teacher, your substitute parent or your substitute God. Aquinas would be fairly libertarian here, I think. He’d say the government should not overregulate your private life if your private vices do not hurt others.

Aquinas is quite conservative about changing laws. Even though his belief in a higher law, a natural law, justifies changing and even disobeying unjust human laws, yet he also says that “to a certain extent the mere change of law is of itself prejudicial to the common good, because custom avails much for the observance of laws.” So he’s saying don’t fix it unless it’s not only broken but badly broken.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. Why does Aquinas believe that laws can help make men good?
2. Does Aquinas believe that the natural law can ever be abolished from the heart of man?

### Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: HarperOne, 2001.

## Lecture 14: Aquinas and Modern Philosophy

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Summa of the Summa*, edited and annotated by Peter Kreeft, chapter 7, “Ethics,” pp. 500–532.

Aquinas’s philosophy is still very much alive. He haunts the houses of subsequent philosophers in the form of a touchstone against which other philosophical systems define themselves. By using the image of a touchstone I don’t mean to assume or claim to prove any kind of special authority to Aquinas’s philosophy. I’m not talking about proof or argument, but seeing, ordering, getting a sense of perspective. Relating other philosophers to Aquinas somehow puts them all into a clearer order.

Why is that? Because on almost every issue Aquinas takes what you could call the default position, the position of pre-philosophical common sense. That’s why Thomism has lasted so long that it’s been called “the perennial philosophy.”

But I think there’s another reason for its longevity. It’s because of Aquinas’s genius for combining the insights of other philosophers in a synthesis. It’s almost always the middle position between two extremes.

But this “golden mean” is not merely a compromise, halfway between two extremes on a horizontal line, but what Hegelians call a “*higher synthesis*.” There’s a new, vertical dimension, a kind of mountaintop vista from which he can see the little hills of other philosophies, opposite philosophical errors, and thus, from that higher point of view he can combine insights in other philosophers that seem irreconcilable.

I don’t mean to put forth this philosophy as the last word, as a closed system with no need of important additions. Aquinas himself could very well be just a thesis for some still higher synthesis. Thomas himself added very significantly to Aristotle. Yet Aristotle too almost always took the commonsense position and the one that was a “golden mean” between two extremes. So someone may do to Aquinas what he did to Aristotle.

And this is being done by Thomistic phenomenologists, Thomistic personalists, and Thomistic existentialists—those are at least three syntheses of Aquinas with new modern perspectives. Phenomenology is a method—essentially testing all ideas by a careful analysis of all the dimensions of ordinary daily experience, spiritual as well as physical. Personalism is a point of view: looking at things from the point of view of the human subject, the person, rather than looking at the person as an object. Existentialism is a set of questions, centering on critical aspects of concrete human existence such as self-identity, death, freedom, evil, uncertainty, choice, and the difference God or no God makes.

Each of these three modernizings or updatings of Aquinas synthesizes him with a philosophical method, or point of view, or set of questions, not with a closed system or ideology like that of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Comte, Sartre, or Marx. Open philosophies are like open

mouths: able to take in food. Because they can eat new ideas, they live longer than closed philosophies. Thomism has that capacity. It's alive.

### Philosophy After Aquinas

If there's a common theme to most modern philosophies it's the crisis of reason, the questioning of reason itself. Sometimes this is a direct attack on reason, and sometimes this attack on reason is purely religious, as in Luther, who called reason "the devil's whore," and who proposed relying on "faith alone." Luther was not a philosopher, but there have been great Christian philosophers after Aquinas who were fideists: and by fideists I mean not just defenders of faith but attackers on reason: Pascal and Kierkegaard come to mind. And I sympathize with them. After Descartes, someone had to deflate reason's new pretensions: thus Pascal. After Hegel inflated his balloon, someone had to prick it; thus Kierkegaard. In secular philosophers who attacked reason, something other than the Christian faith replaced reason: Kant said he tried to clear the ground of reason to make room for a rational faith, and Heidegger said that reason was one of the deadliest enemies of truth. Other modern philosophers simply reduce reason to a much smaller size, but not for the sake of exalting anything else: Hume and scientific positivism come to mind. Still others put nothing at all in the place of reason after it is deflated, and become skeptics, cynics, or nihilists, like the deconstructionists. Aquinas would protest against one and all of these attacks on reason. He'd say that reason, like light, is not the enemy of anything at all except darkness.

It's especially regarding reason's power to know God that the issue between the rationalists and the anti-rationalists emerges. Rationalists like Anselm in the Middle Ages and Descartes in modern philosophy claim that God's existence is rationally self-evident, and use some form of the ontological argument to prove it. Skeptical anti-rationalists like Pascal and Kierkegaard deny that God's existence is demonstrable at all and take refuge in a leap of faith or a wager. Aquinas denies both that God is self-evident *and* that God is indemonstrable. He's staked out a carefully defined position halfway between rational dogmatism and skepticism, both in general and on the knowledge of God.

Once reason was divorced from faith at the end of the Middle Ages, this newly emancipated reason suffered a further divorce within itself, between its empirical and its purely rational aspects: thus the great debate in modern epistemology between rationalism and empiricism. The rationalist begins with innate ideas and relies on mental deduction alone; the empiricist begins with sense experience and relies on induction alone; Aquinas, like Aristotle, combines them, beginning with sense experience, rising by abstraction and induction to universals, and then deducing particular conclusions from universal premises. It's abstraction that holds the steps together, and neither Cartesian rationalism nor Lockean or Humean empiricism has a theory of abstraction.

Neither does Kant. Kant attempted to reconcile these two divorcées, but he really turned out to be another kind of rationalist in disguise, because according to his so-called "Copernican Revolution in philosophy," reason actively imposes its innate structures on experience rather than abstracting them from it. Reason does not discover, reason dictates. For Aquinas, reason's relation with sensation is cooperative. Reason listens. Reason is receptive of form. Kant denies this "feminine" aspect of reason, like Bacon, for whom knowledge is simply for

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power, for “man’s conquest of nature.” I think the technical apparatus of Thomistic epistemology, with its cooperation between active and passive intellect, and between reason and sensation, has major social and cultural repercussions. It’s healing.

Kant calls rationalism “dogmatic philosophy” because it begins with unproved Cartesian “innate ideas,” and he calls empiricism “skeptical philosophy” because that’s where it ends, in Hume. Like Socrates, Aquinas steers between dogmatism and skepticism. And that’s why he asks so many questions, like Socrates. Dogmatists ask few questions because they begin with the answers, and skeptics ask few questions because they despair of finding the great answers.

A related issue is the two anthropologies behind these two alienated epistemologies of rationalism and empiricism. We might call these two anthropologies angelism and animalism. Ever since Socrates and the Sophists, these two answers to “know thyself” have always been tempting us: the ignoring of the body or the denial of the soul. For Aquinas that would be like interpreting a book by either ignoring the words or denying the meaning. For him soul and body as form and matter make up one substance, not two, as in Descartes, who can never solve the “mind-body problem” and ends up with the two clear and distinct ideas of mind and matter as unrelated as a ghost and the house it haunts. And yet Aquinas’s emphasis on our oneness, on psychosomatic unity, does not exclude the soul’s immortality, as it apparently did in Aristotle. So we get that combination too: of the soul as form and the soul as substance, of the soul as one with the body and dependent on it for its activity, and the soul as independent of the body for its continued existence.

Once Descartes separated matter and spirit, and produced the mind-body dualism, the irresistible temptation arose to simply deny one half of this dualism: thus materialisms like Hobbes’s and spiritualisms like Berkeley’s, in which matter is illusion, or pantheisms like Hegel’s in which matter is merely a stage in the development of Spirit, which is what everything really is. Aquinas, of course, is too commonsensical to reduce either spirit to matter or matter to spirit, or to totally separate them, as Descartes did.

Another issue dividing modern philosophers is optimism vs. pessimism in their view of human nature: Rousseau versus Hobbes and Machiavelli. Is man by nature good, so that evil comes from without, or is he by nature evil, selfish, and aggressive, compelled to cooperate and love only by social forces and institutions? By now you will not be surprised to hear that Aquinas says it’s both and neither. Man is neither actually evil or morally good innately, yet he has innate potentialities for both good and evil, and what he becomes is due to his free choice, and therefore is his own responsibility.

A related issue is how far this freedom extends. Determinism gives it no room at all, as in Hobbes, while a philosophy of autonomy demands total freedom, as in Sartre and Nietzsche. Aquinas reconciles free will with the two forces that seem to contradict it. He reconciles it with divine predestination from above, by the principle that grace perfects nature; and he reconciles it with conditioning from below, by the principle of matter and form, body and soul limiting and determining each other in opposite ways.



Another issue in anthropology is the role of the passions, or emotions. Stoicism resents them and suppresses them as much as possible. The good life is the one the least troubled by passions. Kant is basically a Stoic. At the other extreme, Emotivists like Hume and Freud give them the reins of the soul. Hume says that all of moral values come from our projection of our feelings: the emotivist theory. Aquinas integrates the passions into our moral life as a good and necessary property or adjunct, but not as the master or the first cause. They are the matter of virtue but not the form.

Another issue in anthropology is voluntarism versus intellectualism, the primacy of will versus the primacy of intellect; and here too Aquinas does justice to both powers by intertwining them in mutual dependence, by his distinction between different kinds of causality. The will is the efficient cause and the intellect is the final cause of human choice.

With (John) Duns Scotus, a mere century after Aquinas, Voluntarism appears not only in anthropology, but also in theology, a kind of divine voluntarism. In reaction to Neoplatonic philosophers who taught that what God does is only a series of necessary intellectual emanations from His eternal essence, Scotus so emphasized God's freedom of will that he ended up making God arbitrary and irrational, and that made a rational natural theology much more difficult or impossible. (His successor Ockham took it one more step and said that God doesn't even work by the law of non-contradiction: He can make the past not to have been, he can declare truth false and falsity true.)

As usual, Aquinas affirms both insights, both the divine freedom of will and the eternal necessity of the divine Ideas, and so he combines divine voluntarism and divine intellectualism just as he combines human voluntarism and intellectualism.

Here is another issue in Ockham: Nominalism as his alternative to Platonic realism, the Platonic Ideas. Ockham's Nominalism, more than any other single idea, simply ruined medieval philosophy. It was a simple answer to the classic problem of universals: they're not objectively real at all, Ockham said; they're only names, nomina. There are only men, not Man; only this river and that river, no common nature to all rivers. This is nice and simple, but not commonsensical; for if all rivers are different, then how can we truly say they are all "rivers"? At the opposite pole, Plato's extreme realism of universals made them existing substances in another, invisible world: riveriness was as real as the Amazon even though no one ever lived on it. Aquinas reconciled Platonism's insight that universals are real with Nominalism's insight that existing substances are all individual by giving universals two homes: in individual things as their common natures or forms, as Aristotle said, and in God's mind as creative designs for the world, as Augustine said.

Turning to natural theology, the most obvious issue is the reality of both God and the world. Atheism says there is only the world, and pantheism says there is only God. (Pantheists haven't heard about the Big Bang; perhaps they haven't listened to the news for the last fifteen billion years.) Hegel's pantheism actually combines the two errors: the denial of divine timelessness and the denial of creation of temporal beings, creatures independent of God. For him everything is a form of God but God is an ever-evolving being. History is absolutized and eternity is relativized.

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Of course all Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and not just Aquinas, are theists and avoid these two extremes of atheism and pantheism. But within theism, theologians usually prioritize either the divine transcendence, like Muslims, Calvinists, and Deists like Aristotle, or the divine immanence, like semi-pantheists and process theologians, who subject God's own nature to time and change in order to bring him close enough for us to relate to (as if they hadn't heard the news about how the Incarnation already did that). Aquinas's reconciliation of transcendence and immanence is not merely a compromise; as we saw in his metaphysics of essence and existence, it is precisely God's total transcendence of all finite essences, by being infinite existence itself, that allows Him to be most intimately present to every finite essence, actualizing it from within.

Speaking of essence and existence, we have another either/or: essentialism versus existentialism. The essentialism of Leibnitz, one extreme, reduces being to essence and denies the possibility of identical twins: two beings of the same essence are not two at all but one. (This he calls "the identity of indiscernibles." Tweedledum and Tweedledee shouldn't really have two different names if they're identical.) Sartre, at the opposite extreme, says that there is at least one being, man, who simply exists and has no essence at all, but arbitrarily creates his essence by his free choices. Now even though Aquinas emphasizes existence, he does not do so at the expense of essence but as the metaphysical co-principle with it, its consort, so to speak. The one and the many, existence and essence, matter and form, body and soul, world and God, immanence and transcendence—Aquinas's favorite word is "and."

The same is true of oneness and manyness. Modern philosophers tend to either monism (like Spinoza and Hegel) or pluralism (like Leibnitz's monads or the materialists' particles). On every metaphysical level, Aquinas reconciles the one and the many, right up to the top, where even God is many as well as one, Trinity as well as Unity. So the complete unity is the unity of unity with plurality.

And that's true of his social and political philosophy too. He is neither a Marxist-type collectivist nor a libertarian-type individualist. The common good takes precedence over the private good, he says, yet the state exists for the people, not the people for the state.

A related but not identical issue in political philosophy is the authority of the state, whatever form it takes, and our proper attitude toward it. Hegel virtually divinizes it, and says that the individual is fulfilled only by identifying with it and subordinating his good and his rights to it. At the opposite extreme we have Sartre and Nietzsche, for whom the only authentic human existence is perpetual nay-saying and rebellion, either to affirm your freedom, as with Sartre, or to become the Nietzschean Superman, the overman, the man without God, moral conscience or social scruples. Aquinas's ideal citizen is neither a blind conformist nor a blind nonconformist, and his state is neither the savior nor the enemy.

The major ethical argument in modern philosophy is between moral relativists like the Utilitarians and Pragmatists, who say in effect that the end justifies the means, and moral absolutists like Kant, who say morality has nothing to do with ends, only with laws and duty and obedience. Aquinas affirms both the relative and the absolute in morality, as we saw with his three moral determinants, not just one, and thus he simultaneously softens Kant's Puritanical legalism and hardens Utilitarianism's spineless and unprincipled pragmatism.

Finally, on language and linguistics we also find two extremes in modern philosophy, one represented by the Deconstructionists, the debunkers who empty language of meaning, deny its power to reveal the real world, and reduce it to a set of acts and objects, and the other extreme represented by Heidegger, who squeezes out of simple Greek words, primitive pre-Socratic sentences, and lines from German poets a mystical metaphysics that no one can clearly understand or communicate to non-Heideggerians. Aquinas succumbs to neither of these extremes, neither the loss of profundity nor the loss of clarity. The *Summa* is deeper than Heidegger and clearer than Wittgenstein.

Something that's most striking in each of these issues is how unoriginal Aquinas has to be in order to be original. All he has to do is not try to be distinctive and unique, but simply say what common sense says, and he turns out to be the most distinctive and unique philosopher in the world. Of course he thinks and writes this commonsense philosophy with tremendous care and rationality and logic, and with an abundance of abstract technical terminology, which enables him to make many distinctions, but it's not hair-splitting; it's all issue-solving.

This pattern of thinking seems at first hard to attain, since most modern philosophers fail to attain it. Yet it turns out to be the easiest philosophy of all to attain, because it's the default position, the philosophy of common sense, the philosophy we all held before we studied philosophy. All the alternatives go off the rails in one direction or the other; this is the rails. It looks like you don't have to have a Ph.D. to be a Thomist but you do have to have a Ph.D. to be anything else. You don't need to study the history of philosophy to believe a full, sane, and balanced philosophy, but you do need to study the history of philosophy to have a half empty one, or an insane one, or an unbalanced one.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the study of these other philosophers is worthless or harmful. Just the opposite. We appreciate things only by contrast, and this is as true of the philosophy of Aquinas as it is of anything else.

Thomism is like a plant, not like a building. Thomas may be like the trunk of the philosophical tree rather than a mere branch, but even the trunk is not the whole tree. It depends on its roots and it keeps growing new branches. It grows. It did grow—Thomas is the product of Socrates and Plato and Aristotle and Paul and Augustine and Boethius and many others. Those are his roots. And it is still growing. Branches that began with the Thomistic trunk are still abounding. Thus the Thomistic phenomenology of Pope John Paul II, and the Thomistic personalism of Norris Clarke, and the Thomistic existentialism of Jacques Maritain. And there are other examples, in analytic philosophy and the philosophy of science, that I haven't mentioned. The trunk's inherent purpose is to put forth many new branches. And this has been done with Aquinas more than with any other philosopher in history except Socrates himself. You don't hear about Cartesian phenomenologists or Kantian existentialists or Kierkegaardian philosophers of science or Platonic personalists, or Heideggerian analytic philosophers, but you hear of Thomistic versions of all these things. And you will continue to hear about them for quite a few more centuries. Aquinas's philosophy is like a tree, and modern philosophical systems are like buildings, and trees live longer than buildings. They also make us happier.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How does Aquinas integrate the senses into our moral life?
2. How did Ockham's Nominalism ruin medieval philosophy?

### Suggested Reading

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Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

### Other Books of Interest

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Adler, Mortimer J. *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.

Gilson, Etienne. *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999.

**Suggested Readings:**

Chesterton, G.K. *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*. New York: Image Books, 1974.

Kreeft, Peter, ed. *Summa of the Summa*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

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Adler, Mortimer J. *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1993.

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