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Aquinas

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Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE) ranks among the most important thinkers of the medieval time period and among the greatest minds produced by Christianity. His systematic approach to theology helped to define the Scholastic movement, and his appropriations of the arguments of ARISTOTLE were instrumental in restoring classical Greek philosophy to the European intellectual mainstream. Furthermore, Aquinas’s applications of natural law theory proved foundational to Enlightenment conceptions of the state and to the emergence of international law. Fitting neatly into neither the category of traditional theologian of the Middle Ages nor that of modern philosopher, Aquinas came to represent a new breed of Christian thinker: a defender of orthodoxy who turned to pagan, Muslim, and Jewish sources for support, and a Christian who used philosophical tools – including reason, induction, and empirical evidence – to understand and advance his faith.

Born near Naples, Italy in 1225 CE, Aquinas was sent at the age of five to study at the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino, where he remained for ten years. At fifteen, he enrolled at the University of Naples and first was exposed to the works of Aristotle (whose writings only recently had been reintroduced to European scholars after centuries of suppression). While at Naples, Aquinas joined the Dominican order, much to the displeasure of his family; Aquinas’s family kept him under house arrest for almost two years in an unsuccessful attempt to force him to reverse his decision. When his family relented, Aquinas traveled to Cologne and Paris to study under the Dominican scholar Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great). In 1256, he became a professor of theology at the University of Paris, where he taught from 1252 to 1259 and from 1269 to 1272 (holding the Dominican chair). He also taught at Anagni, Orvieto, Rome and Viterbo. He died on March 7, 1274 on his way to the second Council of Lyons. Aquinas was canonized in 1323 and, in the late

nineteenth century, his thought and ideas, collectively referred to as Thomism, were designated the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church – a designation that stands to this day.

During his relatively brief lifetime, Aquinas was the author of over sixty works, including extensive writings on scripture and commentaries on the works of such thinkers as Aristotle, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Peter Lombard. He is best known, though, for two long theological treatises, the *Summa contra Gentiles* (in which he defends Christian beliefs against non-Christians) and the *Summa Theologica* (his “summation” of theology). Over two million words in length, the *Summa Theologica* has become the work which defines Thomism and which may well represent the pinnacle of Western systematic thought.

While Aquinas would define himself as a theologian and not as a philosopher, central to his importance historically is his claim that philosophy and reason are essential to theology. Challenging a prevailing view of his day which held that philosophy is a threat to faith and must be suppressed, Aquinas argues that philosophy in fact serves as a “preamble to faith.” It rationally establishes the truth of claims such as “God exists” and “God is one” and thus provides a firm foundation for belief. Moreover, through “similitudes” – the use of conceptual analogies – philosophy supplies insights into the nature of religious claims that otherwise defy human understanding; for instance, while God’s infinite “goodness” cannot be fully grasped by the finite human, reason applied properly allows one to construct an analogy between that which is knowable (the goodness seen in human experience) and that which is not (the perfect goodness of God), thus enabling one to discern aspects of the divine. Perhaps most significantly, philosophy provides the basis for defending the truth of Christian claims against Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians by developing an independent and universal language of argumentation; for example, while pagans might not surrender their polytheism upon being told the Bible asserts that God is one, they surely will have to yield their belief, Aquinas thought, when confronted with a rational argument that establishes the truth of monotheism. (See the discussion of his *via eminentiae*, below.) Thus, philosophy becomes a useful tool for the church, particularly at a time when the insulation of Christendom was being pierced by events ranging from the Crusades to the founding of “modern” universities at Oxford, Cambridge, and Bologna.

While ostensibly giving Christian belief a privileged position over philosophy – “If any point among the statements of the philosophers is found to be contrary to faith, this is not philosophy but rather an abuse of philosophy” – Aquinas also holds that true theological claims cannot

be patently false, “so it is possible, from the principles of philosophy, to refute an error of this kind” (*Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity*, II.3, c). Reason thus can serve as an instrument not only to understand but to perfect theology. For Europe as it emerged from the so-called Dark Ages, this new-found respect for the human person and for human reason would prove revolutionary.

For Aquinas, human beings possess two rational faculties. First, there is “reason” itself, the faculty which processes sensory data to draw general conclusions such as “fire is hot.” Second, there is the “intellect” – a faculty which intuits non-empirical, *a priori* truths (which Aquinas labels “first principles”) such as “good is to be done and evil avoided.” While the ability to learn from sensory experience is common to all higher animals, the faculty of intellect is possessed by humans and angels alone. Aquinas argues that angels, in fact, are “pure intellect.” As non-corporeal beings, angels lack the physical senses to see, smell, and hear; they can only “know” in the direct, intuitive sense afforded by the intellect. Alone among all creatures, humans combine reasonable and intellectual faculties – though, especially since the Fall, both faculties emerge as fallible and incomplete.

Many of Aquinas’s most important philosophical arguments must be read in terms of these dual rational faculties. For instance, in his proofs of God’s existence – historically referred to as the “Five Ways” – Aquinas borrows and builds upon concepts introduced by Aristotle (and, to a lesser extent, Maimonides and Avicenna) to offer five parallel “demonstrations” of the existence of God: the arguments from motion, cause/effect, contingency, gradation, and governance. Each demonstration starts with an empirical observation. In his first Way, the argument from motion, Aquinas simply observes that things move. Reason then recognizes a correlation in its examination of observable experience: “whatever is moved is moved by another.” Each instance of motion is caused by some prior motion. But, Aquinas concludes, this sequence “cannot go on for infinity. . . . It is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God” (*Summa Theologica*, Part I, question 2, article 3). If motion exists, and motion is caused, there must be some first mover that initiates the motion, lest everything would be at rest. Thus, Aquinas holds, we rationally arrive at God.

For modern critics like Immanuel KANT, this argument is fatally flawed. Although Aquinas starts with a correct empirical observation about the causal nature of motion, they contend that he contradicts himself by positing a first mover, God, who himself is able to cause motion but whose motion is not caused by anything prior. No empirical

data support the concept of an unmoved mover, so it is irrational to posit such an entity.

If Aquinas believed that human rational capabilities were purely empirical in nature, he would have to agree with this conclusion. But Aquinas holds that intellectually each human is a *composite* of reason and intellect, and each faculty contributes in its own way to the proof. It is reason which surmises that all motion is caused; and it is intellect which at that point steps in and asserts that if all of the links in the chain of motion were contingent links, dependent on something prior, we would have no complete explanation of motion. The intellect, intuiting a first principle roughly equivalent to “there must be an explanation,” is rationally compelled to posit, Aquinas thinks, an unmoved mover to account for the observable phenomenon.

Aquinas argues that reason and intellect not only give humans the ability to know that God exists, but also provide us with glimpses into the nature of God. An advocate of the *via negativa*, Aquinas holds that we can know about God through rationally examining what God is not; while we cannot grasp God’s infinite nature, for instance, we can comprehend our own finitude and understand, by means of our rational faculties, ways in which God is *not* like us. Additionally, philosophy can play a more positive role in allowing us to understand aspects of God, the *via eminentiae*. For example, if one starts with the premise that God is a first mover, one can rationally prove (to the pagan, for example) that God is a unity, i.e. one and not many. That which is compound must be brought together by something prior; a first mover by definition has nothing prior to it (lest it would not be first); therefore God must not be compound. Of course, for Aquinas, what we can know of God by means of even the *via eminentiae* is limited: “The knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just so far as it can be led by sensible things; from these, however, our understanding cannot reach the divine essence” (*ST*, I, q.12, a.12). Complete knowledge of the divine comes only to those blessed with a supernatural gift from God.

Aquinas’s response to the problem of evil echoes the positions of Plotinus and AUGUSTINE before him. Evil is not a substance created by God; rather, evil is a “privation” of the good and, as such, has no metaphysical status: “Hence it is true that evil in no way has any but an accidental cause” (*ST*, I, q.49, a.1–2). Since what we call evil is simply the removal of some of the good from a wholly good substance, evil is uncreated and, as such, unattributable to God.

Aquinas’s response to the theological dilemma of free will – the question of how human beings can possess free choice in the face of a

sovereign, all-powerful, and all-knowing God – is historically more novel. Aquinas describes each human act as being constituted by two components, an end and the means to that end. It is the intellect which intuits the end, which for humanity is ultimately the happiness found in the “knowledge of God.” This end is supplied to humans by God, it is part of their created nature, and it is not subject to human choice. The empirical faculty of reason, through experience and the observation of precedent, then chooses the means to this end for which the human has been created. This choice is unencumbered by God: “People are in charge of their acts, including those of willing and not willing, because of the deliberative activity of reason, which can be turned on one side or the other” (*ST*, I–II, q.109, a.3). Are people, then, free? Yes and no. Just as human beings have no freedom to change the fact that they need a certain amount of vitamin C to survive, they have no choice over their created end. This fact is established by God. But just as a given human being can choose to refuse to select the proper means to satisfy his or her vitamin requirements – one could elect to eat nothing but proteins or nothing at all – humans have the unencumbered ability to choose whatever means they would like, even means that serve to take them away from their created end of happiness. Thus, both God and the individual contribute to every human act: God establishes the end and the human selects the means.

How, then, is God’s sovereignty preserved within Aquinas’s system? If (as he claims) the good and loving God wills that all humans reach happiness/perfection and if (as he also claims) humans have the ability to freely choose evil means, cannot humans thwart God’s will? Aquinas thinks not. He introduces a distinction between two ways in which God wills events to occur. God wills some events to occur necessarily, and other events contingently. It was in the first manner that God willed “Let there be light” at the beginning of time; the mere fact that God willed the event in this manner brought it into reality. It is in the second, contingent sense, however, that God wills that all humans reach perfection. Much like a person might wish for double sixes in rolling dice, recognizing that the outcome rests contingently on natural probabilities, God wills that all humans attain perfection, knowing the ultimate result is contingent upon the vagaries of personal free choice. God’s will is fulfilled and God’s sovereignty is preserved, even when an individual person chooses evil, because God wills precisely that the individual’s attainment of perfection come only if chosen freely by him or her. Thus, Aquinas argues, humans can be free, God can be good (willing perfection for all), and God’s *contingent* will can be fulfilled even in cases in which individuals follow the path of sin (*ST*, I, q.19, a.8).

Since the end of humanity is created by God and pursued naturally by all humans, Aquinas believes that sin results not from an act of will or a failure of intellect but from ignorance in choosing means. People are literally good willed; they will the good as their end at all times. Immoral acts are caused by a failure of reason – a failure to choose means appropriate to attaining this created end. Aquinas’s depiction of the nature of immorality is in sharp contrast to Augustine, who believes that humans often seek evil for evil’s sake. For Aquinas, humans seek only good, but they end up doing evil when, through an ignorance which is often culpable, they choose inappropriate means.

Aquinas’s concept of law focuses on the issue of what constitutes the appropriate means to the god-given end. A law properly understood is “nothing else than an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by him who has care of the community” (*ST*, I–II, q.94, a.4). For Aquinas, there are four primary types of law: the *eternal law*, which is the plan of God that directs every entity in the universe – animate and inanimate alike – to its appointed end; the *natural law*, which is that aspect of the eternal law which is accessible to human reason; the *human law*, which is the equivalent of the positive law and must never conflict with the natural law; and the *divine law*, which supplements the other types of law through sacred text and direct revelation from God.

Of these, the natural law receives the greatest amount of attention in Aquinas’s writings. In pursuing the natural law, humans must apply their reason to the task of determining which means will direct them to their god-given end. The more nearly an act approaches this end, the more just it is; the further it deviates, the more unjust. For example, Aquinas argues that the created ends of human sexuality include procreating the species and unifying a husband and wife in the bond of matrimony. Thus, reason tells us, fornication and adultery both emerge as immoral since neither act serves to unite husband and wife to each other, but adultery becomes the greater sin since it entails a more pronounced abuse of unity (through violating the existing marriage bond of at least one of the parties) (*ST*, I–II, q.153, a.2). Aquinas’s natural law arguments on sexual matters still ground contemporary Roman Catholic opposition to such issues as birth control, *in vitro* fertilization, and masturbation. Each act is seen as a violation of the procreating and/or unifying end of sex. His natural law arguments also contribute significantly to the just war tradition. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas expands upon pre-existing understandings of the rules for when one may initiate war (the *jus ad bellum*) and advances concepts such as double effect – the idea that if a single act has two results, one good and one evil, the act is only necessarily condemnable if the evil effect is intended – which are

now integral to moral prescriptions for the fighting of war (the *jus in bello*).

Since a law, by definition, pursues the good, human laws which fail to do so – unjust laws – are “not laws at all” according to Aquinas. They have no moral claim on individuals (though they may be adhered to under certain, practical circumstances).

Aquinas’s concept of the state reflects this insight. A supporter of a mixed form of government in which the monarch derives his power from an aristocracy and the aristocracy gains its power from the polity, Aquinas holds that government is only legitimate when it pursues the good (*ST*, I–II, q.105, a.1). A monarchy which turns from the good to evil in its policies and actions becomes, by definition, a “tyranny” and is undeserving of the citizen’s allegiance. While Aquinas cautions against a citizenry pursuing rebellion cavalierly – the anarchy caused by the ensuing unrest is often worse than the tyranny itself, he warns – his views represent a significant break from the arguments of previous Christian thinkers. Unlike the hierarchical vision of the state offered by Augustine, in which God appoints rulers and rulers reign by God’s authority (making rebellion against rulers equivalent to rebellion against God), Aquinas portrays the citizenry as equipped with the potent faculties of reason and intellect and possessing the resulting ability to determine for itself whether just policies – means appropriate to the common good – are being pursued. By its collective authority, the citizenry has the moral right to rebel against unjust rule: “Nor should the community be accused of disloyalty for thus deposing a tyrant, even after a promise of constant fealty; for the tyrant lays himself open to such treatment by his failure to discharge the duties of his office, and in consequence his subjects are no longer bound by their oath to him” (*On Princely Government*, chapter VI). Each citizen’s moral obligation remains to the good; it is the tyrant who has turned from his appropriate path. By popularizing such concepts, Aquinas emerges as a seminal figure in the development of modern philosophical notions of political authority and obligation; historical figures including Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King cite his thought in justifying disobedience to unjust rule.

Thomas Aquinas’s works in general and his *Summa Theologica* in particular remain among the most important and impressive examples of philosophical system building in the history of the West. While contemporary philosophy has come to reject many of the explicitly theological components of Aquinas’s thought, especially with respect to his metaphysics, Aquinas still is widely and rightfully regarded to be the finest philosopher of the medieval time period and a pivotal transitional figure in the move to modernity.

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