

Aquinas

A Beginner's Guide

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Beginners
GUIDES

Aquinas

A Beginner's Guide

Edward Feser



ONE WORLD
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A Oneworld Book

Published by Oneworld Publications 2009

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A CIP record for this title is available
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ISBN 978-1-85168-690-2

Typeset by Jayvee, Trivandrum, India
Cover design by Simon McFadden
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow

Oneworld Publications
185 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7AR
England
www.oneworld-publications.com

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Acknowledgements

For useful comments on an earlier draft of this book, I thank Christopher Kaczor, my editor Mike Harpley, and an anonymous referee. As always, I thank my beloved wife Rachel and our dear children Benedict, Gemma, Kilian, and Helena for their patience and love. Special thanks are owed to my father, Edward A. Feser, who advised me over twenty years ago that I ought to read Aquinas. You were right, Dad; I wish I had listened to you sooner. I dedicate this book to you.

System of citations

Listed below are the abbreviations used for works of Thomas Aquinas quoted or cited in the text. Unless otherwise indicated within the text, quotations are taken from the translations cited here.

- CT* *Compendium theologiae*. Translated by Cyril Vollert as *Light of Faith: The Compendium of Theology* (Sophia Institute Press, 1993). References are by part and section number.
- DEE* *De ente et essentia*. Translated by Robert P. Goodwin as “On Being and Essence,” in Robert P. Goodwin, ed., *Selected Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Prentice-Hall, 1965). References are by chapter.
- DPN* *De principiis naturae*. Translated by Robert P. Goodwin as “The Principles of Nature,” in Robert P. Goodwin, ed., *Selected Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Prentice-Hall, 1965). References are by chapter and paragraph number.
- In I Cor* *Super Epistolam Primam Pauli Apostoli ad Corinthios*. Commentary on St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, excerpt translated by Timothy McDermott in Timothy McDermott, ed., *Thomas Aquinas, Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford University Press, 1993).
- In DA* *Sententia super De anima*. Translated by Kenelm Foster and Silvester Humphries as *Commentary on*

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- Aristotle's De Anima* (Dumb Ox Books, 1994). References are by book, lecture number, and paragraph number.
- In DC* *Sententia de caelo et mundo*. Translated by Fabian R. Larcher and Pierre H. Conway as *Exposition of Aristotle's Treatise On the Heavens*, in two volumes (College of St. Mary of the Springs, 1964). References are by book and lecture number.
- In DH* *Expositio in librum Boethii De hebdomadibus*. Translated by Ralph McInerny as "How are Things Good? Exposition of On the Hebdomads of Boethius," in Ralph McInerny, ed., *Thomas Aquinas, Selected Writings* (Penguin Books, 1998).
- In Meta* *Sententia super Metaphysicam*. Translated by John P. Rowan as *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Dumb Ox Books, 1995). References are by book, lesson number, and paragraph number.
- In NE* *Sententia libri Ethicorum*. Translated by C. J. Litzinger as *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Dumb Ox Books, 1993). References are by book, lecture number, and paragraph number.
- In PA* *Sententia super Posteriora Analytica*. Translated by Richard Berquist as *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* (Dumb Ox Books, 2007). References are by book and section number.
- In Phys* *Sententia super Physicam*. Translated by Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, and W. Edmund Thirlkel as *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* (Dumb Ox Books, 1999). References are by book, lecture number, and section number.
- QDA* *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*. Translated by John Patrick Rowan as *The Soul* (B. Herder, 1949). References are by article number.
- QDM* *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*. Translated by Richard

- Regan as *On Evil*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford University Press, 2003). References are by question number and article number.
- QDP* *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei*. Translated by Lawrence Shapcote as *On the Power of God* (Newman Press, 1932; reprinted by Wipf and Stock, 2004). References are by question number and article number.
- QDV* *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*. Translated by Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt as *Truth*, in three volumes (Henry Regnery Company, 1954; reprinted by Hackett Publishing Company, 1994). References are by question number and article number.
- SCG* *Summa contra gentiles*. Translated by Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, Vernon J. Bourke, and Charles J. O’Neil as *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, in five volumes (Doubleday, 1955–1957; reprinted as *Summa Contra Gentiles* by the University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). References are by book, chapter, and paragraph number.
- SENT* *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*. Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, excerpt translated by Timothy McDermott in Timothy McDermott, ed., *Thomas Aquinas, Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford University Press, 1993).
- ST* *Summa theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province as *The Summa Theologica*, in five volumes (Christian Classics, 1981). References are by part, question number, and article number.

1

St. Thomas

If we want to study Aquinas we should pay him the compliment of treating as important what he thought of as important. To study Aquinas as Aquinas is a poor piece of flattery, since Aquinas cared very little for Aquinas, while he did care for God and for science.

C. F. J. Martin, *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations*, p. 203.

One approach to the study of the history of philosophy is to situate the great thinkers of the past within the historical contexts in which they worked and determine what social, political, cultural, and philosophical circumstances influenced their ideas. This approach certainly has its value, especially insofar as it can help us correctly to understand what a philosopher meant in saying this or that. If pursued too single-mindedly, however, it can distract us from what the thinkers themselves considered important. The philosophers of the past did not write in order to reflect their times or to provide future historians with something to do. Their work was intended to point beyond itself to something else – to the *truth* about things – and what matters ultimately is whether they succeeded. As Aquinas himself once wrote, “the study of philosophy is not about knowing what individuals thought, but about the way things are” (*In DC I.22*). This is the point of the remark by Christopher Martin quoted above. The main value of studying what Aquinas or any other thinker said about God, science, or some other topic is to find out whether what he said is true, or at least likely to lead us closer to the truth. As Martin goes on to

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add, studying a thinker of the *past*, specifically, has value insofar as it can help us determine whether what we take for granted in the present is itself true:

If we want to know about the existence of God, or about the nature of science, we should read Aquinas, not merely the writers of this century ... The great benefit to be derived from reading pre-modern authors is to come to realise that after all we [moderns] might have been mistaken.

That Aquinas's work should be read as a challenge to us today – and a challenge, as we shall see, not merely to our conclusions, but to many of our premises too – is a central theme of this book. Whether one thinks that challenge ultimately succeeds or not, it is important to treat Aquinas as in this sense a living author rather than a museum piece.

Martin's reference to "science" might strike some readers as odd. Wasn't Aquinas a philosopher and a theologian, rather than a scientist? And given his concern with God and other matters of religion, weren't his opinions matters of faith rather than reason, scientific or otherwise? Yet the assumptions behind such questions are precisely the sort that Aquinas's philosophy challenges. For Aquinas, a science is an organized body of knowledge of both the facts about some area of study and of their causes or explanations (*In PA* I.4); and while this includes the fields typically regarded today as paradigmatically scientific (physics, biology, and so forth), it also includes metaphysics, ethics, and even theology. Furthermore, these latter sciences are as rational as the ones we are familiar with today. To be sure, a part of theology (what is generally called "revealed theology") is based on what Aquinas regards as truths that have been revealed to us by God. To that extent theology is based on faith. But "faith," for Aquinas, does not mean an irrational will to believe something for which there is no evidence. It is rather a matter of believing something on the basis of divine authority (*ST* II-

II.4.1), where the fact that it really has been revealed by God can be confirmed by the miracles performed by the one through whom God revealed it (*ST* II-II.2.9). In any case, there is another part of theology (known as “natural theology”) that does not depend on faith, but rather concerns truths about God that can be known via reason alone. It is these purely philosophical arguments of natural theology with which we shall be concerned in this book, along with Aquinas’s views in metaphysics, ethics, and psychology (which includes the study of the human mind, but extends well beyond this, as we will see).

Aquinas’s life and works

Thomas was born circa 1225 at Roccasecca, near the town of Aquino in southern Italy, from which his aristocratic family derived its name (hence the sobriquet “Aquinas”). At five years old he was sent by his parents to be educated at the Benedictine Abbey at Monte Cassino, in the hope of setting him on the path to attaining, eventually, the prestigious position of Abbot. But while studying at Naples as a teenager, Aquinas came under the influence of the new Order of Friars Preachers, also known as the Dominicans after their founder St. Dominic. Attracted by its devotion to study and teaching, he joined the order at nineteen, much to the chagrin of his family, whose worldly ambitions for Thomas did not square with the Dominican life of poverty and simplicity. In the hope of getting him to change his mind, his brothers abducted him and put him under house arrest at the family castle at Roccasecca for about a year, though he spent the time committing to memory the entire Bible and the four books of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (a theological textbook then widely in use). Notoriously, they even went to the extent of sending a prostitute into his room on one occasion, but he chased her away with a flaming stick pulled from the fireplace,

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which he used afterward to make the sign of the cross on the wall. As the story has it, he then kneeled before the cross and prayed for the gift of perpetual chastity, which he received at the hands of two angels who girded his loins with a miraculous cord. Eventually his brothers relented and he was allowed to return to the Dominicans.

While a student at what would become the order's study center in Cologne, Aquinas acquired the unflattering nickname "the Dumb Ox" due to his taciturn character coupled with his considerable girth. The former trait owed largely to a humble unwillingness to call attention to himself, and despite his portliness it is said of Aquinas that he ate only once a day in order to devote himself more fully to his work. In any case, his genius became evident before long, leading his mentor Albert the Great (c. 1200–1280) famously to predict that the Ox's "bellowing" would someday be heard throughout the world.

The works of Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) had during the preceding century become once again available to scholars in the Latin West, which led to a renewed interest in his philosophy, and Albert was at the time the foremost thinker of this Aristotelian revival. Aquinas would go on to become an even more influential proponent of Aristotle, and was recommended by Albert in 1252 for a position as a lecturer at the University of Paris, where Aquinas was a great success. It was apparently during this time that he composed the short treatises *On the Principles of Nature* and *On Being and Essence*, which set out his core metaphysical ideas. This period also gave rise to the much longer treatment of disputed questions *On Truth*.

After 1259 Aquinas returned to Italy and produced the massive *Summa contra Gentiles*, a treatise devoted to defending the claims of orthodox Christianity against a wide variety of objections presented by Jews, Muslims, pagans, and heretics. Following this he began work on the even more massive (and never completed) *Summa Theologiae*, a systematic treatment of all

the main issues of theology organized around the theme of how things ultimately derive from, and are destined to return to, God, their first cause and last end. Along the way it deals with a wide variety of topics in metaphysics, ethics, psychology, and other subjects. These two *Summae* are generally regarded as Aquinas's masterpieces. In the course of working on the second, he would also produce many other works, apparently intended in part as preliminary treatments of certain topics to be dealt with in the *Summa Theologiae*. These include treatises on disputed questions *On the Power of God* and *On the Soul* and a series of commentaries on the works of Aristotle.

This latter, commentarial project had another purpose as well, one to which Aquinas's eventual return to Paris may be related. The use of Aristotle's philosophy in expounding and defending Christian doctrine was highly controversial in Aquinas's day. Aristotle had taken several positions (such as the view that the universe had no beginning) that seemed incompatible with the claims of Christianity. So too had the followers of Averroes (1126–1198), the Muslim philosopher whose interpretation of Aristotle was regarded by many as authoritative. The Averroists had held, for example, that the human race shares a single intellect, which appears incompatible with the notion that each human being has an individual immortal soul. More traditional theologians thus regarded Aristotelianism as theologically dangerous, and preferred the Neoplatonic tradition in general, and Augustinianism in particular, as more suited to the needs of Christian theology. The controversy between defenders and critics of Aristotelianism was particularly fierce at the University of Paris, and Aquinas was determined to show that, when rightly understood, Aristotle's philosophy was not only compatible with Christianity, but the best means of expounding and defending it. In effect, he took a middle position between Averroism and Augustinianism, seeking to avoid the extremes of the former while showing that the key elements of the latter

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tradition could be incorporated into a broadly Aristotelian worldview. The result was a unique synthesis that has since come to be known as Thomism (after “Thomas,” the name by which Aquinas was known during his lifetime).

In 1272 Aquinas returned once again to Italy. While saying Mass in Naples one day in 1273 he went into a trance, and appears to have had a mystical experience, after which he was unable to resume work on the *Summa Theologiae*. Famously, he explained that after what he had seen, everything he had written now seemed to him “like straw.” Called to attend the Second Council of Lyons, he apparently hit his head against a low-lying tree branch while on the journey, and sustained a serious injury. He was taken to the Cistercian abbey at Fossanova, where he was nursed by the monks, but died on March 7, 1274.

In addition to his profound humility, the character traits for which Aquinas was most notable included a deep piety and an astounding capacity for sustained abstract thought. It is said of him that he was so single-minded in his devotion to God that he would leave the room when discussion turned away to some unrelated subject. He could become so absorbed in prayer or in a chain of philosophical or theological reasoning that he would sometimes forget where he was, fail to perceive the people around him, and even (as one account has it) fail to notice the flame from a candle he was holding as it burned his hand. According to another famous story, while at dinner with King Louis IX of France he got thinking about the Manichaean heresy, struck the table exclaiming “That settles the Manichees!” and called for his secretary to take down the argument that had just occurred to him. Suddenly realizing where he was, Aquinas apologized and explained to the other startled guests that he thought he was alone in his room. Related to this tendency towards abstraction appears to have been an extraordinary unflappability. Anscombe and Geach relate a story according to

which Aquinas once came upon “a holy nun who used to be levitated in ecstasy.” His reaction was to comment on how very large her feet were. “This made her come out of her ecstasy in indignation at his rudeness, whereupon he gently advised her to seek greater humility.”