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0521807328 - Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae Ia 75-89

Robert Pasnau

Excerpt

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Introduction

*Alioquin, si nudis auctoritatibus magister
quaestionem determinet, certificabitur
quidem auditor quod ita est, sed nihil
scientiae vel intellectus acquires, sed
vacuus abscedet.*

QQ 4.9.3c; see p. 16

This book is a close study of Aquinas's best-known philosophical text (§In.1), read in the light of his full body of writings (§In.2). The topic is human nature, which for Aquinas means above all a discussion of the soul and its various capacities (§In.3). My focus is philosophical, and yet the subject is a work of theology, because often it is theology in the Middle Ages that comes closest to our modern philosophical concerns (§In.4). Still, it is crucial to understand the theological context. Aquinas's interest in the philosophical problems surrounding human nature grows out of his broader theological views about the meaning of life (§In.5).

In.1. Overview

In the chapters to come, I have some novel and perhaps surprising things to say about Thomas Aquinas. As I consider how best to ease the reader down this road, the words of Montaigne come to mind: "Aristotle wrote to be understood; if he could not do this, much less will another that is not so good at it" (*Essays*, ch. 21). In fact I doubt whether Aristotle always did write to be understood, but certainly Aquinas did, above all in his reader-friendly *Summa theologiae*. But in the more than 700 years that have passed since Aquinas's death in 1274, our modes of expression have changed a great deal. Surely there is some call for commentary.

Of course, I am not alone in this enterprise. It may be that more has been written about Aquinas than about any other philosopher, and some of it has been insightful. Again, I think of Montaigne:

Who will not say that glosses augment doubts and ignorance, since there's no one book to be found, either human or divine, which the world busies itself about, whereof the difficulties are cleared by interpretation. The hundredth commentator passes it on to the next, still more knotty and perplexed than he found it. When were we ever agreed among ourselves: "this book has enough; there is now no more to be said about it?" (ibid.).

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Somehow I am not distressed by this. It seems to me that knots and perplexity lie at the essence of philosophy. A philosophical text without knots is not philosophical at all. At best such a text will have started as philosophy and achieved too much, by treating an issue so thoroughly and decisively that it slips out of the realm of philosophy – growing up, perhaps, to become science.

A knotty philosophical text, then, is an interesting philosophical text, and it is my aim to identify a good many of the knots lying beneath Aquinas's serene prose. To my mind, there is far too much consensus in the secondary literature, a consensus that is symptomatic of a failure to appreciate the depth of his thought. I am constantly amazed at how much of what is written avoids raising the truly hard questions, and consequently leaves the reader feeling that perhaps Aquinas has nothing of much interest to tell us. It is as if those who suppose Aquinas has all of the answers have entered into a kind of unspoken conspiracy with those who suppose he has no interesting answers, with the result that his ideas have been neglected by the wider philosophical community.

An investigation into human nature raises many of the hardest questions in philosophy. I have by no means been able to address all of the issues that Aquinas raises in connection with human nature, but I think no one will feel cheated by the range of topics. The chapters that follow begin with the nature of soul and the mind-body problem (Chapters 1–5), then take up the workings of sense, will, and intellect (Chapters 6–10), and conclude with self-knowledge (Chapter 11) and immortality (Chapter 12). I have found that to understand many of these issues, I need to turn to metaphysics. As a result, much of what is novel in these chapters stands or falls with some controversial claims on topics such as these:

- What is prime matter? (§§1.4 and 1.5, *Excursus*)
- What are substances, and what are substantial forms? (§3.2)
- What is the relationship of form and matter? (*Excursus*)
- What is the role of teleology? (§§In.5, 6.2, 7.1)
- How are substances individuated? (§12.4)

I am sure I haven't done justice to any one of these vast problems, let alone all of them. But I hope that I have been able to bring out at least some of the potential within Aquinas for an adequate solution.

Aquinas's ideas are surrounded on all sides by complex traditions. On one side, he himself was deeply influenced by earlier philosophers, Aristotelian, Platonic, and Augustinian, and he absorbed these traditions through a wide variety of sources. On the other side, Aquinas was at first the subject of fierce controversy and then, after both he and his work were canonized, the subject of a long commentary tradition. I had at one time hoped to situate Aquinas's thought within this context, backward and forward, but the task proved overwhelming. (From time to time, fragments of this effort surface, particularly in the notes.) The one influence I have remained committed to tracking is Aristotle's. Aquinas's philosophy is

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IN.2. THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Aristotelian in the way his theology is Christian, and much of what follows is unintelligible apart from its background in Aristotle's metaphysics and psychology.

In.2. The scope of the study

This is a study of Aquinas's *Treatise on Human Nature*, just one small part of the *Summa theologiae*'s first part (*ST* 1a), which itself constitutes only about a fourth of *ST*. The *Treatise* contains a mere fifteen questions (QQ75–89) out of the 119 that make up 1a. In all, my subject is less than 3 percent of *ST*'s whole. There are obvious reasons for picking this 3 percent: it is here, more than anywhere else in *ST*, that Aquinas confronts perennial questions about the human mind, the relationship between mind and body, the senses, intellect, and the scope of human knowledge. But these are issues that Aquinas takes up in many different places, often times at greater length, and so it is not so obvious why one should pick out the *Treatise* for special attention.

This question can be sharpened by looking at Aquinas's prologue to *ST* 1a, where he explains in careful detail his motivation for composing the work.

A teacher (*doctor*) of the catholic truth is not only responsible for instructing those who are advanced, but also has the duty to educate those who are just beginning, in keeping with what the Apostle says, in I Corinthians 3, *As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat*. For this reason, our intent in this work is to develop those issues that concern the Christian religion in a way that suits the education of those who are just beginning.

It has seemed to us, however, that those who are new to this teaching are impeded in a variety of ways when it comes to the things that various people have written: partly by the proliferation of unhelpful questions, articles, and arguments; partly, too, because the issues necessary for such students to acquire knowledge are developed not in instructional order, but according to the requirements of a textual commentary, or as the occasion for a disputation allowed; partly, also, because the constant repetitiveness of these works has generated aversion and confusion in the minds of those listening.

We will strive, therefore, to avoid these faults and others of this sort, and we will attempt, trusting in divine aid, to pursue those issues that concern sacred doctrine in a manner concise and lucid – inasmuch as the material allows (1a pr).

These remarks paint a vivid picture of pedagogy in the thirteenth century. Like a distinguished research professor faulting his colleagues for being too wrapped up in their own work to take notice of their students, Aquinas argues that the standard scholarly formats of his day are more confusing than illuminating for the novice. Lectures and treatises were too long, too repetitive, too disorganized – the result being “aversion and confusion.”

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Vita

Aquinas is almost always silent on the subject of his personal motives and goals. We do not know, for instance, why he became a Dominican friar, nor why and how his theological and philosophical interests grew during his early years. Even as regards that most public side of him, his lectures and writings, we are largely in the dark about why Aquinas wrote what he did, when he did: Why, for instance, a *Summa contra gentiles*? (It was once widely thought that *SCG* was written as a kind of field guide for Christian missionaries in their intellectual struggles against the infidels. This has been discredited.) Why commentaries on Aristotle? (It was once widely assumed that these were written with the idea of combatting Averroes's influence as a commentator. This too has been discredited.) In light of such uncertainties, the preface to *ST* is particularly unusual and valuable for the insight it gives us into Aquinas's background motivations.

For a good summary of Aquinas's life and work, see Kretzmann and Stump (1998). The best detailed biography is Torrell (1996). Despite Aquinas's relatively explicit remarks, there is still controversy over precisely what role he intended *ST* to play. For two interesting and quite different suggestions, see Boyle (1982) and Jenkins (1997), ch. 3.

Aquinas no doubt meant these charges to apply to himself as much as to others. His first major work (1252–56) was a commentary (in question form) on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. This work was both enormous (though no more so than *ST*), and also hopeless with respect to “instructional order,” as cursory inspection shows. Although the first book of *SENT* begins promisingly enough, with a discussion of theology's status as a science, Aquinas immediately plunges into a series of questions on use and enjoyment, a central topic in medieval ethics but hardly an appropriate starting point for a course in theology. Hard on the heels of this discussion, he enters into the mystery of the Trinity, the worst imaginable topic to take up with novices.

In giving his Commentary this order, Aquinas was simply following the structure of Lombard's *Sentences*; he was, then, very much writing “in keeping with the requirements of a textual commentary.” Indeed, such a commentary was the standard medieval requirement for a “teacher of the catholic truth.” Thus William Ockham, at the beginning of his own vast commentary on the *Sentences*, sixty years later, must first take up use and enjoyment (but only after a long and interesting prologue on theology and science), then the Trinity, and so forth.

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IN.2. THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Aquinas considered revising *SENT* in the mid-1260s, but gave up that project in favor of *ST*, which covers much the same ground, but in a style more conducive to novices. In *ST*, use and enjoyment get taken up in their proper context, near the beginning of the 12ae (QQ11,16), in the middle of Aquinas's discussion of human action. The Trinity is discussed in 1a (QQ27-43), but only after a thorough discussion of God's existence and essential nature.

Once scholastic theologians completed their lectures on the *Sentences*, their scholarly activities most often turned toward disputed questions, which might take up any topic – sometimes within certain limits, but often on any topic at all that a member of the audience might suggest. (These latter were known as *quaestiones quodlibetales*.) Aquinas delivered his first Quodlibet (QQ 7) in Advent, 1256, soon after finishing *SENT*. The topics he covered in that debate typified the random nature of such occasions: after three sets of questions on spiritual substances (the angels), the subject turned toward the Eucharist, then the bodies of the damned, then the interpretation of Scripture, and finally the value of manual labor. (He contends that doing philosophy counts as manual labor (QQ 7.7.1c).)

Most of Aquinas's disputed questions were not quodlibetal, and hence were more narrowly focused: he argued sets of questions on, among other things, truth, divine power, evil, and the virtues. The set of disputed questions that is of particular interest to us is his *Quaestiones disputatae de anima* (QDA), which seems to have been delivered the year before he began *ST*. Not surprisingly, there is considerable overlap between the two works. The most striking difference is the relative brevity of *ST*. In *ST* 1a 75.5 ("Is the soul composed of matter and form?"), for instance, there are four objections followed by a brief main reply (the body or *corpus* of the article). QDA 6 asks the identical question, but introduces seventeen objections, and makes a reply that is four times as long. This is characteristic of the difference between Aquinas's disputed questions and *ST*. By a *summa* of theology, Aquinas does not mean the pinnacle of his work but merely a summary.

These considerations lead to some obvious questions. What does a reader gain, in focusing on *ST*, and what does the reader miss? Would one merely be missing "the proliferation of unhelpful questions, articles, and arguments"? Or is *ST* an oversimplification: good for beginners, but inadequate for the serious scholar? Scholars have largely preferred the first answer. James Weisheipl (1974) refers to *ST* as "Thomas's major work, the crown of his genius" (p. 361). John Jenkins (1997) writes that "on any given issue, the *Summa* generally contains the most mature, clear and definitive statement of Aquinas's position"; it "expresses his most fully developed thought" (p. 78). These remarks suggest that *ST* manages to be both concise and definitive, accessible to students and at the same time his most profound masterpiece.

Perhaps. But we should beware of letting educational needs distort history. Descartes's *Meditations*, for example, has been influential out of

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all proportion to its originality or quality, largely because of its accessibility to novices. If any of the great scholastic authors had put themselves to the trouble of writing in such a popular style, we would have a very different picture of the transition from ancient to modern thought. As things are, *ST* is about as close as the later medieval period can come to a *Meditations*. But it is a mistake to suppose one can reach a deep understanding of Aquinas solely by a close reading of *ST*. Aquinas's vast literary output (more than eight times the length of Aristotle's surviving work) is not a miracle. He wrote with extraordinary speed: rather than laboring for years over a single work, Aquinas chose to plow forward from treatise to treatise, regularly taking up again issues that he had already considered. At any one time Aquinas might have been composing three or four different works (dictating at once to multiple secretaries, if the stories are to be believed), and he cannot have left himself much time for polishing or mulling over the details of any given work. No one of these treatments can be viewed as decisive; each has to be considered as part of the larger fabric that makes up Aquinas's complete system of thought. Each time Aquinas reconsiders an issue he does so from a slightly different perspective. Generally, though not always, these perspectives are complementary, and so one can reach a deeper understanding of any one work by comparing it with other discussions of similar material.

My approach is to take each of Aquinas's texts as just one more rough draft on the way toward his ideal philosophy. This "rough draft" strategy makes particularly good sense for the Treatise, which in the space of fifteen questions goes over issues to which Aquinas returned repeatedly during his career, often at much greater length. So, to take just one characteristic example, 76.8 asks exactly the same question that gets asked in I *SENT* 8.5.3, *SCG* II.72, *QDA* 10, and *QDSC* 4: "Is the soul whole in each part of the body?" Any serious study of Aquinas should take advantage of his repetitiveness by examining how these multiple drafts make up a whole that goes deeper than any single version.

But then why a study of *ST* in particular? One very practical reason is that a study of *ST* should be useful to many different readers. Because the Treatise is among the more accessible works of later medieval philosophy, it makes a natural point of entry for today's generation of novices. At the same time, because the Treatise was written at the height of Aquinas's powers, and sets out what he regards as his very best arguments, it is the natural focal point for more detailed scholarly work.

The considerations of the last three paragraphs shape the approach of this study. I take the Treatise as my starting point, a guide to what Aquinas sees as the crucial issues regarding human nature. But I do not aim to understand Aquinas merely through a careful reading of the Treatise. That is where the discussion starts, but we will see in every case that the relatively brief remarks he makes there need considerable supplementation from *SCG*, *SENT*, disputed questions, Aristotelian commentaries, and various shorter treatises. I take seriously *ST*'s claim to be a concise guide

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IN.3. ON HUMAN NATURE

to the essential issues, but I do not suppose that the Treatise offers the last, most decisive word on any one topic.

In.3. On human nature

QQ75–89 are often referred to as the Treatise on Man. This is wrong in two ways. First, Latin has one word for man (*vir*) and another for human being (*homo*), and so a *Tractatus de homine* is better described as a Treatise on the Human Being, if for no reason other than sound principles of translation. Second, and more substantively, Aquinas's *Tractatus de homine* extends all the way through Q102. The first part of this larger treatise, QQ75–89, concerns the *nature* of human beings (*de natura hominis*); the second part, QQ90–102, concerns their *production*, with special attention to the creation of Adam and Eve. It is hard to see how anyone could have missed this point, since the prologue to Q75 is quite clear:

Having considered spiritual and also corporeal creatures [QQ50–74], we should now consider human beings, who are composed of a spiritual and corporeal substance. And first we should consider the nature of human beings [QQ75–89], then second their production [QQ90–102].

Accordingly, I refer to QQ75–89 as the Treatise on Human Nature (or, for short, the Treatise).

What does Aquinas mean when he says he will focus on human nature? The short answer is that by 'nature' Aquinas means more or less what we would expect: he means to discuss the essential features of human beings, the things that make us human, or (as Aristotle often puts it) what it is to be a human being. But *natura* has a complex range of meanings, and we will understand the Treatise better if we take a look at how Aquinas understands the term in its various senses. *Natura* was first imposed, Aquinas tells us, to refer to the generation of living things; in this sense it serves as the abstract noun for the verb *nascor* (to be born). By extension, the term came to signify the inner principle of any generation or birth, and then, extended still more, to signify any inner principle of movement or action. Finally, the term is given one further meaning, as the ultimate end of the process of generation, which Aquinas identifies as the essence of the species.

On this analysis, three of the four Aristotelian causes are identified as candidates for the meaning of *natura*. Both the formal and the material cause can be the nature of a thing inasmuch as either of these causes can be considered the inner source of movement or action. The final cause too can be the nature inasmuch as the essence of a thing is the end of the process of generation.

Just as form or matter was called *nature* because it is the principle of generation (and generation gets called *nature* on account of how the term was first imposed), so species and substance get called *nature* because that is the end of generation. For generation has as its end-point the species of the thing being generated, which results from the union of form and matter (*InMet* V.5.822).

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So ‘nature’ starts out meaning something like *birth*, and then gets extended to mean, first, the internal principles of birth and of movement in general and, second, the ultimate end of this process.

The Treatise is concerned with human nature in this last sense: its topic is the essence or defining character of human beings. “In general it is the essence of any thing, what its definition signifies, that is called its nature” (29.1 ad 4). Yet this focus on the essence of being human leads back to the prior sense of *natura* as inner principle of action, and so in turn to the question of whether matter or form has the better claim as being the inner principle of a thing’s existence and functioning. Aquinas holds that form, rather than matter, is the inner principle that makes a thing be what it is: “the essence of any given thing is completed through its form” (29.1 ad 4). Indeed, following Aristotle, Aquinas holds that in the case of natural, nonartificial substances, the formal and the final cause are identical. The ultimate end of generation is the primary inner principle of a being, and this is its form. The form of a thing is the reason why such a thing was generated; that is what the process of generation was aimed at. So in the human case, since a human being’s form is the soul, “the end of the generation of a human being is the soul” (*InMet* VIII.4.1737). In this sense, Aquinas says, the formal and final cause of a human being are numerically the same.¹

What about matter? Aquinas holds that the material cause (the human body, for example) has much less of a claim to be part of human nature. It was the characteristic mistake of the pre-Socratics to suppose that all things could be explained in terms of material causes:

Ancient philosophers, unable to transcend their imaginations, . . . said that the only things that exist are bodies, and that what is not a body is nothing (75.1c).

Following Aristotle’s famous diagnosis, then, Aquinas holds that explanations must be given in terms of formal as well as material cause (see *InPh* II.2). This is not a conclusion that the Treatise takes for granted. The very first thing that Aquinas sets out to show, in 75.1, is that the soul is not a body but rather the form of a body (see §1.3). Yet although material causes take a back seat to formal causes, still no definition of human beings would be complete without reference to the bodies from which we are composed.

The nature of a species consists in what its definition signifies. But in the case of natural things the definition signifies not the form alone, but the form and the matter (75.4c).

Human beings are essentially embodied creatures, and moreover essentially have bodies of a certain kind (see §2.1). A complete inquiry into human nature, then, would take as its subject all that is characteristically human, body as well as soul. (For discussion, see *InDA* I.2.144–160; *InPh* II.4.175.)

A theoretical enquiry into human nature will be aimed at the *universal* nature of being human:

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IN.3. ON HUMAN NATURE

Sometimes *nature* is called the what-it-is of a thing, which includes all that the completeness of the species requires. For it is in this way that we say that human nature is common to all human beings (*SCG* IV.41.3788).

The Treatise is not concerned with features peculiar to one person or another, but with soul in general, and body in general. To this end Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of matter, common and signate. Only the former is contained in human nature:

Thus matter is part of the species in natural things – not signate matter, of course, which is the principle of individuation, but common matter. For just as it belongs to the character of this [particular] human being to be composed of *this* soul, *this* flesh, and *these* bones, so it belongs to the character of *human being* to be composed of soul, flesh, and bones (75.4c, continuing the earlier passage).

Etymology

Like many medieval authors, Aquinas is fond of speculative etymology. In claiming that the original meaning of *natura* is *birth* or *generation*, he seems for once to be right. (His source is Aristotle, *Met.* V 4, 1014b16, but see “*natura*” in Lewis and Short 1879.)

Here, as is often the case, the etymology serves a serious purpose (see Jordan 1986, pp. 16–17). Aquinas believes that language is isomorphic with the way we think (see Pasnau 1997a). By looking at how names change their meaning, we can see the way our thoughts have evolved.

Names are imposed by us in keeping with how we understand things, because names are signs for the things we understand. Now sometimes we understand the primary through the secondary, and thus we apply a name to something in a primary way, when in actual fact the name is suited to it only secondarily. So it is in this case. For because the forms and powers of things are cognized through their actions, generation or birth took the primary sense of the name *natura*, whereas form took the most remote sense (*InMet* V.5.824).

From a logical point of view, *natura* ought to mean the inner principle or form of generation. (Hence Aristotle remarks that “in the primary and strict sense,” *phusis* refers to a thing’s inner principle of movement (*Met.* V 4, 1015a13).) But human understanding starts with what is most visible. So *natura* was first used to refer to the action of generation, and only later applied to the inner principle. We will see that this is a key principle of Aquinas’s methodology: in understanding the soul, one works one’s way in from the external action to the internal capacity that explains the action, and eventually to the nature of soul itself. We have no direct access to the soul, not even to our own soul (§§5.5, 11.2).

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This study has little to say about universals (see §10.1). But it is helpful to keep in mind that the subject of the Treatise is the human being, focused not on features peculiar to any one individual, but on the features that all fully functioning human beings must possess.²

These remarks on *natura* confirm that our subject is human nature in what is now the primary sense of that phrase: nature as essence or defining account. We can now understand more clearly how this part of *ST* is structured. Aquinas first lays out God's aim in producing the human species (QQ75–89), then he explains how in fact God did produce the human species (QQ90–102). The second set of questions rests on the first: by providing an account of human nature, Aquinas specifies the final cause of God's creative act. QQ90–102 then complete the discussion of human beings by analyzing the one Aristotelian cause left outstanding: the efficient cause. Here Aquinas addresses the question of where human beings come from. Once he has answered this question, he takes himself to have completed a general treatment of our species.

In.4. A philosophical study

ST is a work of theology. This has two important consequences. First, and most apparently, large parts of the work are concerned with issues that presuppose elements of Christian doctrine. The general topic of 3a, for instance, is Christ. Second, Aquinas permits himself in *ST* to rely on premises that are not accessible to natural reason. Thus the second part of Aquinas's general treatment of human beings (QQ90–102) presupposes in many places the Genesis account of human creation. Although Aquinas is very much concerned with showing that this account is coherent, no attempt is made to demonstrate its truth.

In between and within the more theological discussions there are a great many places where Aquinas engages in analysis that is clearly within the bounds of what we now call philosophy. The Treatise is in this regard perhaps the richest of all such sections of *ST*. The most superficial examination indicates that the topics are philosophical: mind and body, free will, knowledge, intellect, perception (see the list of questions below). A more detailed examination shows that Aquinas's arguments are themselves philosophical, generally presupposing no theological claims whatsoever. Occasionally, Aquinas invokes the existence of a God that created the world according to a rational plan (see §§6.2 and 7.1). But even such nonsectarian theological premises are rare in the Treatise, and never crucial to the argument. So while the overall plan of *ST* is theological, significant portions of the work readily fall within the modern discipline of philosophy.

There should be no objection, then, to a philosophical study of *ST*, especially the Treatise. But there still might seem to be something at least puzzling in the choice of a theological work as the subject for a philosophical study on human nature. If philosophy is what is wanted, why not focus on one of Aquinas's more philosophical works, such as *SCG* or, even more so,