

THE CATHOLIC THING
COURSES



INTRODUCTION TO
THOMAS AQUINAS

by Ralph McInerney

INTRODUCTION TO THOMAS AQUINAS

by Ralph McInerny

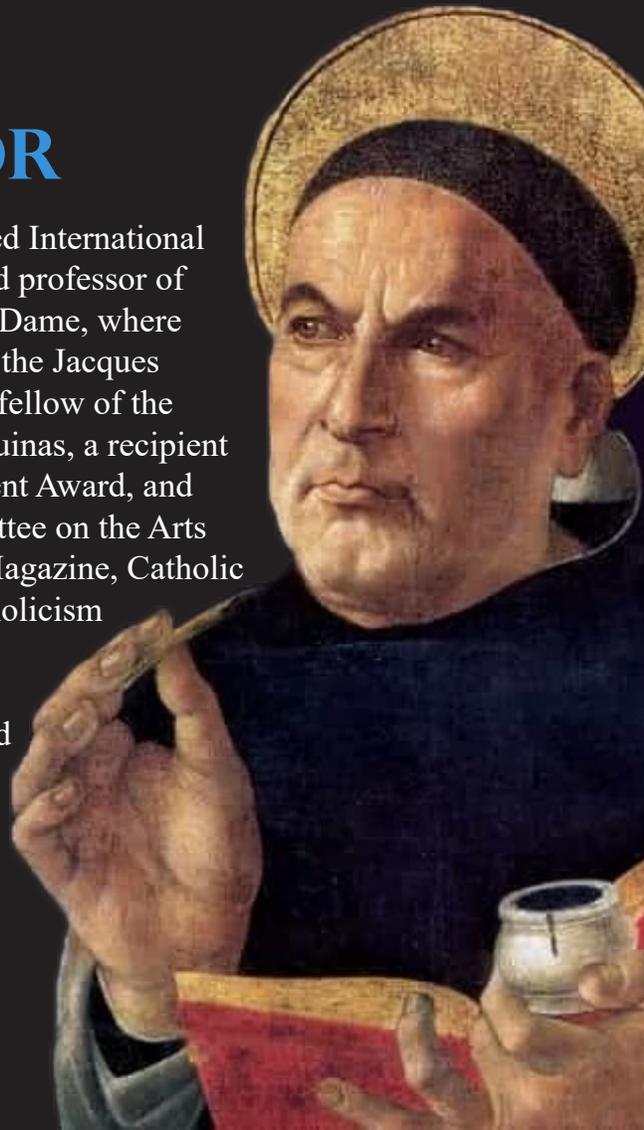
ABOUT THE COURSE

This course introduces the student to St. Thomas Aquinas— philosopher, theologian, sacred poet, and member of the Dominican order, a friar who sought his salvation as a priest under the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but who also possessed one of the greatest philosophical minds of history. The writings of St. Thomas have shaped Catholic thought since his death up to our own day.

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR



Ralph McInerny (1929-2010) founded International Catholic University. He was a beloved professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, where he directed the Medieval Institute and the Jacques Maritain Center. Dr. McInerny was a fellow of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, a recipient of the Boucheron Lifetime Achievement Award, and a member of President Bush's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. He founded *Crisis Magazine*, *Catholic Dossier*, and hosted the Basics of Catholicism conference at Notre Dame for many years. A tireless writer, he published countless books on matters of faith and philosophy, as well as witty novels, including the well-known *Father Dowling Mysteries* and a more recent series of mysteries set at Notre Dame.



LESSON I: LIFE AS BIBLIOGRAPHY

This course is a brief effort to introduce a major thinker, always a risky enterprise. The task is compounded in the case of St. Thomas Aquinas since he was not only a theologian, but also a philosopher and a sacred poet. Chiefly, however, he was a member of the order founded by St. Dominic, the Order of Preachers, usually known as the Dominicans who sought his salvation as a priest under the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. That his life was a short one, 1225-1274, less than half a century, in no way decreases the difficulty of giving a brief introduction to his thought. An enormous number of writings by Thomas have come down to us, some of them planned, some of them products of his task as a teacher, many occasional, responses to specific requests he felt obliged to honor.

The first video lecture gives an idea of the task before us. It is divided into four parts, as are all the lectures in this course, something that was done to facilitate delivery rather than due to anything mandatory in the quadripartite as such. Here I shall say things to supplement what you have seen or heard in that first lecture. A convenient way of doing this is to classify and briefly discuss his writings.

James Weisheipl, in his magisterial *Friar Thomas D'Aquino, His Life, Thought, and Work*, prepared for publication in the year that marked the seven hundredth anniversary of the death of Thomas, provides a useful catalog of Thomas's works, which owes much to an earlier catalog by I. T. Eshmann, which is included as an appendix to Etienne Gilson's *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas* (1956). A later arrangement of the works into categories can be found in Jean-Pierre Torrell's *Initiation B Saint Thomas D'Aquin. Volume 1* (1993), which accepts, while slightly altering, Weisheipl's. Here are the categories proposed by Weisheipl:

1. Theological Syntheses
2. Academic Disputations
3. Expositions of Holy Scripture
4. Expositions of Aristotle
5. Other Expositions
6. Polemical Writings
7. Treatises on Special Subjects
8. Expert Opinions
9. Letters
10. Liturgical Pieces and Sermons
11. Works of Uncertain Authenticity

Torrell whittles the number of categories to nine:

1. Theological syntheses
2. Disputed Questions
3. Biblical commentaries
4. Commentaries of Aristotle
5. Other Commentaries

6. Polemical Works
7. Treatises
8. Letters and expert opinions
9. Liturgical works, sermons, prayers

1. Theological Syntheses

a. These include the early exposition of the *Sentences of Peter Lombard* in four books that was written in Paris from 1252-1256. The four volume work of Peter Lombard, a 12th century figure who ended as Bishop of Paris, became the standard work whereby the fledgling theologian was required to exhibit his ability to interpret and comment on a text meant to summarize Christian doctrine. Among the writings of theologians from the 13th century on will be found a commentary on Lombard. (Sometimes, as in the case of Duns Scotus, three of them which track his teaching career from Oxford to Paris to Cologne). There is as yet no English translation of this work, indeed there is no critical edition of the Latin text.

In the manual edition of the work, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* edited by Pierre Mandonnet beginning in 1929 and ending in 1947 you will find the work carefully following the divisions of Peter Lombard's four volumes. Each volume was divided into parts called distinctions and Thomas's commentary is fittingly preceded by a reprinting of the distinction of Lombard. This is followed by a *divisio textus* which provides a running outline of what Peter had written. There follows a discussion which is divided into questions, the questions into articles, and often further subdivisions. Here Thomas poses a thematic question suggested by the text and considers it independently of Peter Lombard. The genre of the later *Summa theologiae*, itself suggested by the format of quodlibetal and disputed questions, is already present. Each article of a question raises a difficulty and then gives a number of arguments on behalf of a positive or negative answer to it. This is followed by a Solution in which Thomas treats the thematic question after which he turns to a discussion of the proposed answers, sometimes rejecting them, sometimes making distinctions that bring them into accord with what he has said.

The outlines of Peter Lombard which follow the reprinting of his text have not received the attention they deserve. Weisheipl and Torrell give interesting historical sidelights to the composition of the work.

b. The *Summa contra gentiles* was begun in Paris in 1259 and finished in Naples and Orvieto in 1264. It is not a commentary, it too is divided into four books which are divided into chapters. This may make it appear closer to modern practice, but the chapters contain without emphasizing the dialectical approach to the matters raised. A position is always developed in the light of plausible alternatives. The 'gentiles' in question were the Moslems, Jews and heretical Christians that the Dominican encountered in their work in Spain and elsewhere. This aim leads to the search for arguments which do not depend on specifically Catholic sources, since these would not be accepted by the addressee. Is the work to be called theology or philosophy? In chapter 1 of Book Four, Thomas distinguishes a threefold way in which men can consider divine things: first, according to natural reason; second, divine revelation is treated in preaching; third, the human mind is raised by what had been supernaturally revealed. Thomas then says that in the previous three books he has been concerned with natural knowledge of God and will now in the fourth book turn to treatment of

revelation. St. Edith Stein was much influenced by this *Summa* in developing her notion of Christian philosophy. Much has been written about Thomas's self-description of his task. I direct you to the recent book of Thomas S. Hibbs, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa contra gentiles* (Notre Dame Press, 1995).

c. The *Summa theologiae*, unfinished though it be, is rightly considered to be Thomas's masterpiece. The plan of the work is into three parts. The First Part (written from 1288-1269) contains 119 questions, each divided into articles, each article following the same literary form. The thematic question is given a proposed answer which is supported by a number of arguments, usually three in number, and then the discussion is turned by an *On the contrary*, some authoritative text is cited to suggest that the discussion is on the wrong track. There follows the *Respondeo dicendum quod* in which Thomas develops an argument or arguments on behalf of an answer other than that favored by the initial arguments. He ends by taking up those arguments as objections to his own position. There is no appreciable deviation from this style throughout the parts of the work. The result is not to bore the reader but rather to make the structure translucent, drawing the mind directly into the dialectical give and take summarized by the text. The sentence structure of the articles is similarly repetitive and the vocabulary of the whole limited. It is an introduction to theology for beginners, Thomas has told us at the outset, and this is not a professorial joke. Order and argument, focusing on the essential, leaving sideshows and further precision to other occasions — these characterize the work. Part One discusses the one God, the Trinity, creation, with emphasis on angels and men.

The Second Part is subdivided into two. The First Part of the Second Part (written in 1270) contains 114 questions and deals with man's ultimate end, aspects of human actions, the passions or emotions, habits and virtues, sin, law and grace. The Second Part of the Second Part, (written from 1271-1272), the largest volume, contains 189 questions. It discusses the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, justice and prudence, in the course of which the beatitudes and the fruits of the Holy Ghost are interwoven with the discussion. The parts of the fundamental virtues are pursued in some detail, and it ends with a discussion of states of life, especially the religious life.

The Third Part (begun in 1272 and broken off in December of 1273), contains 90 questions which deal with the Incarnation, the union of human and divine nature in Christ, and the life of Christ. The discussion of the sacraments had covered baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance — and then is abruptly stopped. There are other unfinished works of Thomas's but the explanation of this stop is a deliberate decision, prompted by a mystical experience that convinced Thomas that all he had written was nothing but straw compared to the green pastures he had briefly glimpsed. Josef Pieper's *The Silence of St. Thomas*, reissued by St. Augustine's Press in 1999 is must reading on this subject.

2. Academic Disputations

There are two sorts of disputation, one the so-called *Quaestio disputata*, the other *Quaestiones quodlibetales*. The occasions for and nature of the two kinds of disputation are discussed in the lectures. They represented one of the three tasks of a regnant master, to comment, to dispute, and to preach. We have eleven sets of disputed questions of Thomas. That *On Truth* 29 subsidiary questions and are dated by Weisheipl as taking place in Paris from 1256 to 1259. The *Disputed Question on the Power of God* comprises 10 articles which are said by Weisheipl to have taken place in Rome from 1265 to 1266. The *Disputed Question on Evil* (Rome, 1288-1267) comprises sixteen articles, that *On Spiritual Creatures* (Italy, 1267-1268) comprises eleven articles. The *Disputed Question*

on the Soul (Paris, 1269) has 21 questions. That *On the Virtues in General*, thirteen questions, *On Charity* thirteen articles, *On Fraternal Correction*, two articles, *On Hope*, two articles, and *On the Cardinal Virtues*, four articles, are all set by Weisheipl in Paris from 1269-1272. The *Disputed Question on the Incarnate Word*, finally, has five articles, and is placed by Weisheipl in early April, 1272, in Paris. The articles of the disputed questions differ from those in the number of arguments with which they begin — the *Summa theologiae* usually confines itself to three ‘objections’ — and the far more sophisticated way in which matters are discussed, doubtless because of the setting which occasioned them. There are twelve sets of *Quodlibetal Questions* which are divided into two given at Christmas or Easter in Paris during the two three-year-periods, 1256-1259 and 1269-1272, when Thomas was a regnant master there. They are, as their title suggests, what-you-will disputes on all and sundry, and a delight to peruse.

3. Scriptural Commentaries

The threefold task of the master of theology was summed up, as I have mentioned, in three infinitive: *legere, praedicare, disputare*. The chief texts to be read were the Sentences and books of the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. Thomas commented on Job at Orvieto from 1281-1264, and is characterized by him as a literal interpretation. That at the Psalms is said to be guided by the nocturns of the Office, and includes psalms 1 to 51. Weisheipl places it in Naples, 1272-1273, thus very late in Thomas’s short life, but a life that had been lived with the psalms as daily prayers. The commentary on Isaiah has no agreed upon dating, nor has that on Jeremiah. There is a separate commentary on the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Thomas wrote the *Catena Aurea* or *Golden Chain*, glosses on the four gospels drawn from the Greek and Latin Fathers, at Orvieto and Rome in 1262 or 1263 through 1267. We have two gospel commentaries of Thomas’s own, that on Matthew (Paris, 1256-1259). And that on John (Paris, 1269-1272). Thomas commented on all the epistles of St. Paul. Mention can also be made of the Commendation of Sacred Scripture, which I have included in my Penguin Class collection of texts of Thomas, pp. 5-17.

4. Aristotelian Commentaries

As you read this summary of the writings of Thomas, with dates supplied where needed, you will see the fundamental role played in their composition by Thomas’s duties as a regnant theologian. In this regard, the eleven commentaries on treatises of Aristotle, not all of which are complete, come as a surprise. They were no part of Thomas’s task as a theologian. They all come late in his life although he had immersed himself in the writings of Aristotle from the beginning of his studies at Naples, if not earlier, something that received added stimulus from the influence of St. Albert the Great. Our discussion in the first lecture of the controversies that swirled around the philosophy of Aristotle at Paris give the historical reason why Thomas decided to provide close readings of the treatises. He began this work in 1268, in Rome, with the commentary *On the Soul*, which he completed in Paris when he returned there for his second period as regnant master, 1269-1272. Most of the commentaries were composed during this period when Thomas was extremely busy lecturing and disputing. He commented on *On Interpretation* (incomplete), on the *Posterior Analytics*, *Physics*, *On the Heavens and Earth* (incomplete), *On Generation and Corruption* (incomplete), *On Meteors* (incomplete), *On Sense and the Sensed Object*, *On Memory and Reminiscence*, *On the Metaphysics*, *On the Nicomachean Ethics*, *On the Politics* (incomplete). I have lauded and discussed the importance of these commentaries several times. Perhaps you will want to read the discussion in my preface to the already mentioned Penguin Classic *Selected Writings* (1998). If we add the *Tabula*,

or index, to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Torrell says was composed around 1270, we have a round dozen of Aristotelian works.

5. Other Expositions

Thomas commented on two treatises of Boethius, *On the Trinity* (incomplete) which Weisheipl places in Paris, 1258-1259, and on the work called *De hebdomadibus* (Whether everything that is good just insofar as it is), which Weisheipl dates as the same time as the first Boethian commentary. Thomas wrote a remarkable commentary on *On the Divine Names* by the pseudo-Denis the Areopagite (Rome, 1265-1267) and another on the work called *The Book of Causes*, thought to be Aristotelian but which Thomas showed to be excerpted from Proclus (Paris, 1271-1272).

6. Polemical Writings

There are two many causes for writings so described, attacks on the religious life and misunderstandings of Aristotle. The former are *Against Those Impugning the Religious Life* (Paris, 1256) against William of Saint-Amour, *On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life* (Paris, either 1269 or 1270), against Gerard d'Abbeville, *Against Those who would prevent the entry into religion of boys*, against d'Abbeville and Geraldni, located by Weisheipl in Paris, 1271. As for misreadings of Aristotle, Thomas wrote his extremely important *On There Being only One Intellect, against the Averroists*, which may be taken as a charter for his commentaries on Aristotle. This was written in Paris in 1270. *On the Eternity of the World*, Paris, 1270, is of basic importance for understanding Thomas on the relation of faith and reason.

7. Treatises

Thomas's treatise *On Fallacies* is regarded as authentic by Weisheipl who thinks it was composed when Thomas was held in confinement by his family, 1244-1245. Torrell thinks it inauthentic. *On Being and Essence* (Paris, 1252-1256) and *On the Principles of Nature* (Paris, same dating) were written before Thomas became a master. The *Compendium of Theology* was written late in Thomas's life, and is incomplete, perhaps like the *Summa* a casualty of Thomas's mystical experience. It was based on the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity, but stops in the midst of the discussion of hope. *On Separate Substances*, also late, perhaps at Naples, is also incomplete. *On the Rule of Princes, to the King of Cyprus*, also incomplete, is dated by Weisheipl between 1265 and 1267 at Rome.

For the Letters and Expert Opinions I will simply refer you to the discussions in Weisheipl (pp. 389-400) and Torrell (pp. 511-520). Like the quodlibetal questions they are on a vast range of topics, some of them of greater interest than others. As for Thomas's liturgical writings and sacred poetry, the Office he composed for the Feast of Corpus Christi takes precedence. Weisheipl places its composition at Orvieto in summer of 1264. The Eucharistic Hymns, e.g. *Adoro te devote*, are still sung where the faith is robust. As for the sermons, they date from the last years in Naples, and concern the Creed, the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria and the Ten Commandments. These are of great importance. We still await a critical edition of all of Thomas's sermons.

Some years ago there was an advertising campaign called "The Man Who Reads Encyclopedias." This was an effort to sell the Britannica, and Adlai Stevenson figured in the series. Reading encyclopedias seems a random enough aim, guided as one must be by the mere alphabet, but is reading lists of books, bibliographies, a more intelligent use of one's time? As a general rule, no, but this skeletal presentation of the literary production of Thomas Aquinas, together with the dating of

the works, can be overlaid his life and give us a sense of his enormous productivity at the various stages of his short career through time.

Furthermore, one as knowledgeable as yourself in the biography of Thomas will find food for reflection in the conjunction of his life and work. In the course of my presentation I have mentioned a number of specific works. Somewhat shamelessly, I shall give works of my own pride of place in the writing assignments that follow these lessons.

Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- Introduction to my Penguin Classic, *St. Thomas, Selected Writings*, London: Penguin, 1998.
- Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1999.

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Write a review of at least five typed pages in length of Pieper's book *The Silence of St. Thomas*.



LESSON II: MEDIEVAL EDUCATION

From the age of five when Thomas Aquinas was sent to the nearby abbey of Monte Cassino he entered a system of education that stemmed from the recovery in translation during the Dark Ages of some fragments of classical thought. Saint Augustine taught in the system of Imperial Schools, first in North Africa, then in Rome, before moving with his entourage to Milan. After being moved decisively by the preaching of Saint Ambrose, he withdrew to a retreat at Cassiciacum where he prepared himself for entry into the Church, thus fulfilling the prayerful hopes of his mother Monica.

At Cassiciacum, Augustine wrote a number of works, many in dialogue form, which give us a taste of the teacher he had been. *On the Teacher*, a dialogue with his son Adeodatus who would die young, Augustine examined what happens when one learns with the aid of a human teacher. He concluded that we have but one teacher, Christ, and that the soul contains a participation in the light that is the Word of God that enables us to grasp truths. In *On Music*, he discusses one of the liberal arts and here and elsewhere he is one of the major conduits of the notion of liberal arts. The number of the arts is nine in Augustine and it is only later in the fifth century that Cassiodorus Senator and Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480-524) that the number of the liberal arts was established as seven. The *Institutiones* that Cassiodorus composed for the monastery at Vivarium which, though a layman, he founded, is one of the most succinct expressions of the relationship between faith and reason which would characterize medieval education.

Cassiodorus distinguished between sacred learning, that contained in the Bible, and secular learning which he took to be adequately summed up in the liberal arts. Eventually, the arts were divided into two groups, the trivium — grammar, rhetoric, logic — and the quadrivium — arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. The terms suggest that the liberal arts are propaedeutic to sacred learning, a threefold way and a fourfold way. And ways to what? To the wisdom contained in Revelation. From first to last, medieval education was founded on the conviction that reason and faith are complementary and that secular learning finds its fulfillment in the use put to the arts in the interpretation of Scripture.

This system of education was initially located in monasteries where it was chiefly aimed at the training of choir monks whose work was the *Opus Dei*, the daily chanting of the hours in the abbey church. Some laymen, and laywomen in the case of monasteries for women, also benefited from this education. It is the contention of the great French medievalist Regine Pernoud that the position of women in medieval society was quite favorable until the founding of universities in the 13th century. Still, there were female masters as well, notably Christine de Pizan.

At Monte Cassino, Thomas would have been introduced to this liberal arts tradition of secular learning. At the end of the first millennium, the cathedral school became a second center of education, training the priests of the diocese. This development accompanied the formation of towns and cities apart from the rural fastness in which the monastery was set. When Thomas transferred to the University of Naples in 1239, he came into a setting which was the organic development of the liberal arts tradition. The organization of the university may be seen as the recognition that the hegemony of the liberal arts was over. The arts could no longer be seen as effectively summarizing secular or natural knowledge once the influx of translations of the treatises of Aristotle was felt. Organic as the development of the university out of the seed bed of liberal arts tradition came to seem to Thomas Aquinas, the transition was a difficult one. At first there was a prudent caution shown toward the new learning and eventually, in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, at Paris, the phenomenon known

as Latin Averroism or Heterodox Aristotelianism prompted Thomas to write his commentaries on Aristotelian treatises discussed in the previous lesson.

It is convenient, and indeed inevitable, that Paris should be regarded as the flagship of the medieval university. Its papal charter dates from early in the 13th century and it was at Paris that the great battle between old and new was fought. In the 12th century, Paris was already a center of European education. The Englishman, John of Salisbury, has left us vivid accounts of the lively intellectual scene he found there in the 12th century. There was the cathedral school on the Ile de la cité and there were the schools on Mont Ste Genevieve, where Peter Abelard taught, as well as the remarkable School of St. Victor, of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine. When the university was formed — the *magistorum et scholarum* of Paris — it amalgamated the existing schools and introduced a common program of preparation for the Master of Arts and Master of Theology. We will return to the structure of the medieval university.

At Naples, Thomas first became acquainted with the ‘new’ Aristotle. Of course Aristotle had figured in the liberal arts tradition, represented by the few logical works of his which had been translated by Boethius. It is fascinating to wonder what would have happened if Boethius had been able to carry out the project he set for himself, the translation into Latin of all of Plato and Aristotle with the provision of commentaries on their work. As it happened, this project was interrupted when Boethius was accused by Theodoric the Arian ruler of Italy, with headquarters at Ravenna, of conspiring with the emperor of the east to overthrow him. One of the great works of prison literature, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, was written by Boethius while he awaited execution in Pavia, near Milan. Alternating prose and poetic sections, Boethius addressed the problem of evil, the suffering of the innocent. Dr. Johnson was to wonder, Boswell tells us, how in such circumstances Boethius could show himself *magis philosophus quam Christianus*, more a philosopher than a Christian. And indeed Boethius employs only secular sources to address his thematic question. If nothing else, this gives us a vivid sense of the difference between philosophy and theology. But Boethius was also the author of a number of theological treatises which would have a profound influence in later centuries. If all the writings of Aristotle — and of Plato! — had become available at the outset of the sixth century, the battles that characterized the thirteenth century might have been fought out much earlier. As it was, Aristotle would find a Latin voice only toward the end of the twelfth century and during the thirteenth century his entire corpus would find its way into the lingua franca of the medieval scholar.

From the outset, Thomas held that the treatises of Aristotle were both compatible with the liberal arts tradition and with Christian faith. His interest in Aristotle, quickened at Naples, would receive a further boost from Thomas’s entrance into the Dominican Order. When he finally made his way North, he was to study with Albert the Great whose interest in Aristotle was profound, to the extent of writing a paraphrase of the whole Aristotelian corpus.

The Structure of the University

When the existing schools of Paris were amalgamated into the legal entity of the university, the program of study was formalized, modeled, as it must seem, on the guild system in which the apprentice was trained through stages to the status of master. The basic structure of the University of Paris was this. There was an entry level in the Faculty of Arts which young boys entered in their early teens to embark on a course of studies extending some seven to nine years when the Master of Arts degree was conferred on successful candidates. Once in possession of the Master of Arts, the young man, now perhaps twenty years of age, could enter one of the advanced faculties, that of

Theology, Law or Medicine. It is doubtful that Thomas was ever a student of the arts at Paris, having completed that course before arriving. As a fledgling theologian he would over the course of years become proficient in Scripture and in the Sentences of Peter Lombard. Courses were cursory at first, a quick trip over the terrain, and then became progressively more demanding with the candidate gradually participating more and more in the teaching task itself, giving cursory readings of a book of Scripture, for example. The regnant master presided over such apprentice work. The same was true of the disputed questions.

A master would post a thesis he meant to defend publicly in advance of the date and the other masters and students would come prepared to raise difficulties for the proposed solution. The initial response would be by one of his assistants, with the magisterial resolution following. The apprentice would lecture on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard to his juniors and gradually acquire mastery of the subject. A man was in his early thirties by the time he was subjected to the public testing that would determine whether he would be named a master of theology. As we have already seen, Thomas wrote some of his earliest treatises during these apprentice years at Paris.

All students were clerics, set off from the laity by the tonsure, not one of the Holy Orders. Students of theology were priests and thus could fulfill the third task of the master, preaching. The inaugural lecture before the whole corps of masters was the crucial final step. Thomas's as we have seen was devoted to the commendation of Scripture and its division into books. Once a master, a man was in principle qualified to teach in any university, but there was a limited number of regent professorships. The Dominicans held two and it was to one of these that Thomas was appointed, after opposition to him and the Franciscan Bonaventure had been resolved by the intervention of the pope. There was enmity between the secular masters — priests who were not members of religious orders — and the religious, particularly the two mendicant orders, that of St. Dominic and that of St. Francis. We have seen that some of Thomas's polemical writings were responses to these attacks. It was the practice of the Dominicans to put a man into one of their chairs for a three year period and then assign him to a teaching post in one of the houses of the order, so that there was a trickle down influence of a Parisian education. Thomas first occupied a Dominican chair, teaching in the Convent of St. Jacques, from 1256 to 1259. After that, he was sent to Italy where he taught in a number of places, Orvieto, Viterbo, Naples and Rome, before being called back for an unprecedented second term as regent master in 1269. The reason for his recall was that he might address the issue of Latin Averroism, since his own views seemed in the target area when Franciscan theologians responded to the so-called Latin Averroists who were masters in the Faculty of Arts.

Calling the entry level of the university the Faculty of Arts was a deliberate linking to the liberal arts tradition. Over the course of the thirteenth century this became in effect the Faculty of Philosophy, as treatises of Aristotle which could not be construed as dealing with one of the traditional arts were added to the curriculum. With the advent of the Aristotelian corpus in Latin translation it was no longer possible to think of secular learning as confined to the seven liberal arts. Some Masters of Arts remained in the Faculty of Arts and their attention was professionally focused on the Aristotelian treatises. A feature of the liberal arts tradition was that it incorporated the conviction that there was a complementarity and compatibility of secular and sacred learning. With the rising enthusiasm for Aristotle this *modus vivendi* came into question.

It has become fashionable to be skeptical about the so-called two truth theory as a central tenet of the Latin Averroists. That this skepticism should itself be subjected to skepticism is clear from

Thomas's response to over enthusiastic Aristotelean.

Thomas's Polemics against the Latin Averroists

In his treatise *On the Soul* Aristotle offers an argument for the immateriality of intellect which is based on the nature of intellectual knowledge. In sense perception, for example when one sees green, green is present to or *had* by the sensor in a way that is different from the green of the shamrock. In the latter case there is an individual instance of green numerically distinct from other instances in other shamrocks, an unripe apple and your pallor the morning after the night before. Seeing green is not productive of another instance of green in the inventory of the external world. Individual instances of green are incidental properties or accidents of things, forms inhering in substance as in their matter. Green as seen is received by the sense in a different way in which it is received materially. Thus sensation comes to be spoken of as the reception of green otherwise that it is received by matter, or immaterially. For all that, the range of sight is limited to colors. But the range of intellect is unlimited, a truth that Aristotle expresses in the phrase "the soul is in a certain way all things." Unlike sensation, understanding or intellection does not employ a material organ. If it did, its range would be limited in the way that sight's is. The intellect is defined as a capacity to know whatever is and has as its object the nature or essence of sensed things grasped in a way that leaves out of account this or that instance of the nature. Immaterial reception here is of a more exalted sort than is the case with the immateriality involved in sensation. Sight can be overwhelmed by brightness and its activity impaired, but intellect thrives on rather than is impeded by greater intelligibility.

Well, this is a difficult topic and one could and doubtless should go on. But we are interested in a controversy that arose as to the upshot of this analysis in *On the Soul*. Is Aristotle speaking of the capacity of the human soul such that his account of the immateriality of intellection redounds to the intellectual soul? Is he establishing that, because intellection is what it is, that each individual soul that has the capacity for it is immaterial and can enjoy existence independently of the body whose substantial form it is?

In different ways, Avicennia and Averroism — whose readings of Aristotle accompanied the translations of the treatises — hold that what Aristotle is establishing is that immaterial intellect is not a capacity or faculty of the human soul but a separate entity whose causality accounts for our thinking. On this view, Aristotle is not establishing that each and every intellectual soul can exist apart from body — the immortality of the soul — but that there is numerically one intellect elsewhere whose activity causes our thinking. But our soul does not survive the body.

This Averroistic interpretation of the Aristotelian text continues to be the dominant reading of *On the Soul*. Masters in the Faculty of Arts in the thirteenth century accepted this reading, which is why they are called Latin Averroists. From this it should follow that we are faced here with one of the "errors of Aristotle." On the Averroistic reading, philosophy not only does not establish the immortality of the soul, it establishes that human souls are not immortal. But the Latin Averroists were Christians whose belief accordingly was that the human soul is destined for a continuing existence after death, whether of weal or woe. Surely then they must reject Aristotle and account his position false. The Latin Averroist controversy arose because these masters did not care to do this. Rather, they held, and were taken to hold, that something contradictory to Christian faith was philosophically true but nonetheless the Christian assumption about the immortality of each and every human soul is also true.

The Latin Averroists were thus seen as calling into question the traditional assumption that faith and



reason are compatible. They were taken to hold that philosophical truths and revealed truths can be contradictorily related yet both be true. This was the situation to which Thomas Aquinas returned in 1269 when he once more became regent master at Paris. His treatise *De unitate intellectus contra averroistas* — which I have translated as *Aquinas Against the Averroists: On There Being Only One Intellect* — is of fundamental importance for understanding Thomas’s own Aristotelianism. In the treatise he shows at great length that the separatist reading of Aristotle on intellect will not do. His rejection of it could simply be based on its conflict with a fundamental assumption of Christian belief. If Christianity is true, this view of the mortality of the human soul must be false. But did Aristotle teach what the Latin Averroists thought he did? That is the heart of the polemical treatise. Thomas argues that the text of Aristotle simply will not support the separatist interpretation, that Aristotle is clearly establishing the intellect as the faculty of a soul that is the form of a body is such that the human soul cannot cease to be when a person dies.

Of course Thomas may be wrong in his own reading of Aristotle but his interpretation has to be appraised on the basis it is offered. The text of Aristotle and the wider context of Aristotelian philosophy. It is a matter of what Aristotle actually taught. This is a textual and historical question. What is the correct or true reading of Aristotle? Anyone wishing to get a sense of Thomas’s approach to the Aristotelian text owes it to himself to ponder this treatise carefully. Clichés about baptizing Aristotle or benign — that is, distorting, that is, false — reading of Aristotle to make him compatible with the faith dissolve on a close reading of this treatise.

After he has established in great detail the correct reading of Aristotle, Thomas moves beyond the merely historical question to argue that Aristotle’s position is true. All in all, the treatise is a devastating refutation of Latin Averroism. And it is a massive impediment to the tendency to suggest that we must distinguish Thomas’s “personal” views from his interpretation of Aristotle.

The treatise *On the Eternity of the World* casts further light on Thomas’s view of the relationship between philosophy and faith. Among what were called the “errors of Aristotle” — that is, Aristotelian tenets which conflict with the faith — is the eternity of the world. This is a quite different case from the foregoing. There is no doubt that Aristotle held that the world had always been because it makes

no sense to say that it has come to be. But we read in Genesis that in the beginning God created heaven and earth. Here, surely, there is a contradiction. How does Thomas deal with it?

First, Aristotle is right in holding that the world cannot come to be in the sense that there is something which before being the world comes to be the world. There is no antecedent matter in potency to becoming the world. If the world comes to be, this must be in a quite different sense, *ex nihilo*, from no previous subject or indeed state of affairs. Call this creation as opposed to becoming in the way in which things come to be within the existent world. Is Aristotle denying that the world comes to be in the sense of being created? There are those, e.g. Mario Sacchi, who take seriously Thomas's attribution of creation to Aristotle. I agree with Sacchi. But this does not settle the dispute before us. The world can be a created world and for all that have always existed. Say that is Aristotle's view. It is still incompatible with Christian faith and thus, on the assumption that Christianity is true must be accounted false. But Thomas is not done.

Thomas goes on to say that Aristotle's arguments for the eternity of the world are at best probable. Indeed, Thomas holds that it is philosophically impossible to establish with certainty either that the created world has always existed or that it was created in such a way that time has a beginning with it. On this view, the most that philosophy can do is offer a probable argument for a position in conflict with the faith. The result is that there is no flat out contradiction of faith and reason.

Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- *On the Eternity of the World*. In *Thomas Aquinas Selected Writings*, translated and edited by Ralph McInerny. London: Penguin, 1998, pp. 710-717.
- *Aquinas Against the Averroists: On There Being Only One Intellect*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993.
- Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1962.

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Write an essay outlining the argument of *On the Eternity of the World*.

LESSON III: THE LOVE OF WISDOM

Philosophy has had a long history but that history begins with the Greeks and it is from the Greeks that we have its name. The love of wisdom. It was because he wished to distinguish himself from the sophists, who claimed to be wise, that Protagoras said that he would prefer to be one in love with, in quest of, wisdom rather than to suggest he was already in possession of it. Wanting to be wise seems a pretty vague description of what it is to be a philosopher and of course many explanations of what this desire consists of might be given. Thomas Aquinas was concerned to grasp what this could mean for Aristotle.

In the opening two chapters of the *Metaphysics*, which Thomas describes as Aristotle's proemium or introduction to the treatise, we find a remarkable account of the pursuit of wisdom and thus of what philosophy is.

"All men by nature desire to know," Aristotle begins, and we may mistakenly think that he is speaking of himself and certain close friends. But as the immediate sequel makes clear, Aristotle intends the full universality of that opening sentence. "A sign of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness, they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight." How disarming. Aristotle illustrates his initial claim by pointing out that sense perception delights us, we love it, especially the sense of sight. "For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things."

As rational animals we are endowed with senses, which are ways of knowing, and thus our desire to know can be illustrated by appeal to our delight in the senses. But Aristotle is far from through anchoring his generalization in what we share with the animals. He goes on to discuss a hierarchy that can be distinguished among mere animals on the basis of the presence in them of one or more senses. Some animals only sense whereas others have memory besides, whereby they retain impressions received. This makes the latter capable of learning. For the animal to move himself from place to place requires the retention of images or he would never get to where he is going. A first way in which man is set off from the other animals is by his capacity for experience. Experience is a product of memory "for the several memories of the same thing produce finally the capacity for a single experience." Experience in turn is the presupposition of art. "Now art arises when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgment about a class of objects is produced." The difference between experience and art is illustrated by healing. One might provide a given remedy, say, tar water, because it had helped Ramona when she was similarly afflicted. As to why it helps, the experienced person does not know. To know why is to have art.

This is a crucial point in the discussion. Knowing why, grasping the cause, emerges as preferable to mere experience. Of course, one with experience may seem in practical matters better to consult than another who has art without experience. This is true in practical matters but now 'art' begins to function differently. At the outset, in discussing sight, a distinction had been adumbrated between seeing with a view to action and just seeing, looking, for its own sake. So too now 'art' is transferred to knowledge of causes which has no practical end in view. And wisdom is linked to knowledge of the cause. But even in the practical order, we can recognize a hierarchy among those who have art and thus grasp why something occurs. The laborers on a building site know why they do what they do

but there is a master builder (architect) who directs the actions of bricklayers and electricians and the like to the overall goal of building the pyramid. The latter is considered wiser than those he directs.

But back to the theoretical. Games involve know-how and are fairly self-contained. They are not ordered to something else. More pertinently, the study of mathematics is sought for its own sake. Aristotle now stops using ‘art’ in a commodious way and distinguishes art from science. In this narrow sense, art is practical and science is theoretical. Theoretical knowledge makes one wiser than he who does not have it.

But the comparative use of ‘wisdom’ and ‘wiser’ now gives way to a discussion of wisdom as such. Knowledge has been linked with the grasp of the cause, and the grasp of a comprehensive cause — like the end of all the crafts that go into building — makes one wiser. What are the causes knowledge which will make one wise in the fullest sense? The answer, in short, is the first and principal causes, the causes of all things. Knowledge of such causes is divine in two senses. One, this is the kind of knowledge God is thought to have. Second, because the human attainment of it makes one most godlike. Moreover, the first causes and the divine are synonymous. Thus it is that the common human desire to know is said to reach its fulfillment in such knowledge of the divine as we can achieve. Theology is the goal of philosophy.

The Divisions of Philosophy

Philosophy emerges as an umbrella term that covers a plurality of sciences insofar as the sciences other than wisdom are ordered to it as to their ultimate goal. Thomas arranges the various philosophical sciences in two ways, one pedagogical, the other formal.

In several places, Thomas states what he takes to be the natural order in which the philosophical sciences should be learned. First logic, then mathematics, then natural philosophy, then morals and finally metaphysics.

With the exception of logic, this order is based on ease and accessibility. Logic is difficult but since it treats the method of science, it is profitably studied first. Mathematics deals with things easily accessible and independent of any wide experience of the world and life. Thomas holds an abstractive view of mathematical objects. Mathematics considers substance as quantified — quanta — without the sensible qualities such as color and weight that physical substances have as they exist. Because quantity is presupposed to sensible qualities (color is of a surface), it is possible to consider surface without sensible qualities, without however suggesting that there actually exist merely quantified substances. Natural philosophy is the study of the changeable things around us that we perceive with our senses. The procedure within natural philosophy is from the most general, to the progressively less general, to the specific study of things that come to be as the result of a change and will cease to be as the result of a change. Aristotle’s *Physics* is the study of common properties of mobile things — their composition of matter and form, motion, time, place. It ends with a proof of a prime mover, an unmoved mover, without which none of the movers and moved things studied in natural philosophy could exist. Subsequent works of natural philosophy deal with the principle of living things — soul — generation and corruption, sense and its object, the cosmos... Moral philosophy deals with the human good, *Ethics*, which focuses on the integral good of the individual, bringing emotions under the sway of reason so that one acts moderately and courageously. The good shared by members of a family and the common good of the political community give raise to the moral sciences. Finally, the quest from wisdom takes the form of metaphysics where physical things are considered anew with an eye to developing what substance could mean if applied to things which exist immaterially, what



act and potency, one and many, could mean. The subject of metaphysics is being as being, being in general, and since being is analogically common to the things that are, and substance is the principal sort of being, reference to which is made in describing other things that are, the metaphysician concentrates on substance. In analyzing anew physical substance, he sees that form is paramount and thus immaterial things can be thought of as subsistent forms. By thus analyzing physical substance, the metaphysician seeks meanings for term which permits their application to the causes of the subject of the science.

This view of metaphysics indicates that the principal object of our desire to know — the divine — can only be gotten at obliquely, not as the subject of the science, but as causes of the subject of the science.

The formal division of philosophy is implied by these remarks. Sometimes it is the perfection of knowing itself that is the goal, truth, and sometimes truth is sought for purposes of action or making. That is, sometimes knowledge is theoretical and sometimes practical.

Theoretical philosophy comprises three sciences.

Natural philosophy which considers things into whose definitions matter and motion must enter; mathematics which considers things which can be defined without sensible matter though with no implication that they could exist in the world that way; metaphysics which considers what is and which exists without matter or motion. Thomas will add that some things are such that they sometimes exist in matter and sometimes do not, and exemplifies this with being, act, potency and the like. Other things, like God and the angels, never exist in matter. Metaphysics is concerned with the first as with its subject, and with the second as with the causes of its subject. Much of the task of the metaphysician is to establish senses of being, substance, act, potency, etc. which enable us to extend these terms to immaterial instances of them. This extension is by way of analogy.

Practical philosophy also comprises three sciences: ethics, economics, politics. These differ because of the different ends they pursue — the good of the individual, one's good as the member of a family which is shared with others, one's good as a member of the city, a good common to all citizens.

And logic? It is the method of the sciences.

Theology

The divine is considered by the philosopher only as the cause of being as being. God is known through his effects and named from them. God or immaterial substance could not be the subject of a philosophical science since we have no direct knowledge of Him or of angels. The fact of revelation opens up the possibility of a theology that can meaningfully be said to have God as its subject matter. Such a science is based on what God has told us of himself, what we otherwise would never know. Since we cannot *know* what God thus reveals, we accept it as true on the basis of faith, trusting the authority of the revealer. This theology, supernatural as opposed to natural theology, is based on the truth of what has been revealed as accepted by faith.

The most general way of contrasting philosophy — and the theology in which it terminates — with supernatural theology is as follows. The starting points or principles of philosophy are unarguable truths that everyone naturally knows. Philosophy presupposes the naturally and commonly known truths and its arguments will be persuasive to the degree that they build upon such truths. This is not to say that everyone has in mind an explicitly formulate list of self-evident truths. Nor of course is it to say that anything commonly said or thought is true. One of the tasks of the philosopher is to

uncover these basic presuppositions, to clarify them, not by proving them, but by laying them bare in such a way that we realize that we always knew them, they are implicit in anything we might think, much as we have been speaking prose all along without being reflectively aware of this. However distant from the ordinary philosophical discussions may become there must always be this Ariadne's thread connecting them with truths knowable by everyone.

How different philosophy has been in this regard since the fateful turn taken by Descartes. The Cartesian assumption is that everything we think might be false, that we do not at the outset have any warrant to claim we know something. Rather, candidates for knowledge must be subjected to scrutiny, passed through the acid bath of a method, and only if they emerge successfully do we have the right to say we know them. This approach has the unsettling implication that no one who is innocent of critical philosophy really knows anything. Real knowledge is the product of philosophy and prior to philosophizing knowledge is an illusion.

Which assumption is the right one? On the first view, there are truths presupposed to philosophy from which philosophy begins: they are not as true the products of philosophizing. The second view is the opposite. Do we simply choose one approach or the other and go on from there? That would make the whole enterprise depend on a random choice, arbitrary, relative. But the initial truths assumed by the first view cannot be proved. What can be done is to show that the second view is incoherent. There are several standard arguments that show that, despite his claims, Descartes does not and cannot doubt everything. Doubt can never be universal, anymore than falsity could be. The arguments to which I refer show that Descartes smuggles into his procedure what he professes to reject. For example, in order to hold meaningfully that his senses deceive him it must be the case that sometimes they do not. Everyone's senses sometimes deceive him but if this were taken always to be the case the very notion of deception is emptied of meaning. This is shorthand for a long discussion, but at least a gesture toward it is necessary lest we think that being an Aristotelian or being a Cartesian are two plausible choices and that we simply opt for one or the other. The Cartesian choice is impossible. That is all the proof the other, the right, approach can get, and that is all that it needs.

Supernatural theology differs from theology in this: that its starting points or principles are not what everybody naturally knows. Rather, its starting points are the mysteries of the faith, what is taken to be true not because it is understood but because God has told us it is true. The theology based on faith is a science which seeks to understand, or approximate understanding, of what has been revealed. But is it reasonable to believe to be true what we cannot in this life understand, truths such as the trinity of persons in God, the union of human and divine nature in Christ, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharists, etc.?

The Preambles of Faith

Revelation has been described as God's telling us things about himself that we cannot know in this life. Of course we can know that he has told us this or that, but accepting what is revealed as true is a matter of faith, not knowledge. The object of faith is what is incomprehensible to us in this life. Why do I hold that there are three persons in God? Because he has revealed it and it is taught by the Church he founded. The theologian can show that this claim is not nonsense, but he cannot demonstrate that it is true. But not being nonsense is no motive for belief. I believe what has been revealed, hold it in a way that is humbling for my intellect, because I have been promised that this acceptance is the way to eternal life. That is the ultimate motive. That by accepting the darkness of faith in this life we will eventually see God even as we are seen.

Something Thomas draws attention to again and again is that not everything God has revealed is beyond our ken. That revelation in the broad sense includes those truths about God that philosophers can know to be true — that God is one, that there cannot be more than one God, that God is the cause of all else. Thomas calls this the Preambles of Faith. These make up a small, largely implicit subset of what has been revealed. And they are important because they provide the basis for an argument that it is reasonable to accept the mysteries of the faith, those truths we cannot understand.

If some of the things that have been revealed are knowable — the preambles of faith — then it is reasonable to accept the mysteries of faith as true. This is an argument for the reasonableness of belief, not of the truth of the mysteries.

This makes it clear that the goal of philosophy is to know those truths which the theologian calls preambles of faith.

Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- Jacques Maritain, *Introduction to Philosophy*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956.
- *Selected Writings Thomas Aquinas*. London: Penguin, 1998, pp. 109-141.
- Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*. Philosophical Library: New York, 1944.

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Write a paper of at least five pages on the difference between the Thomistic view of philosophy and that of Descartes.

LESSON IV: FROM CONFUSION TO CLARITY

We now have a rough sense of the meaning that ‘philosophy’ has for Thomas Aquinas and a schematic outline of the disciplines that make it up. Philosophy, that is, is the term under which we gather a plurality of sciences or disciplines insofar as, over and above their particular aims, they are ordered to the acquisition of wisdom. Knowledge in general is the quest for the why of things, wisdom is the pursuit of the ultimate and comprehensive causes of the things that are. That is why philosophical wisdom is, for all practical — or theoretical — purposes, theology. It is such knowledge as human beings can acquire of God using their natural powers. This effort comes last for a number of reasons, most obviously because it depends on all the other disciplines either “for its being or for its well-being” as Thomas puts it.

The Way to Go

The various topics and arguments that make up the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas hang together because of his firm views on the order in which we come to know. And, since we name things as we know them, the seemingly limited vocabulary of Thomas will reflect this order providing a kind of Ariadne’s thread which enables us to see how later and extremely demanding discussions are anchored in the knowledge that is the common possession of mankind.

Man is a rational animal whose bodily senses provide his entry into the realm of knowledge. Sensations are gathered in images and in those images the mind discerns and abstracts the nature or essence of the things sensed. All our knowledge is grounded in this grasp of the material objects which surround us, so much so that it will become a question whether we can know anything that is not sensible and material.

Much more will be said of this, but for now we must concentrate on the things we first know and how we know them. Any discipline or science will bear on certain things as its subject matter and will seek to understand them by discovering the causes or principles of their being the way they are. And so it is with the quest for a science of the things of nature.

The natural way of doing this is to start from the things which are more knowable and clear to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature; for the same things are not knowable relatively to us and knowable without qualification. So we must follow this method and advice from what is more obscure by nature, but clearer to us, towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature. [*Physics*, I, 1]

The opening paragraphs of Aristotle’s *Physics* allude to certain methodological requirements and thus show the primacy of logic over other disciplines, including this most basic of disciplines, the science of natural things. Natural things. That is a latinization of ‘physical objects.’ Far from being technical terms, they mean simply: things that have come to be as the result of a change and are subject to change. The etymology both of the Greek and the Latin is obstetric: things that are born, things given birth. Mother Nature is very much in the wings.

Now, to say we want to study changeable things, things that come into and pass out of being as the result of a change, and while they undergo seemingly ceaseless change, does not seem to pick out a limited set of objects. Indeed, the range of the phrase is so sweeping that it is difficult to know how one might begin. Aristotle continues the above passage by suggesting that what is more knowable by us are rather confused masses, the elements and principles of which become known to us later by analysis. Thus we must advance from universals to particulars; for it is the whole that is more

knowable to sense-perception, and a universal is a kind of whole, comprehending many things within in, like parts.

That is, just as we first see an object without discerning its distinguishing characteristics, but as some thing, so the mind first understands things through the most general and universal descriptions and then proceeds gradually toward specific knowledge of them. “Similarly a child begins by calling all men father, and all women mother, but later on distinguishes each of them.”

This illustration makes clear that what will end up being a term which discriminates among males and females is first used by the child in a generic way insofar as other women are like the mother and other men are like the father. Of course this does not entail distinct knowledge on the child’s part of what a father or mother is.

The great methodological point involved is this. Our understanding of the things around us, the things that come and go and constantly change, begins with the most generic description of them, and an account of them on that generic level, after which we proceed to ever less generic analyses until, with luck, we grasp the specific essence. From first to last, what we are talking and thinking about are the singular things grasped by our senses. If we think and speak of them generically, there is no suggestion that there is a realm of things answering just as such to those generic descriptions. What answers to them are the singular things around us. Thomas will often point out that it was Aristotle’s criticism of Plato that he thought there must be levels of reality answering to the progressively less general grasp of singular things.

That is, if we gather all human beings under the name and concept ‘man’, there must be some ideal entity answering to Man as such, over and above the individual men of our sense experience. We will return to this issue which is traditionally known as the Problem of Universals.

This fundamental rule of procedure is the key to the arrangement of Aristotle’s natural writings, as Thomas makes clear in the proemium he wrote to the little work *On sense and the sensed object*. In the *Physics*, the initial or threshold inquiry of natural science, the whole realm of nature is considered in terms of its most general characteristics. Then, since some natural things are living and some are not, the inquiry branches off into the one or the other. Most of Aristotle’s natural writings are concerned with the life-word and with vital operations. Of course, the idea is that, in turning to living things, one presupposes what has already been established about the characteristics they share with the non-living, and goes on from there.

At this point, it might be well to address the astonishment you may be feeling. While there is little doubt that Thomas took the natural science of Aristotle quite seriously — without however engaging in it as such, in the manner of his mentor Albertus Magnus — you and I will find somewhat embarrassing the suggestion that all this has more than merely historical significance. If there is any received opinion of our time it is that advances in natural science have rendered such efforts as Aristotle’s ludicrously irrelevant. Indeed, the standard accounts of Copernicus and Galileo portray them as freeing themselves from the *a priori* limitations of Aristotelianism. Modern science represents a radical breach with everything that has gone before.

Such accounts are not without foundation. Aristotle’s cosmos and not just his account of projectile motion might strike us as a little cosy — but then the universe of Copernicus and Galileo is claustrophobic compared with our own expanding universe. The history of science is a vast subject, of course, and this is not the place to enter into a discussion of possible corrections to received

opinion. There is, however, a way in which we can see that something of what Aristotle accomplished in natural science can survive. Before turning to that, let me emphasize the importance for Thomism that this be the case. The vocabulary that emerges from the analysis of physical objects will be extended through a whole series of later philosophical discussions. If this initial analysis is nonsense, that would affect the totality of Thomas's philosophy. So it is no small matter to ask whether the analysis we are about to summarize has only historical interest.

Perhaps the best way to approach the question is through a distinction, often made, between pre-scientific and scientific knowledge. Some of the more exuberant celebrations of science suggest that its accounts completely replace the ordinary talk about the world that precedes it, the kind of talk we engage in before undertaking the study of science. All this commonsense talk about the world is set aside and replaced by scientific accounts.

A moment's reflection makes it clear that this is impossible. Some of the greatest scientists have been most concerned to relate the somewhat abstruse activities in which they engage with those that you and I — and they themselves — engage when they are not doing science. My favorite in this regard is the British scientist Arthur Eddington. He puts before us what may seem to be the choice we must make. On the one hand, he writes, there is the table on which he is writing the pages we read. It is there in his study, stable, solid, impenetrable — when he leans on it, his elbow does not go through it. Its coordinates are fixed, it faces north northwest. And so on. On the other hand, there is the scientific account of the table. Suddenly its solidity seems to evanesce, to be replaced by a swarm of electrons. Its size and shape alter under the gravitational pull of other bodies, it is porous and does not seem a promising support for a sheet of paper. And so on.

Eddington's question is then: which table is the true one? Or which description of the table is the true one? But we can see that an exclusive choice here is impossible. We need that everyday table as a point of reference for the scientific account. And the everyday table received and receives a true descriptive account which differs from the scientific account of that same table. Eddington's point can be put thus: far from supplanting and replacing our ordinary experience and talk of the world, science presupposes it.

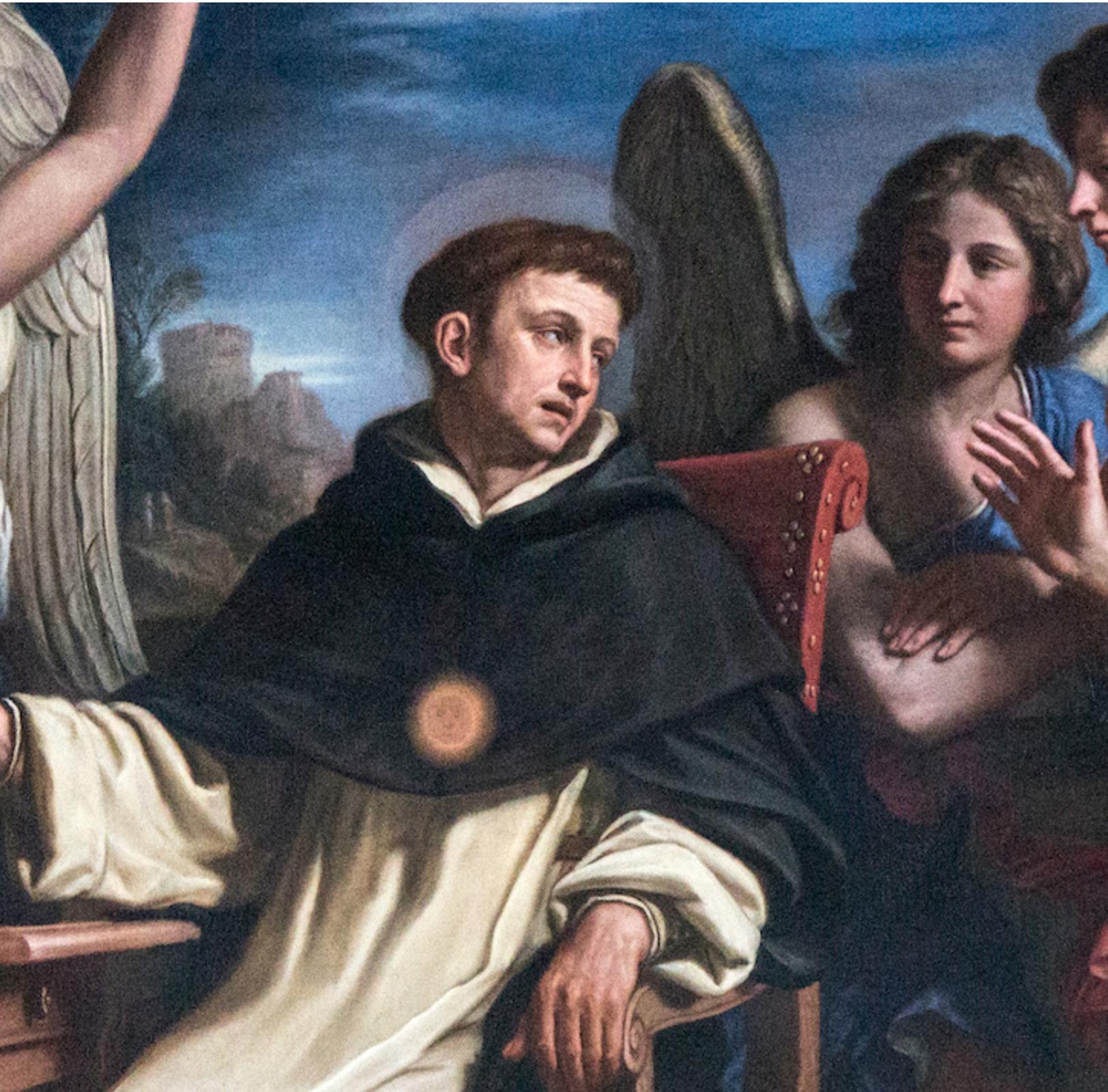
On the basis of this, I suggest the following. The approach to the world involved in the analysis of physical objects that Thomas learns from Aristotle can be called, in our terms, pre-scientific. By scientific we are likely to mean the application of mathematics to physical objects, so that the account of them is quantitative — how much, how fast, how long, how short, etc. etc. If Eddington is right, that quantitative approach presupposes and never wholly replace a familiar and qualitative knowledge and talk about the things of the world. The analysis of physical objects we are about to give is not quantitative. It relies on ordinary experience, easily duplicated. That is why, I suggest, that analysis and the terminology that arises from it is as good today as it ever was — and I think it is pretty good.

It is not meant to be a rival to our chemistry or physics. It is a first and most comprehensive analysis of changeable things. It is true, of course, that Aristotle and Thomas had no notion of the development of a quantitative science of the sort that has swamped all previous efforts, eclipsing them and seeming to render them in all their aspects obsolete. There is a lot that is obsolete in Aristotle's natural doctrine. But it is not obsolete through and through. Its opening analyses remain what they were, preliminary but illuminating accounts of what it means to come to be as the result of a change.

Below is a suggested assignment for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- William Wallace, *The Modeling of Nature*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996.



LESSON V: THE PHYSICAL OR NATURAL THING

What would you select as an example that could stand for any changeable thing such that your analysis of it would be applicable to any of them?

Just as the child's confused knowledge of adults employs 'father' and 'mother', so the analysis of things that come to be as the result of a change, physical objects, we proceed in terms of particular examples. But it is not what is particular or peculiar to them that is at issue, but what they convey that would be true of any other physical object.

Thomas wrote a careful commentary on the *Physics* of Aristotle late in his career, and as a quite young man he wrote *On the Principles of Nature* which is a swift summary of what is found at the outset of Aristotle's *Physics*.

After the preliminary remarks discussed in our previous lesson, Aristotle as is his custom, reviews what his predecessors have had to say on the question before him. This is a serious inquiry. Many of the accounts of natural change he brings forward might strike us as bizarre, but there is nothing condescending in Aristotle's treatment. Elsewhere, in the *Topics* and in the *Metaphysics* he discusses the propaedeutic value of exhibiting a decent respect for the opinions of mankind when undertaking an inquiry. It is his conviction, developed in Book Two of the *Metaphysics*, that no one can completely miss the truth of the matter, that even a false position can be beneficial to the later student. And, once he has completed his survey, which seems to have turned up a hodgepodge of opposed and conflicting views, Aristotle, acknowledging this, nonetheless asks if, beneath the surface differences, all these views contain any common notes. He finds that they do. Those common notes are two. Change takes place between contrary states, and it involves a subject of those states.

If these ideas force their way through what is opposed and distinctive in the opinions related, there is a chance they are well-founded. Of course, the claim is not that they are true because many have thought them to be true, however implicitly. Rather, the suggestion is that people have thought these things as if forced by the truth of the matter, that is, by the things being thought about. Nonetheless, all such a review and discernment of common elements is meant to provide is a suggestion as to where the truth of the matter may lie. Now Aristotle is prepared, taking into account the methodological remarks with which he began, to offer his own analysis.

We will now give our own account, approaching the question first with reference to becoming in its widest sense; for we shall be following the natural order of inquiry if we speak first of common characteristics, and then investigate the characteristics of special cases. (I, 7)

In order to do this, he needs an example. It is this: Man becomes musical.

It will be noted that, in seeking to analyze natural change, Aristotle selects an example of a human being acquiring a skill or art. He will of course distinguish art and nature, but at this point confusion is not to be disdained, and the fusion of the natural and artificial is all right, the distinction to be made later. The example has the great advantage of being more accessible than, say, a heliotrope turning sunward. "Man becomes musical" is of course generic, and could stand for little Lulu learning to tap dance, little Oliver acquiring competence on the harmonica, Ludwig taking lessons on the pianoforte. Some such concrete instance will be in our imagination as we proceed.

Man becomes musical is taken to stand for any change whatsoever, any instance of becoming. The first step in the analysis is to notice that the change can be expressed in a variety of linguistically

different ways:

1. Man becomes musical.
2. What is not musical becomes musical.
3. The not-musical man becomes musical.

That is, the subject of the sentence expressing the change may be simple, e.g. ‘Man’ and ‘not-musical’, or complex, e.g. ‘Musical man’ or ‘not-musical man.’

Another simple point. All the above expressions of the change exhibit the form “a becomes b.” But we also say, ‘from a, b comes to be.’ Is it possible to restate 1-3 in this second form?

- 1’ From man musical comes to be.
- 2’ From what is not musical the musical comes to be.
- 3’ From the not-musical man the musical comes to be.

If we feel any hesitation about these restatements, it is due to the fact that ‘from a, b comes to be’ suggests that a does not survive the change, and in the case of 1’ such an understanding would be quite wrong. Little Oliver does not cease to be when he has learned to play Taps on his mouth organ.

On this basis we can distinguish two senses of subject. On the one hand, there is the subject of the sentence expressing this change. On the other, there is the subject of the change itself. Here is a definition of the latter.

The subject of the change = def. That to which the change is attributed and which survives the change.

Only the grammatical subject of 1 expresses the subject of the change. In all other cases, what the grammatical subject expresses ceased to be when the change has occurred.

Any change involves a subject.

In any change, the subject comes to acquire a characteristic it did not previously have, indeed lacked. But being deprived of a characteristic and having that characteristic are contraries.

Thus, on the basis of his own analysis Aristotle concludes that, at a minimum, any change involves a subject and contraries. This coincides with what he took to be the implication of the various views of his predecessors. It is what they and he are talking about that explains this.

Another example produces a terminology which would characterize the thought of Aristotle and of St. Thomas Aquinas. When one whittles wood he gives it a shape it did not previously have. The wood is the subject, the shape is the new characteristic of which the wood was deprived prior to the activity of the whittler. What is new is the fact that the term wood (hyle), and shape (morphe) become canonical. And wood being materiel for construction, hyle comes into Latin as materia (though in the 12th century, the more literal sylva is found).

If change or becoming involves at least these three, a subject or matter, privation and form, the product of change is the compound of subject or matter and shape or form. That is the upshot of the analysis. Anything that has come to be is complex, made up of subject and shape, matter and form.

Substantial Change

The subject of a change survives the change and the changes we are likely to begin thinking of are such that their subjects are individuals in the world, like Oliver and Ludwig and Lulu. Because the

subjects exist before and after the change, the change is not all that radical. Little Oliver comes to be such and such, musical, as the result of the change, but he does not become Oliver *tout court*.

Sometimes the changes individuals undergo are qualitative, sometimes quantitative, sometimes they have to be with location. Because the subject exists prior to the change and survives it, such changes can be called incidental changes. That is, they involve things which are incidental to, rather than constitutive of, the subject. And soon we find ourselves asking about the subject. Is it possible to speak of it becoming or ceasing to be — not coming to be such-and-such (here or there, hot or cold, musical) but just coming to be.

Well, Oliver and Lulu and Ludwig were all born. There was a time when they absolutely were not. And though they are loath to think of it a time will come after which they absolutely are not. Is there substantial change as well as incidental change?

The response to that question is not to undertake to prove that there is such a thing as substantial change, but to point out that we already know there is.

We know that there are numerically distinct things in the world, things, substances. These are not mere aspects of other things; they enjoy an autonomous existence.

Furthermore, we know that such things come into being and pass out of being.

The task is not to prove these things, but to give an account of them. How should we proceed? On an analogy with the incidental changes we have already examined.

Prime Matter

What we have to get clear on is the subject or matter of a non-incidental or substantial change. In the case of incidental change, the matter is a substance that preexists and survives the incidental change. If substances come to be, and they do, and if our analysis of incidental becoming is any guide, we must be able to speak of the subject of substantial change.

By comparison with incidental change, we know that it cannot itself be a substance. If it were, whatever it acquired would be incidental to it, and the change would not be substantial. It would result in a substance having some incidental trait it previously lacked. But we are trying to speak of the absolute emergence of the substance.

If there is substantial change, and if every change involves a subject, and if the subject of substantial change cannot itself be a subject, it must be a subject without substantial determination. In order to underscore this and to distinguish it from the matter that is the subject of incidental change, we will call it Prime Matter.

Prime Matter is of course not an object of direct experience. It is a subject inferred from the givenness of the fact of substances and the fact that they come to be and cease to be. Added to this is taking the analysis of incidental change to be regulative, suggestive, analogous.

The Basic Vocabulary

One could go on. Suffice it for now to make two fundamental points.

First, these analyses, if they work, do so independently of anything we nowadays would call science. They are not put forward as the last word on anything, but the first word, the least we can say about becoming, incidental or substantial.

Second, the terminology that emerges will enjoy a long career in the philosophy (and theology) of

St Thomas Aquinas.

By the second I mean that ‘matter’ and ‘form’ will take on a series of different but related meanings such that later meaning will rely on our grasp of the analyses we have just looked at. Indeed, we can see that already in the case of incidental change, insofar as we use ‘form’ in speaking of change of place and size, a term whose primary sense is qualitative — the shape of a thing — is extended to place or magnitude.

When Aristotle explicitly says that we come to know the subject of substantial change on an analogy with that of incidental change, this is brought home to us. What we shall be seeing is that these terms and a handful of others are used analogically throughout and provide a unifying and clarifying feature to Thomas’s thought.

Act and Potency

Another couplet that shows up when becoming is analyzed is this. The subject of the change, prior to the change, can acquire, can have, potentially is, the state it acquires as the result of the change. Then it is said to have or be actually what before it was only potentially.

These terms as well, emerging from these quite simple and immediately accessible examples, will be with us throughout our presentation of Thomas’s thought.

Below is a suggested assignment for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- Thomas Aquinas, *On the Principles of Nature*. Penguin Classic Thomas Aquinas, p. 18 ff.



LESSON VI:

IMPLICIT PHILOSOPHY AND PRINCIPLES

It should be clear even from what we have said thus far that Thomas Aquinas's view of philosophy and philosophizing is very different from that which came into vogue with Descartes and still lingers on in contemporary thought where some confidence that knowledge of some basis or another is possible. Descartes' methodic doubt is put forward on the assumption that the claims to know that people make prior to employing the method, that is, prior to the formal engagement in philosophy, are dubitable.

By contrast, Thomas's view is that everyone knows things for certain prior to the study of philosophy, that these pre-philosophical certainties are the principles from which philosophy begins and which function as touchstones of all further knowledge claims.

We should not think of these contrasting views on how philosophy begins as a choice one makes, after which he proceeds in the one way or the other. The admonition to begin with universal doubt is one that cannot possibly be followed. It is not that some are severely critical and others hopelessly credulous. One of the long-established criticisms of Descartes is that he smuggles into his supposed universal doubt all sorts of undoubted knowledge claims without which the very notion of doubt would be voided of meaning. I can doubt if something is true only if I have knowledge of some truths. The stick bent in water is contrasted with the presumed standard view of it outside the glass. I am deceived into thinking it bent because I know it is straight — this recognition may come later and correct the false impression. But if I doubt the straightness of the stick as well I cannot explain what I mean by being deceived into thinking it bent.

There is only one way to start philosophy, then, and that is on the basis of things already known.

Common Sense

But surely it is an alarming suggestion that everybody already knows all sorts of things when we consider some of the things people think they know. Some people think they know men evolved from apes, others think they know we are a species of computer programmed to do the things we do, such that talk about free choices is really unwarranted. Some people think that people used to think the earth was flat. Some people think Galileo proved scientifically that the earth moves around the sun. Others think that gender is a sociological effect rather than a biological fact. And so on.

Reading letters to the editor, listening to talk shows on television or radio, overhearing others on airplanes can produce an astounding number of such items.

Does the view I am attributing to Thomas Aquinas entail endorsing claims like this, many of which contradict one another? What is so nonsensical, we might ask, that it could not become received opinion? Surely, we have to be critical before this mass of opinion, so Descartes seems to be recommending exactly what is needed. People think they know so many things which can be shown to be false.

Exactly. And the way we show them to be false is by appeal to other claims that no one can deny. If a given claim violates the principle of contradiction, out it goes as incoherent. There are criteria for appraising common sense claims that are embedded in them, presupposed by them. These principles pop to the surface as needed. We don't start life by inscribing on the top of p. 1 of our diary “-(p.-p)”

and then go on to comment on the weather, perhaps, noting that either it is raining or it isn't.

This suggests that one of the tasks of formal philosophizing with respect to these principles latent in all human thinking, because they are grounded in the things that are, is to articulate them, defend them against attack — by showing the incoherence of such attacks: they presuppose what they would reject — and the like.

Implicit Philosophy

These matters come up in a most interesting way in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. The Pope begins with the remark that in wishing to discuss philosophy and its relation to the faith, he is not addressing professional philosophers alone. To be a human being at all is to put certain questions to oneself, large questions, unavoidable questions. What are they? “Moreover, a cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?* [n. 1]” He goes on to note that a variety of philosophies have arisen over time and the vexed question arises as to what to make of this diversity. Conflicts between philosophical systems are obvious, sometimes fundamental differences as to starting point, as already mentioned. Still, there is a useful variety as well and different approaches can contribute to a cumulative effect impossible without the different systems.

This recognition of the plurality of philosophical systems and the need on occasion to judge among them, raises the question as to the criteria according to which such judgments are made. If the tenets of one system are used to appraise another, the reverse might almost be done and we would be left with such stand-offs as “To the Platonist, Aristotle is wrong on this that and the other thing” and “To the Aristotelian, Plato is wrong about this than and the other thing.” From which one might conclude that Plato was a Platonist and Aristotle an Aristotelian. So what?

What the Pope next does is thus of crucial importance. Not only does he remind us that there are certain questions no one can fail to ask, the fundamental questions, there are also answers to these questions that are common held! “Although times change and knowledge increases, it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole. Consider, for example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. These are among the indications that, beyond different schools of thought, there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an *implicit philosophy*, as a result of which all feel they possess these principles, albeit in a general and unreflective way. Precisely because it is shared in some measure by all, this knowledge should serve as a kind of reference point for the different philosophical schools. [n. 4]”

If people hold these principles in a general and unreflective way, implicitly, then formal philosophy will articulate and clarify such principles. In doing so it will be uncovering what we already know, not conferring new knowledge on us. These principles do not belong to one philosophical system or another; that is why they are reference points for them all. This means that when a proposed system runs afoul of these principles, it is the system that is at fault, not the world that has to be reconstructed. This indicates that the pluralism the Pope speaks of is not due to some unprincipled syncretism, an unwillingness to make serious judgments. There are philosophical approaches that are different and

complementary. But there are philosophical approaches which are radically flawed because they violate the principles of implicit philosophy.

A knowledgeable reader might find the paragraphs quoted disingenuous, particularly the second. It will occur to him that he or the Pope could give references to texts of St. Thomas which would make the point about the principle of contradiction, the freedom of human action, finality and causality. As for the moral norms, surely the Pope has in mind texts in the IaIIae of the *Summa theologiae*. The implicit philosophy can thus seem to be explicit Thomism and, despite what is being said, one system is being used to appraise others.

It is of course true that Thomas, like Aristotle, spends a lot of time reflecting on the principles of philosophy, those truths implicitly known by all which are the starting points of any further inquiry. The principle of contradiction, causality, finality, freedom, certain moral norms are starting points because, Thomas holds, they are self-evidently true — *per se notae*. That means they don't have to be proved. They do however have to be defended.

From the beginning human beings have a perverse tendency to wish to deny the obvious, to claim, for example, that contradictory claims can be simultaneously true. The dilemma we face here is that the position attacked is taken to be self-evidently true. That means it cannot be proved by something more evident — it is so evident in itself that no proof is required. But it is attacked. What can one do?

Such principles are defended by showing that the attack on them is incoherent. Denials of the principle of contradiction surreptitiously invoke the principle they would reject, thus rendering the rejection unserious.

Do we prove that we are free? Rather we show that the denial flies in the face of assumption the objector must make.

And so on. The act that a philosopher thus defends the first principles of the theoretical and practical order does not make these principles his in some proprietary sense. They are common. They belong to everything because they are grounded in the way things are.

Thomism

Such considerations as these underlie the somewhat surprising claim that Thomism is not a kind of philosophy. The reference is to its principles, its starting points, and its long association with the defense of self-evident principles in the theoretical and practical order, that is, of natural law. As the passages from *Fides et Ratio* make clear, however, these principles are in the common domain, the implicit philosophy possessed by all.

No doubt there are distinctive characteristics of Thomas's thought as it moves away from these first principles, but it is the fact that it is so manifestly anchored in them that gives it a universality that shares in and participates in the community of the principles themselves.

Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- *Selected Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, London: Penguin, pp. 643-645 (IaIIae.94.2).

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Present and comment on paragraphs 1-5 of *Fides et Ratio*.



LESSON VII: WHAT ALL MEN SEEK

In his prologue to the moral part of the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas reflects on the meaning of the truth that man is made in the image and likeness of God. In this man is unique among creatures of the sublunary world. All creatures are like their creator to some degree — as vestiges and shadows, as Bonaventure will say — but man shares in capacities that give him dominion over his own life. He has an intellect and free will and thus can both know that which is fulfilling of him and responsibly pursue it. Other terrestrial creatures are more directed than self-directing. A sign of this is that we do not blame creatures less than man when their actions cause harm.

You will object that you have just disciplined your Black Labrador, chiding him in much the same way as you do your children when they have tracked mud into the kitchen. “Shame on you,” you cried, and the beast cringed, as if accepting your moral verdict. Perhaps you beat him a bit as well. Ah, but you train your dog. Your children you raise. Pets who are trained bear the impress of their master’s mind, but his children have minds of their own and eventually will be held accountable in their own right. Doubtless parental influence will be felt in the long years ahead, but it does not function as the training of an animal does, nor is it ever the sole explanation of what one does.

The great mark of human action is the relevance to it of the question Why? Why did you do that? If you are asked why you plunged forward when tripped, you can explain what happens physiologically when equilibrium is suddenly lost. In your forthcoming book *The Fall of Man* you will present to the world the definitive treatise on tripping and falling. But when Larry King asks you if only human beings are susceptible to tripping and falling you will say no and treat him to a number of anecdotes about grounded antelopes and giraffes, to say nothing of dogies lassoed and wrestled to the ground. Of course human beings utter disedifying things as they are crashing to the ground, but were you to cite this as the mark of distinctively human tripping and falling, your fundamental honesty would get in the way of enthusiasm for the claim. To fall when tripped and to utter lines from Ovid on the way to the ground are two very different kinds of act.

Thomas suggests that we use the phrase “acts of man” to cover those activities which are truly predicable of a human person *but not precisely insofar as he is human*. Any animal with pedal extremities can be tripped up. Man has pedal extremities. When tripped he falls. Willy nilly. It is something done to him, not something he does. We neither praise him nor blame him for the way he falls — unless of course if he is a movie stunt man. Then his falling is artful and intended and worthy of the Oscar he limps home with.

Men grow and take nourishment. Our eyes see and our ears hear. Much the same can be said of your plants and your pets, respectively. The bloodshot eye of your Labrador follows you about the room, an ear twitches and lifts. At the same time that Thomas speaks of what sets the human agent off from all others, he is insistent on the way in which man is inserted into the material cosmos. He is in fact that cosmos writ small, a microcosmos, in whom all the lower levels are present and at the service of what sets the human agent off from other animals and plants and inorganic things. The levels of our nature become important when we ask what is our good.

“Acts of a man” could be distinguished into those which are the operation in us of powers we share with plants and animals; these just go on without our notice but still it is our digestive system that is at work, our respiratory system, our circulatory system, and so on. It is the mark of these that we are not held accountable for them just as such. Our metabolism is not the creature of our choice.

You will object that we do many things to affect these natural activities — diets, medicine, exercise, transplants — and this blurs the distinction the phrase “acts of a man” is meant to make. *Au contraire*, *mon brave*. But we will return to this most important demur.

If it is a mark of “acts of a man” that we are not praised or blamed for them, we will want to distinguish between the normal or abnormal working of our digestion, say, for which we get neither credit nor blame, and the unintended effects of our deliberate choices. You go to the supermarket and find that Tom & Jerry’s alleged ice cream is on sale. You put a carton of it in your basket. A week later, watching *War and Peace* on your VCR, you pause the film and fetch the carton of ice cream. Some time later, as Pierre is wandering about the battlefield at Bordolino, something resists your chewing. You pluck it from out mouth and drop it into an ash tray. It is not until the next morning that you notice it is a massive diamond ring. The sequel to this intriguing event calls out for a story teller, but we will leave such matters to courses in creative writing. How you tracked down the owner of the ring, now a fetching widow, how Tom and Jerry sent the two of you on an extended and much ballyhooed honeymoon cruise, the tragic loss of your bride when she leaned over too far in examining the crater of Vesuvius — over all this we will draw a veil. All that interests us for the nonce is the fact that in buying a carton of ice cream you become the startled finder of a valuable diamond ring. Is this good or bad? Well, good or bad what? The word that occurs is luck. And luck suggests the absence of any intelligible link between what you did — what you knowingly and freely did, viz. buy ice cream — and come into possession of a diamond. If you descended on Martin’s Supermarket and bought up the entire supply of Tom & Jerry’s on the assumption that you would find another diamond, we would think you mad. (We exclude the promotional possibility that every one hundred thousandth carton contains a diamond.) The conjunction of your buying ice cream and finding a diamond is accidental. You intended the one but not the other, yet the other would not have come about if you did not buy that ice cream.

Such fortuitous results of our choices are the boon and bane of human life.

If “acts of a man” can be subdivided in the way just suggested, a third type of action seems to present a quite different problem. We have called these technical acts — that is the deeds of a second baseman, a bank teller, a lab worker, a cellist, a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker. Most of the acts we appraise, blaming or praising, are of the kind we are calling technical, and to say that they are done will or ill is clearly not moral appraisal. Yet these are deeds done in full knowledge and freedom. They are thus indisputably human acts. Yet they are not moral. So what? St. Thomas equates human acts and moral acts. Is he wrong?

Imagine a ball player whose accomplishments during his active career far exceed those of anyone other in his position. The time comes for him to be elected to the Hall of Fame. No one questions his feats as a baseball player but now it comes to light that his hobby is tearing the wings off bees. It further comes to light that high in the mountains of Tennessee his parents are living in abject poverty while he lives high off the hog in Nashville. What kind of son is this? Sportswriters wax eloquent with the moralistic fervor fueled by their own deficiencies. Keep Al out of the Hall of Fame becomes the watchword.

Does admission to the Hall of Fame involve a moral as well as an athletic verdict? However we answer this, we must distinguish between the two. We would do this even though it is the same act that is morally and technically appraised. Al blocks the runner coming from first and turns a double play. In the course of doing this he drives his spikes into the wrist of the runner seeking desperately

to touch second base. The internal damage is severe, the only support of his sainted mother is driven into premature retirement, Al is the MVP of the game, the league, the season. Now we know Al and we know the spiking was deliberate. So the same deed that got the runner out and was prelude to the double play that won the game and put the team in the playoffs gets high marks in baseball and moral condemnation.

Our suggestion is this: any act that is subject to a technical appraisal is also subject to a moral appraisal. Further, the moral appraisal is more basic and pervasive. Not every moral act is subject to a technical appraisal. The technical appraisal bears on a human act but not in terms that are most fundamental to it as moral.

Every human act is undertaken for the sake of an end which has the character of a good. For Aristotle, it is self-evident that there is some all comprehensive end for the sake of which we act, an end sought for its own sake and not for the sake of something further. If there were no such ultimate end, Aristotle argues in his *Ethics*, Book One, chapter two, no act would make sense since every act would be ordered to some further end and so on *ad infinitum*.

Thomas's establishment of an ultimate end for human actions is similar but in many ways even simpler. The good that is sought in any act is never goodness itself, but some element or portion of it. In acting I am thus implicitly seeking the complete and comprehensive good even as I pursue this or that good. I pursue them *as good, sub ratione boni*, and that means as conducive to or part of the comprehensive good.

For both Aristotle and Thomas, an ultimate end is the condition of our action making sense at all. Both of these ways of establishing the ultimate leave open what exactly it is. That is why Thomas will call what he has done to this point providing the *ratio ultimi finis*. That is, what the phrase means. If it is common to all human agents that for them to act at all presupposes the ultimate end, there is great disagreement as to what precisely realizes the notion of ultimate end.

Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- *Summa theologiae*, IaIIae, q. 1, articles 4 through 8.

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Do a careful analysis of Thomas's commentary on Aristotle's argument for an ultimate end: *In I Ethic.*, lectio 2.

LESSON VIII: SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

If all human actions are undertaken for the sake of some end, the structure of human action will of course be centered on the end but involve as well the ways and means the agent chooses in order to secure the end. Acts of will follow on cognition: we cannot want what we do not know. (This doesn't mean that our wants presuppose highly distinct and detailed knowledge; but without at least vague knowledge, our desire would be directionless and unformed.)

Acts Bearing on the End

The will acts which bear on the end are three. The first is called by the same name as the faculty, will or *voluntas*, and it is the initial appetitive response to the recognition that something is fitting or desirable to the agent. Dozens of such recognitions flutter by the mind in a matter of minutes, and apart from its initial response, the will remains unengaged by the vast majority of them. Sometimes, however, it dwells on something recognized as good and responded to accordingly. One takes *pleasure* in the thought of the desired end. But this could be the end of the story — sleep intervenes or one of the many distractions of waking life, or one's conscience, and we turn our mind to something else. If we do not, pleasure can give rise to *intention*. We make the good a project and thus are ready to seek the means to achieve it.

Thomas distinguishes three will acts bearing on the means. The mental activity that precedes is of course a search for ways to attain the intended end. As these are discerned, will gives its consent. But then it must choose among them. (Of course if there is only one way to achieve the end, the distinction between consent and choice will not be discernible.) A third will act is called Use — but we must make another distinction before considering it.

The Order of Intention

The various will acts bearing on the end, and those bearing on means, are constituents of a complete human act. Since not every good leads on to a completely human act, and indeed the action may be cut off at various points, it is these interruptions that bring home to us the elements or constituents of an act. In a smoothly performed action one would scarcely be aware of these various stages. It will be seen that most of this goes on without any overt manifestation of it. This is the Order of Intention — the term not of course restricted to the will act bearing on the end — and it includes all the inner drama whereby we identify ourselves, our wills, more and more profoundly with something presented as a good, as desirable. Where this is only an apparent good, the inner drama involves our becoming morally identified with a false good. Even if, for whatever reason, we do not continue to the complete action, our moral character is shaped by this inner drama. What victories might be won and what defeats suffered without so much as the flicker of an eyelash.

The Order of Execution

This is not a directive from the governor's office, but the complement and continuation of the order of intention. The general rule is this: what is last in the order of intention, is first in the order of execution. When we have arrived at the best means here and now of achieving the desired end, our choice of it initiates a number of overt moves — we step forward, our hand goes out, one arm encircles her waist, in a moment we are whirling about the floor, the heiress in our arms, our confederates with appropriate sacks and soporifics lurking at the far end of the dance floor . . .

Use is the will act which employs and commands our limbs. But we also use our inner faculties in pursuit of an end.

Elicited / Commanded

The will acts that are constituents of the complete act, which make up the states of the order of intention, are just that, acts of the will. As opposed to what? Well, if I nod my head and do so willingly, intentionally, as at an auction, I am soon the possessor of a Ming vase. The nod of my head is voluntary. But my will is one thing, my neck muscles another. In what sense can nodding my head be called an act of will, voluntary? As commanded. As the response of the body to the directives of the will. Hence the distinction between elicited and commanded acts of will.

Reason, since it is presupposed to acts of will, is the first principle of the practical order. It is reason's judgment as to what should be done which will be regulative in the practical order. Of course, human reason is not in every way a first principle, as if the human mind decided what the good for man is, invented it, decreed it. Our mind is a measured measure, and rectitude in the practical order depends first on our knowing what truly constitutes our good and thus what promotes and what thwarts it. There are certain truths in the practical order, like those in the theoretical order, the order of knowing as such, that are immediately seen to be true. Discourse always depends upon and goes back to truths of this kind.

As for theoretical thinking, Thomas, having distinguished the mental act whereby we grasp what a thing is, its nature, and the mental act whereby we affirm or deny a predicate of a subject, says that there is a first in both cases. No one can fail to grasp being; whatever we think of is brought under the notion of 'that which is' or 'what exists.' Every other idea or concept presupposes this one; that is what is meant by saying it is first. No one can fail to see that we cannot simultaneously affirm and deny the same predicate of the same subject. This is presupposed by any other judgment that we make; that is what is meant by saying it is first. 'The broom is in the closet' cannot be true at the same time as 'The broom is not in the closet,' assuming we are speaking of the same broom and the same closet.

If it is like that with thinking in general, there is an analogue in the practical order. To grasp something as good is to grasp a being seen as desirable. A good thing is by that very fact desirable, choosable. That is why we immediately see that we should pursue the good and avoid evil. Such a recognition is so obvious as scarcely to need stating. But it is worth stating because, however sweeping and vague it is — as indeed is 'It is impossible to affirm and deny the same predicate of the same subject at the same time' — it serves to anchor practical discourse in something nongainsayable. No one could possibly think otherwise. Are there more informative guidelines?

Natural Law

Natural law comprises the first self-evident principles or precepts of the practical order. And that is what we have been talking about. We have at least one such precept: Do good and avoid evil. And we had asked if there are others. What Thomas does at this point is not so much list a series of self-evident precepts as to point out the basis for their formulation.

What we cannot not will is the good. Will follows on intellect which grasps the universal, so the good desired is comprehensive, not this good or that, but goodness as such. How can we articulate our good? Thomas suggests that we consult our natural inclinations.

Inclinations are natural when we have them whether we like it or not. They are not chosen. They

follow on what we are. But in thinking of what we are we notice that we are a microcosm. I don't mean that this occurs explicitly but what we recognize about ourselves is, at first, what we can recognize as true of things other than humans. Thus, we share with all things a natural inclination to preserve ourselves in being. We share with other animals an urge to sexual congress and having young. As men we are made for the society of others and our desire for knowledge is an implicit desire for knowledge of God.

A set, an ordered set, of natural inclinations; givens. They are not of course precepts that must be followed, as if natural law consisted of some such list as "Preserve yourself," "Get married," "Take out citizenship" and "Know!" Rather, these inclinations indicate constituents of our comprehensive good, but the pursuit of them is only moral when it is conscious and willing, ordering them to our comprehensive good. That we should seek knowledge must be understood in the light of our overall good. The pell-mell and heedless pursuit of knowledge could be ruinous. And of course the same is true of the rational direction of our attraction to the opposite sex and desire to have children. No element of our good trumps all the others; it is our comprehensive good that is the measure.

This can disappoint us if we expected Thomas simply to make a list. Of course there are lists, and one he draws attention to is the Decalogue, whose precepts he takes to be precepts of natural law. Negative precepts, like Don't lie, rule out any instance of lying, and thus may seem easier of application than such affirmative precepts as Honor your parents. They can both be difficult of application, but in different ways. Sometimes not telling another what we know may arguably not be a lie. And taking innocent life may not in every instance be murder. For all that, Don't lie and Don't murder are exceptionless norms.

The task of the human agent is not of course simply to think straight in general but to think straight in the here and now application of principles. For this to happen our appetites must be responsive to right reason: the good we cognitively recognize has to be the good of our appetite, something that requires habitual attending to it, that is, virtue.

Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- Ralph McInerny, *Ethica thomistica*.

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Give an account of Thomas's treatment of intemperate action in his commentary on the *Ethics*, Book Seven, lessons 1 through 3.

LESSON IX: FACT AND VALUE

It was David Hume who offhandedly wondered how it was that arguments whose premisses feature Is should be thought to yield valid conclusions featuring Ought. How from observations about the way things are can we conclude anything as to what should be, or what we ought to do? The doubt once admitted, it soon is extended to the claim that there is no logical link between descriptive and evaluative statements. If there is any assumption that dominated twentieth century ethics it is this notion of a fact / value split.

G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* appeared in 1903 and introduced the notion of the Naturalistic Fallacy. This newly discovered fallacy consists in holding that such moral terms as good and ought are grounded in truths about the way things are. If one were to say that 'good' means xyz, where xyz are natural properties of the thing called good — imagine the thing is an orange and its goodness is said to consist in sweetness, juiciness and tartness — then, because a definition can always be substituted for the definiendum, to say that x is good means xyz because xyz is xyz, substituting xyz for 'orange.' In other words, any attempt to define what is meant by calling something good by appeal to its natural properties will end in a tautology.

The example Moore considers is identifying good with pleasant. But on his understanding of definition, this leads to the tautology 'the pleasant is pleasant.'

So what do we mean when we say that an orange is good? If 'good' does not pick out any of the natural properties of the orange, what does it mean? Moore suggests that it means a non-naturalistic property that we intuit in the way in which we intuit the naturalistic property yellow. Either you see it or you don't.

There were those who were flattered by the suggestion that they and their friends just knew what 'good' means. The fact that this could not be explained to someone who lacked the putative intuition merely drew attention to the perhaps lamentable but doubtless inevitable chasm between Them and Us. It is not too much to say that 20th century English speaking moral philosophy was dominated by the fact / value split. Whatever the variation in accounts of morality, there was avoidance of any suggestion that evaluations were grounded in truths about ourselves and the world.

Thomas and the Split

So influential was this assumption that there were those who sought to protect Thomas Aquinas from the charge that he had violated the fact / value dichotomy. This was somewhat anachronistic, of course, but the undertaking attests to the assumption that any account of moral action, its goodness and badness, that is anchored in the way things are is fallacious and vitiated. Holding this, friends of St. Thomas undertook to show that he had not committed the fallacy.

It is doubtless unwise to accept the fact / value split as good money and apply it to past thinkers as a kind of touchstone of acceptability. A moment's reflection would suggest that Hume had a very different understanding of the natural than Thomas or, for that matter, most classical thinkers. For Hume, nature seems to be inert, just there. On that basis it does seem daunting to ask what this or that inert blob should be. But what nature means is an inner principle of activity. A thing tends toward that which is fulfilling of it, and that is the aim of its natural tendencies. When we ask how the digestive system ought to work we ask what its nature is, what it is for. Intuitions of goodness seem singularly irrelevant.

Of course the committed fact / value dichotomist, so to speak, is unimpressed by this. Such uses of oughts are not at all like the moral ought; they can, as suggested, be linked and grounded in descriptive truths but that is because such a use of ought is itself just a disguised descriptive phrase. When I say that the digestive system ought to operate in a certain way I am merely calling attention to the way in which by and large it operates. The moral ought, moral goodness, are left untouched by this analysis.

The Fallacy of the Fallacy

Peter Geach eventually pointed out how the supposed naturalistic fallacy is itself based upon a fallacy. Geach draws attention to the difference between what he calls attributive and predicative adjectives. A predicative adjective he exemplifies by “That is a yellow bird” which comes down to saying that That is a bird and it is yellow. The attributive adjective can be exemplified by “He is a good cook.” This does not come down to saying that he is a cook and he is good. A sign of this is that we would not conclude from “He is a good cook” and “A cook is a person” that “He is a good person.”

Subjects have a claim on the predicative adjective independently to the noun it modifies. But the attributive adjective adheres to the substantive it modifies and takes its meaning from that adherence. Bernard Williams has summed this up as follows.

Since ‘good’ in this sort of construction is intimately connected with the substantive that it qualifies, the meaning of a phrase of the form ‘a good x’ has to be taken as a whole; and its meaning is partly determined by what fills the place of ‘x’.

Moore took ‘good’ to be predicative, naming some single simple non-natural property whatever the make-up of the thing called good. Geach reminds us — only philosophers need such reminders — that to call something good is inextricably linked to what that something is. If you are assured that a given car is a good one and within a block of the dealer’s the wheels have rolled off, the transmission has dropped to the street and the steering wheel comes loose in your hands, your lawyer will scoff at the wily dealer’s suggestion that he wasn’t thinking of any of these things when he called the car good. What was he thinking of? He wist goes limp, he rolls his eyes and lisps, “A simple non-natural property.” The answer makes clear that the book in his office is the *Principia Ethica* swaddled in the dust jacket of *Tom Sawyer*.

In claims courts, the naturalistic fallacy is committed every day. This suggests that it isn’t a fallacy to think that when we call something good we are recommending it because of certain natural properties it has, properties which stir the will. The Moorean alternative is fantastic.

When Geach talks of attributive adjectives like ‘good’ he makes clear that the substantive it modifies plays a role or function. A car may have many attractions but basically it is a vehicle and to call it a good one is to imply that it does well what a vehicle is expected to do. So too with good cooks and bakers and candlestick makers. And so too, Aristotle said, with men, with human agents.

The human function is rational activity and that is polyvalent: there are many constituents of the human good, as our remarks in the previous lesson about natural inclinations show.

The Point

Why dwell on this old theory of Moore? Geach’s essay did not stop the slide toward moral relativism and nihilism. What remained and intensified is the assumption that our value judgments cannot be justified by appeal to the way things are. (Some generalized this over all judgments, theoretical as

well as practical). But then what does justify our saying that X is good rather than X is bad? Nothing. Such judgments are arbitrary, expressions of will.

Dealing with such philosophical views is painstaking. My point here is simply to indicate the kind of intellectual context in which we now find ourselves. To say that Thomas's views are countercultural is an understatement.



LESSON X: ALL THE THINGS THAT ARE

In the panoramic description of philosophy that Aristotle gives at the outset of his *Metaphysics* he makes us aware of the fact that ‘philosophy’ is an umbrella term that covers a number of different disciplines or sciences — logic, mathematics, natural science, ethics, etc. — yet having an overall telos as well. That is, it is not just a jumble of different inquiries, unrelated to one another, but rather an ordered set of disciplines which aim at a culminating inquiry — in the divine.

On this basis, we can say that the goal of philosophy is theology. This is an internal goal. The theology based on Sacred Scripture may be thought of as the external goal of philosophy, the mistress to whom philosophy is handmaiden, but there is an intrinsic theology to philosophy and it is the point of the whole enterprise.

Does this mean that we will find among Aristotle’s works one devoted exclusively to the divine? Does this mean that theology is a separate discipline like geometry or arithmetic or natural science? Well, why not? Geometry has its subject matter, so does arithmetic, and so does natural philosophy. What is to prevent there being a science whose subject matter is the divine?

What prevents it is the fact that we have no access to the divine of the kind that would be required for it to be the subject of a science. We would have to have a definition of God, for one thing. But all our talk about God is oblique and indirect, dependent on our knowledge and talk of other things, which are more easily accessible by us.

What we find as the wisdom toward which philosophy tends is the unwieldy treatise that later editors dubbed the *Metaphysics*, fourteen books which have given scholars trouble for two millennia.

Being as Being

The science that is beyond physics, beyond mathematics, is said to have for its subject matter being as being, Natural philosophy has mobile being, being as subject of motion, as its subject matter. Mathematics has quantified being, discrete or continuous quantified being, as its subject matter. By contrast with them, there is said to be a third theoretical science whose subject is being as being.

What can that mean? If natural philosophy is concerned with a kind of being and mathematics with another kind, it sounds as if we now have a science that is concerned with every kind of being, with all the things that are. How can everything function as the subject of a science? Insofar as it is being. This science is also said to consider matters which cannot reasonably be said to fall to any particular science. For example, while any science invokes the principle of contradiction, it seems no more or less appropriate that natural science should analyze and defend it than should mathematics. These left-over and somewhat unwieldy matters are the concern of metaphysics because it is the science of being as being.

The difficulty with this portrayal of metaphysics is that it seems to run counter to some rock bottom Aristotelian convictions. If I know a flowering dogwood only in terms of what it has in common with all other trees, this is more common, general, and less proper knowledge of the dogwood. Success here would be to know dogwood as dogwood, in its specificity. And needless to say to know it only as a plant, or as a substance, would be even more general and inadequate knowledge of the dogwood.

Universal or general knowledge is where we begin, not where we end. We first of all know things vaguely and in general and then move gradually toward specific knowledge of them.

Well, you can see the difficulty created by talk of knowing everything insofar as it is being. Being

sounds like the first, more general and vague thing you could say about anything. Metaphysics thus seems to put a premium on the most general knowledge in a way that seems to conflict with the general rule about how the human mind advances in knowledge — *from* the more universal.

Being Is not Univocal

Another obstacle to ‘being as being’ functioning as the subject of a science is that ‘being’ is not a univocal term, and this is required of the subject of a science lest it fall into the fallacy of equivocation. This is a difficulty that Aristotle moves swiftly to solve.

If we had but two choices with respect to how common terms function, either univocally or equivocally, we would face an impasse. ‘Being’ is not a univocal term. If it is an equivocal term, we wouldn’t know which of its meanings was at issue in any analysis or argument, and this would vitiate discourse.

As it happens there is a third possibility. Some terms are common to many in such a way that, though they have a plurality of meanings as do equivocal terms, their meanings form an ordered set in which one of them is primary and explanatory of the others. ‘Man’ is a term shared by Socrates, Alcibiades and you and it gets the same account or definition in each use. ‘Log’ is said of the captain’s book and what is floating down the river to the mill, and receives quite different accounts in those two uses, much as ‘pick’ applied to the iceman’s tool and your selection of Fifi LaRue as Miss America receive quite different accounts. We could scarcely think there could be an inquiry into or science of log and pick that could surmount this diversity of meanings. But Aristotle reminds us of such examples as ‘healthy.’

Healthy is a term common to many things which receives different accounts in its different uses. We speak of a healthy Labrador, a healthy coat, a healthy diet, and while it is clear that ‘healthy’ receives different accounts in each of these uses, those accounts are not wholly different. How so?

When I say that your Labrador is healthy I mean something like health is a quality he has.

When I say his coat is healthy I mean something like it is a sign of his having health or being healthy.

When I say his diet is healthy I mean it aims to preserve his health.

Here there is an ordered set of meanings. One is primary — having health — because it is invoked to explain the other accounts.

Aristotle’s point is to liken ‘being’ to ‘healthy.’ We can have a science of healthy because we have a focal meaning of the term, and clarity about that enables us to explain its other meanings.

But ‘being’ too is said in many ways, just as ‘healthy’ is. There is a primary meaning of ‘being’ and it is substance. If I call a quality or quantity or motion being, I must refer to substance since all of these are inherent in it and dependent on it.

Moving right along, Aristotle suggests that there is a science of being as being and, for reasons just given, its will be primarily about substance, the first and controlling meaning of the term.

Like so many of Aristotle’s momentous solutions, this one turns on the most obvious facts about our language, about how some common terms behave. Who could fail to grasp the example of ‘healthy’? ‘Being’ is like that, Aristotle notes, and a whole set of obstacles are swept away.

But not all.

Is Substance Univocal?

The answer would seem to be yes, obviously. Substance is a category, a category is a supreme genus, a genus is that which is predicated univocally of its species. It would seem, then, that the obstacle posed by ‘being’ as a possible subject of the supreme science is removed when we see that ‘being’ means primarily substance and that the science of being as being can concentrate on substance.

The difficulties arise when we ask what ‘substance’ is univocally common to. Is it univocally common to bodily substances and separated substances? Is it univocally common to bodily things and God?

Here is the summary difficulty for what Aristotle is apparently trying to do in setting up a science of being as being:

Insofar as it is considered a common science, a consideration of what is true of the physical objects which have been the concern of natural philosophy, it seems either redundant or to put a premium on the general and vague.

Insofar as it is the culminating science of philosophy and is chiefly concerned with the divine, there is a twofold difficulty:

- the divine cannot be the subject of a science
- nothing is univocally common to the bodily and the divine

Pierre Aubenque has posed the dilemma of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* in a not wholly dissimilar way.

- The subject of metaphysics is being as being.
- The subject of a science must be a genus.
- Being is not a genus.

These are not difficulties to be rushed by, as if they were mere bumps on the road. It is a feature of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* that it seems in search of its subject rather than in possession of it from the outset. Aristotle speaks almost wistfully of ‘the science we are seeking.’

Let us put the difficulty in as stark a way as we can:

If metaphysics is a most general science it cannot be univocally universal enough to include the divine in its subject matter. How then can the philosophical quest achieve its goal, which is knowledge of the divine?

God as Cause of Being as Being

There is a science of being as being and we seek its causes. This suggests that the first causes of being are not considered to fall under that apparently commodious subject. For all that, the task of metaphysics would appear to be to analyze natural substance in search of what might be said of it, not as natural substance, but simply as substance. Why? Not to say more profound things about material substance, but rather to fashion a vocabulary that will be applicable to immaterial substance.

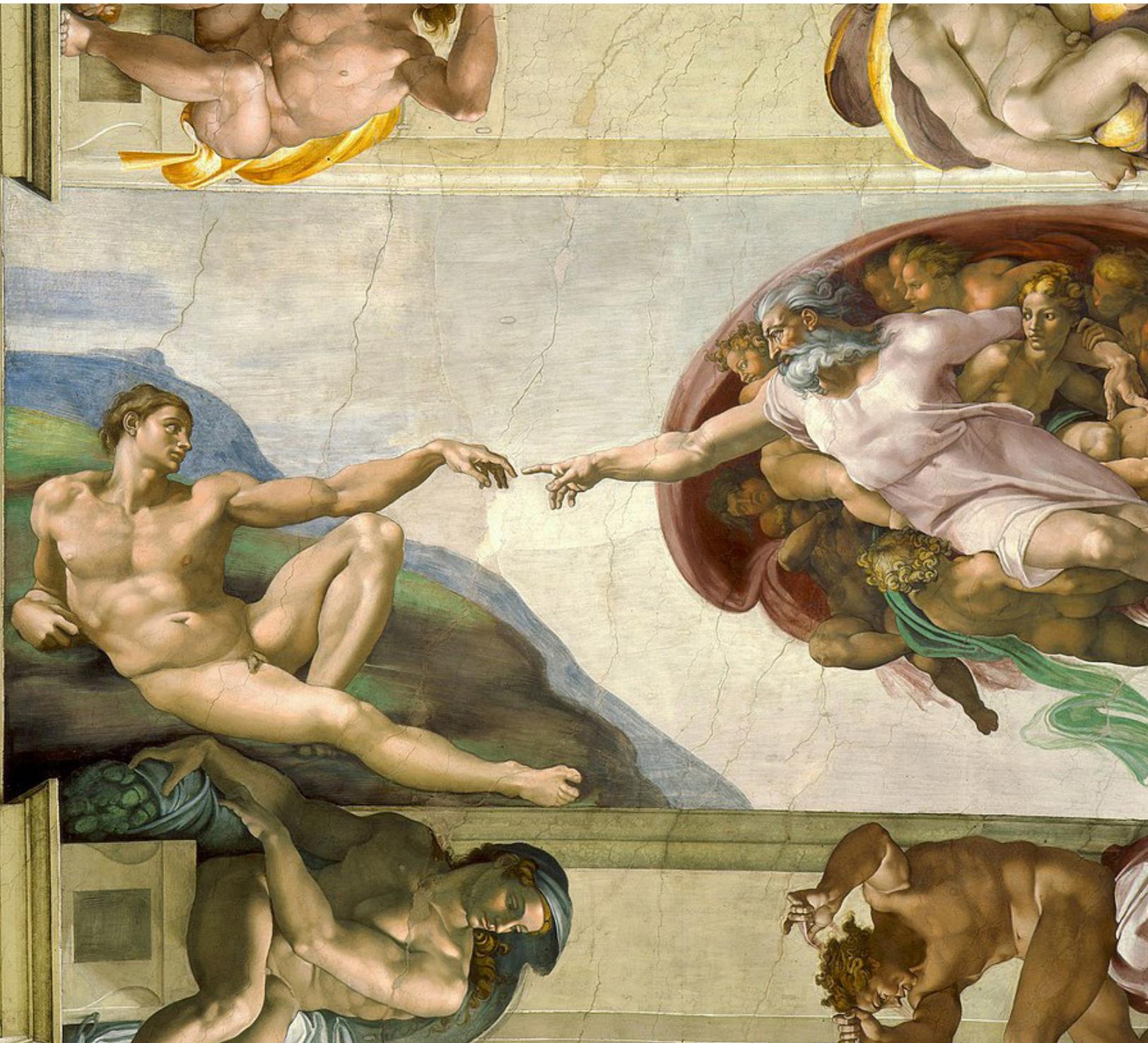
Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Write a review of *Veritatis Splendor*.



LESSON X: THE DIVINE NAMES

Concern with our knowledge of God and the reach of our language in speaking of him is not of course confined to philosophical inquiry. No one can read Thomas's careful commentaries on Aristotle without sensing his profound admiration for the Greek thinker. It was as if Aristotle represented for Thomas what the unaided human mind can do. Thomas was severe with those he took to be distorting the thought of Aristotle. There is a profound sense in which, as a philosopher, Thomas is an Aristotelian. This does not mean that he was a member of a fan club nor that he was interested in what Aristotle had to say because Aristotle said it. To the sometimes consternation of modern philologists, Thomas was interested in the truth or falsity of what Aristotle said, the force of his arguments, the ability of his position to defeat radical alternatives to it. No matter how often he cites Aristotle as the Philosopher, Thomas was not interested merely in historical truth, the accuracy of ascribing certain positions to Aristotle. He was interested in such questions, of course. His little polemic against the Averroist interpretation of Aristotle's *De anima* is there for anyone to read. But once he had settled the textual or historical question to his satisfaction, Thomas goes on to ask if what Aristotle says is true. As Father Chenu pointed out, Thomas in his commentaries is interested in the *intentio* as well as the *verba* of the text. In short, he is as commentator engaging in the same activity as the author of the text he comments on. Nowhere is his assumption of the truth of Aristotle's teaching more evident than in Thomas's discussion of the divine names.

Knowing and Naming

However much one must admire the achievements of Aristotle in the matter of knowing and speaking of God — the whole point of philosophy, we remember — philosophical theology must seem thin beer when compared to the richness of revelation. As a theologian, Thomas pored over Scripture with an attention surpassing that he devotes to any philosophical text.

We have spoken earlier of Thomas's teaching on the trajectory of human knowing, the natural progression from knowledge of sensible things to non-sensible things. This order is observed rather than abrogated by divine revelation. God tells us about himself in our language whose words have their own history and origin. Christ tells stories which rely on the common knowledge of the things of this world, of the relationship between father and son, planting and harvesting, fishing, and so on. The parables have as their point, not to tell us what we already know, but to employ what we know to point to truths we would not otherwise know. The language of Scripture generally, the parables more particularly, and most especially the Incarnation and the Sacraments display the way the naturally known is put to a higher purpose. Our knowledge of God is expanded considerably by revelation, but the *way* God is spoken of recalls the extrapolated language of the philosopher. Thus, in speaking of the divine names, Thomas will first say things true of both philosophical and theological naming of God.

The Divine Names

The question implicit in any discussion of the names of God is this: how can words or names be common to creature and God? God is wise, but 'wise' is a word that is applied to such men as Socrates. God is good, but 'good' is applied to many other things. God is just, but so is St. Joseph . . . And so on. The names of God are shared with creatures, and it is the meaning the terms have as said of creatures that provides the springboard for understanding their application to God. Names are not common to God and creature univocally or equivocally but analogically.

A univocally common name receives the very same account as said of many things. E.g ‘man’ said of this person and that and the other and so on. An equivocally common name is one which receives quite different and unrelated accounts as said of many things. ‘Slip’ as said of a place for a boat and of an item of lingerie is the same word, but there would seem to be no connection at all between these two meanings of it. An analogous name, Thomas says, is midway between these two.

Socrates is wise.

God is wise.

The implicit question, again, is how is the same word said of God and creature? ‘Wise’ doesn’t get exactly the same account in these two instances. For one thing, the wisdom of Socrates is a hard-earned characteristic, There was a time when he was not wise, he has lapses even in his prime, and eventually he may end up drooling out of both corners of his mouth and uttering nonsense. None of that is true of God. Why not? The basic rule is to deny of God anything that is imperfect. But of ‘wise’ said of Socrates entails all these imperfections, how can it be predicated of God?

By purifying it of those imperfections. By eliminating the creaturely mode of wisdom. And what is left? Wisdom. But wouldn’t this be like the onion once it is completely unpeeled. What could possibly be left after we peel away the features of Socrates’ wisdom? Thomas says we can indeed retain these perfections without their accompanying imperfections; indeed, we must if the word is to be applied to God. And of course God has applied the word to himself, so this is a spur to the theologian to go on. The perfection is found in God in a manner quite different from the manner it is found in creatures.

The Three Ways

This analysis is the basis for distinguishing moments in speaking of God, ways of speaking of him. First, affirmatively. “God is wise.” Second, negatively. “God is not wise as humans are.” Thirdly, by way of eminence. “God is wise in a way that surpasses our ability to comprehend.”

Of course, the very plurality of the divine names is a sign that none of them comprehends him. If one did, we would not need the others. The plurality derives from the fact that perfections scattered in creatures have been caused by God. But **nemo dat quod non got**.

But Thomas is not through. Isn’t there a name of God which is, as it were, his proper name? God told Moses to tell his skeptical brethren that ‘He Who is’ had spoken to him. To be wise, to be good, to be just, and so on, are ways of being, and the one way is not the other. The diversity stems from the diversity in creatures. But we try to think beyond that to the union of all these attributes in God: each is one with him. Nicholas of Cusa thus spoke of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Things that are other and opposites in creatures are unified in God, are one with him.

It was by reflecting on the fact that particular divine attributes are ways of being that Thomas offered an account of those words in Exodus. The quasi proper name of God, Thomas writes, is *Ipsum esse subsistens*. In any creature, its nature is a mode of existence; no creature is existence. But in God there is no such distinction between what he is and his existence. Reflection that the infinitive to-be, *esse*, is thus limited in creatures, Thomas thinks of God as unrestricted existence, not limited to this kind or that. God is subsistent existence. That is the meaning of *Ipsum esse subsistens*.

The Cloud of Unknowing

Considering these various moves necessary to speak of the divine names, and noting that in the end we do not know how God is wise or good, or indeed existence as such, Thomas says that, in the

end, we know what God is not rather than what he is. This is profoundly true. For all that, it would be wrong to suggest that Thomas ends by denying that we know anything of God. That would make mincemeat out of the complicated analyses we have just sketched. Complete ignorance would make impossible the precisions just seen. We must not make Thomas say less than he says. Nor of course more. Our mind is made to know God, but in this life, whether by nature or grace, we cannot fully grasp what he is. That is what awaits us as our reward, to be seen even as we are seen.

Below are suggested assignments for universities and those looking to further their study on St. Thomas Aquinas.

Suggested Reading Assignment

- *Summa theologiae*, I, question 33. *Exposition of Boethius's De hebdomadibus*. Included in my Penguin Classic, p. 142 ff.

Suggested Writing Assignment

- Analyze the second lesson of the commentary on Boethius.



LESSON XII: THE RELEVANCE OF THOMAS

I began reading St. Thomas more than half a century ago and I have never stopped. Nonetheless, as I come to the end of this presentation of his thought, I am gripped with a sense of inadequacy. Among the sins of my past life are a number of books in which I have tried to do what I have tried to do here. A little book called *Aquinas* will appear from Polity Press in Cambridge, England, in 2003. You may want to take a look at it and compare the summary treatment of Thomas in that book with that I have attempted here. They differ, no matter the overlaps.

It is a mark of an author like Thomas that one keeps finding new things in rereading him and wondering how stupidly one overlooked them on previous readings. I am sure that in whatever future that is allotted me I will look at this course as I do those books, wistfully though not entirely with regret. I have outlived Thomas by a quarter century and I will never live long enough to exhaust what he has written. A humbling realization, but salutary too.

Not that I have consciously included inadequacies in my treatments of Thomas. They come of their own accord.

Thomas and the Magisterium

I earlier drew your attention to Pope John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* which, along with *Veritatis Splendor*, is one of his major contributions to the long line of papal commendations of St. Thomas Aquinas as our mentor par excellence in philosophy and theology. Secular philosophers are often nonplussed by the fact that Catholics get such authoritative advice on matters philosophical. Even some Catholics seem more puzzled than receptive. Perhaps a majority of philosophers who are Catholic ignore the Magisterium's advice on Thomas. Some even seem to believe that it was all taken back at Vatican II and nowadays we should fall into line behind Heidegger or some other cult figure.

The proper response to the Magisterium's recommendation of Thomas is gratitude. As *Fides et Ratio* points out, what has been called the Scandal of Philosophy continues apace. After millennia of inquiry, the house of philosophy sounds like the Tower of Babel. What is a beginner to do in the face of so many conflicting systems and authorities? One way or the other we get into philosophy by heeding someone's advice on how to do it, if only the fashioners of Philosophy 101 at Meatball Tech. It may seem unimportant where one takes the plunge into philosophy; once in the pool one can hope to sort out the conflicting currents and ride the crest of truth to the opposite ladder. But it matters a lot where we begin, if we are at all serious about the task. We take on a lot of intellectual freight in those first laps across the pool and we can never be completely dry again. Since Descartes, one way or the other, philosophers have driven a wedge between our mental activity and its objects. As we have already suggested, this approach is in diametrical opposition to that taken by Thomas.

Beginnings may be arbitrary, but where you have two quite incompatible notions of what philosophizing is, one of them has got to be wrong. I don't mean that either Heidegger or Wittgenstein is true. I refer to the most basic division of all. Is the human mind made to know the things that are or can it only know things as it knows them? One of these positions is false and the other true.

If you look at the long history of commendations of Thomas, particularly those since Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*, you will find that it is Thomas's epistemological realism that is stressed, and stressed as a fundamental alternative to dominant secular philosophies. The Catholic of course has antecedent certainty that the Church's advice is worth taking. But once one has taken it, once one has

devoted a half century or so to the study of Thomas principally and other philosophers in the light of his thought, it becomes clear that the alternative to Thomas's way of philosophizing is incoherent. It is not a live option we might take which will land us in truths in conflict with Thomas. In this sense, Thomism is not a philosophy among others. It is synonymous with philosophy.

I will not repeat here what I said earlier about the Pope's concept of Implicit Philosophy in *Fides et Ratio*. Renewed reflection on it, as well as reflection on what Thomas has to say about our natural way of knowing, will bring home to you the basic reason why the Church has put Thomas before us as our mentor.

Ite ad Thomam

If what I have put before you in the lectures and lessons prompts you to immerse yourself in the writings of Thomas, my objective will have been realized. That is my final lesson. Go to Thomas!

Sincerely Yours,
Ralph McInerny

Introduction to Thomas Aquinas was recorded in 1995 as part of the *International Catholic University Classics Collection*. *TCT Courses* proudly has received the rights to offer this timeless course by Dr. Ralph McNerny to a wider audience.

THE CATHOLIC THING COURSES



© 2022 The Catholic Thing Courses

For More Courses and Learning Opportunities

visit

COURSES.THECATHOLICTHING.ORG

THE CATHOLIC THING
COURSES