Introduction

I. AQUINAS’S REPUTATION

People familiar with Thomas Aquinas’s work know that he ranks among the greatest philosophers, but the number of such people is still smaller than it should be. Anthony Kenny described and gave one reason for this state of affairs more than a decade ago, when it was even more deplorable than it is now:

Aquinas is little read nowadays by professional philosophers: he has received much less attention in philosophy departments, whether in the continental tradition or in the Anglo-American one, than lesser thinkers such as Berkeley or Hegel. He has, of course, been extensively studied in theological colleges and in the philosophy courses of ecclesiastical institutions; but ecclesiastical endorsement has itself damaged Aquinas’s reputation with secular philosophers. . . . But since the Second Vatican Council [1962–65] Aquinas seems to have lost something of the pre-eminent favour he enjoyed in ecclesiastical circles. . . . This wind of ecclesiastical change may blow no harm to his reputation in secular circles. [Kenny 1980a, pp. 27–28]

The prognosis with which Kenny ends his diagnosis was being slowly borne out even before he published it. Philosophers, especially those in the Anglo-American tradition, have been bringing Aquinas into secular philosophical discussions. The philosophers of religion among them have, understandably, taken the lead in this process. It was natural that they began looking into Aquinas because of their special interest in his philosophical theology. But Aquinas’s systematic approach to philosophical theology led him to include in it full treatments of virtually every area of philosophy, regarding which he always shows how in his view the existence and nature of God is related to the area’s subject matter. Consequently, philoso-
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phers of religion who first read Aquinas in connection with a narrow, twentieth-century conception of their specialization have been taking up appreciative investigations of other aspects of his thought, and they are gradually being joined by philosophers who have no professional interest in religion.

Since this book is intended to help speed the process of engaging philosophers as well as students in the study and appreciation of Aquinas’s philosophy, it makes sense to begin by trying to dispel the familiar, apparent obstacles to a wider recognition of Aquinas’s value as a philosopher.

II. THE STATE OF THE TEXTS

It seems safe to say that Aquinas is better known, at least by name, than any other medieval philosopher. From the viewpoint of contemporary philosophy, however, even the best-known medieval philosopher is likely to seem more remote philosophically than Plato and Aristotle. To some extent this odd situation testifies to the achievements of a group of outstanding philosophical scholars in the latter half of this century who have devoted themselves to the study and presentation of ancient philosophy in ways that have shown its relevance to contemporary philosophy. But their recent achievements were made possible by the fact that for a long time almost all the texts of ancient philosophy have been available in good printed editions and, to a very large extent, in English translations, often in several versions. On the other hand, all corresponding efforts on behalf of medieval philosophy are bound to be enormously hampered by the contrasting state of the relevant texts. The works of medieval philosophers are in many cases entirely unedited and unavailable in print, or at best — even in the case of Aquinas — incompletely edited. The editions that exist are often less good than they should be, and only a very small proportion of the edited texts have been translated into English or any other modern language.

The great disparity between the current state of the materials for the study and teaching of ancient philosophy, on the one hand, and of medieval philosophy, on the other, is entirely unwarranted. There are many more medieval than ancient philosophical works, and most of them have yet to be studied. Since a good proportion of
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those that have been studied exhibit intellectual scope and sophistication as impressive as any in the history of philosophy, the exploration of this medieval material, much of which is brand new to twentieth-century readers, is likely to be rewarding. And exploration is what it takes—pioneering exploration, with all the excitement and risk that accompany such enterprises. Before the texts of medieval philosophy can be studied and properly assessed, they have to be dug out of unreliable, unannotated printed versions four or five hundred years old or from the medieval manuscripts themselves [which are still numerous despite the devastation in Europe during and since the Middle Ages]. Special training is required even for reading the old editions, which are typically printed in an abbreviated Latin; and the manuscripts, which are obviously much more important sources than the old, uncritical editions, can be deciphered only by people trained in Latin paleography. Making a critical edition based on more than one and sometimes many manuscripts demands further skills along with great care and patience. As matters stand, then, most texts of medieval philosophy are literally inaccessible except to highly specialized scholars, only a few of whom are likely to share the interests of contemporary philosophers and thus to invest the extra time and effort required to make this material fully available.

Nevertheless, a small but slowly growing number of philosophers have glimpsed some of the intriguing philosophical material to be found in medieval texts on even such unlikely topics as grammar and logic and have been equipping themselves to make some of it available to their colleagues and students. The editions, translations, and philosophical articles and books that have appeared during the past twenty-five years or so have begun to affect the perception of medieval philosophy by philosophers in general. A great deal remains to be done, and all of it involves hard work. But no other area of philosophical scholarship is so rich in unexplored material or so likely to repay the effort required to bring it to light in ways that will stimulate its philosophical assessment. As might be expected, much more scholarly attention has been given to Aquinas’s philosophy than to that of any other medieval philosopher, but even his works—more extensive than those of Plato and Aristotle combined—need better editions and translations and further, deeper exploration.
III. MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY'S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

The works of the medievals in general would probably be more accessible now if their philosophical value had been recognized earlier, but in that respect, too, history has been unjust to medieval philosophy. The unwarranted disparity between medieval and ancient philosophy as regards not only their texts but also their apparent relevance to post-medieval philosophy has its historical roots in the achievements of the renaissance humanists. The intellectual gap between ancient and medieval philosophy seems to have been a natural consequence of the cataclysmic historical events associated with the barbarian invasions, the fall of Rome, and the rise of Christianity. But, more than a thousand years later, an even wider gap appeared between medieval and modern philosophy that can be attributed not to historical events on the grand scale but to the humanists' attitudes shaped by broad cultural considerations more than by specifically philosophical positions. The humanists extolled the ancients, naturally condemned the medieval scholastics against whom they were rebelling, and arrived on the European scene simultaneously with the development of printing, which gave their views an immediate and lasting influential advantage over those of their medieval predecessors. The humanists' views divided medieval from modern philosophy not only by rejecting scholasticism as literally benighted and hence linguistically, educationally, and intellectually barbarous but also by portraying the philosophy of their own day as the first legitimate successor to the philosophy of antiquity, especially to that of Plato. Of course, many views promoted by the humanists have gone the way of their insistence that education consists almost entirely of the study of the Greek and Latin classics. The effect of their wholesale rejection of medieval philosophy on cultural grounds lasted longer partly because it was reinforced by the Protestant reformers' simultaneous and equally vehement rejection of medieval philosophy on the basis of its association with Catholicism, and partly because the rejection coincided with a growing disaffection toward traditional Christianity among many of the educated elite.

The success of the humanists' deliberate attempt to resume the development of philosophy as if the thousand years of medieval philosophy had never happened can be seen in early modern philoso-
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phy. With the exception of Leibniz, the best-known philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mention “the schoolmen” only to denigrate their thought. In fact, however, as historians of modern philosophy have shown, early modern philosophers sometimes owed a large, unacknowledged debt to scholasticism.

Medieval philosophy, then, is useful for understanding the thought of both the periods that surround it. The contribution medieval philosophers make to our understanding of ancient philosophy is perfectly explicit, since they make it in their many commentaries on Aristotle, of which Aquinas’s are especially careful and insightful. And understanding the contribution medieval philosophy makes to modern philosophy, seeing the continuities as well as the rifts between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment, will deepen our understanding of the work of the moderns.

IV. THE SCHOLASTIC METHOD IN MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

Even if an open-minded, experienced reader of ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophy overcomes the traditional historical obstacles just discussed and looks into a good English translation of one of Aquinas’s books, he or she is likely to be daunted by the unfamiliar, unusually formal organization of the discussion. Aquinas wrote Summa contra gentiles, the most obviously philosophical of his big theological works, in chapters grouped into four books; but even that sort of arrangement, common in later philosophical texts, is made unusual in Aquinas’s version by the fact that many of his hundreds of chapters consist almost entirely of series of topically organized arguments, one after another.

The literary format that is characteristic of Aquinas’s [and other scholastic philosophers’] work, the “scholastic method,” is a hallmark of medieval philosophy. Treatises written in this format are typically divided into “questions” or major topics [such as “Truth”], which are subdivided into “articles,” which are detailed examinations of particular issues within the topic [such as “Is there truth in sense perception?”]. The examination carried out in the article begins with an affirmative or negative thesis in answer to the article’s yes/no question, and the thesis is then supported by a series of arguments. Since the thesis is typically opposed to the position the au-
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Theor will take, its supporting arguments are often called “objec-
tions.” Immediately following the objections is the presentation of
at least one piece of evidence on the other side of the issue – the sed
contra (“But, on the other hand . . .”). The sed contra is sometimes
an argument or two, sometimes simply the citation of a relevant
authority – just enough to remind the reader that, despite all the
arguments supporting the thesis, there are grounds for taking the
other side seriously. The body of the article contains the author’s
reasoned reply to the initial question, invariably argued for and often
introduced by pertinent explanations and distinctions. The article
then typically concludes with the author’s rejoinders to all the objec-
tions [and sometimes to the sed contra as well], so that the form of
the article is that of an ideal philosophical debate.

The scholastic method, derived from the classroom disputations
that characterized much medieval university instruction (and made
it more interactive and risky than the sort we’re used to), is the
methodological essence of scholastic philosophy and helps to ex-
plain its reputation for difficulty. But scholastic philosophy is hard
and dry for much the same reason as a beetle is hard and dry: its
skeleton is on the outside. Argument, the skeleton of all philosophy,
has been on the inside during most of philosophy’s history: covered
by artful conversation in Plato, by masterful rhetoric in Augustine,
by deceptively plain speaking in the British empiricists. Once one
gets over the initial strangeness of scholastic philosophy’s carefully
organized, abundant, direct presentation of its arguments, that char-
acteristic will be appreciated as making scholastic philosophy more
accessible and less ambiguous than philosophy often is. And the
scholastic method – laying out the arguments plainly and develop-
ing the issues in such a way that both sides are attacked and
defended – provides an opportunity, unique among the types of philo-
sophical literature, for understanding the nature of philosophical
reasoning and assessing its success or failure. Jan Aertsen [in Chap-
ter 1] explains the origins of scholasticism’s specific literary forms
and Aquinas’s uses of them.

V. MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

The most formidable obstacle to contemporary philosophers grant-
ing medieval philosophy the attention it deserves is the still wide-
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spread suspicion that it merely helps itself to carefully selected bits and pieces of philosophy in order to serve the purposes of theology, or that medieval philosophy simply is theology of a sort that might occasionally fool an unwise reader into thinking it is philosophy.

We can begin to dispel this misconception by observing that medieval philosophy's connection with theology is like philosophy's many connections with other disciplines in other periods, and that philosophy has been noticeably affected by one or another influence during most of its history. For instance, from the middle of the nineteenth century until the present, the dominant influences on philosophy seem to have included first biology and geology, then physics and mathematics, and now, perhaps, a combination of physics, neurophysiology, and computer science. Still, medieval philosophy, the longest of the traditionally recognized periods in the history of philosophy, is also the one most clearly marked by a single outside influence, and that influence is unquestionably theism of one sort or another—Christianity in most of western Europe, Judaism or Islam elsewhere. Until relatively recently, the influence of theism was considered to have permeated all of medieval philosophy. It did not; a great deal of medieval philosophy—logic, semantic theory, and parts of natural philosophy, for instance—could have been written by altogether irreligious people, and perhaps some of it was.

Theism's influence also used to be considered to have been unhealthy for medieval philosophy. It might have been so if the philosophy really had been confined to theological topics, but it wasn't; or if the medievals typically had developed, say, their theories of inference, of signification, or of acceleration with only religious purposes in view, or had applied religious criteria of some sort in assessing those theories, but they didn't. Of course, they did spend a lot of their time thinking carefully about religious and theological issues, somewhat as twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophers have done with linguistic issues, because they thought those issues were even more fundamental than [and hence explanatory of] many traditional philosophical issues. To that extent they might be fairly described as preoccupied with theism, but certainly not to the exclusion of other concerns or in such a way as to distort their philosophy into preaching or to obliterate the boundary between it and dogmatic theology.
As Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg have pointed out, during the Middle Ages

The most advanced scholarly research in philosophy... was made by students or teachers in the faculty of Theology [especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries]. This is why so much of the study of medieval philosophy is concerned with theological texts. But this historical connection does not entail that philosophy and theology could not be studied separately, or that theological goals determined philosophy and made it unfree and unphilosophical. There are large sections of pure philosophy in theological texts, often to the extent that theological authorities thought it necessary to intercede and demand a stricter limitation to theological problems. (Kenny, 1982, p. 15)

Philosophers have always been particularly, and legitimately, concerned with the influence of religion on philosophy, because of religion’s reputation for anti-intellectualism and its tendency to try to settle disputes by simply citing doctrine. But the professional attitude of medieval philosopher-theologians toward religion was determinedly anti-anti-intellectual, and in their professional capacity they saw doctrine primarily as part of their subject matter to be analyzed and argued over, rather than as an argument-stopper. In particular, no open-minded philosophical reader can study even a few pages of Aquinas without recognizing a kindred spirit, even when Aquinas is working on an unmistakably theological topic such as creation, God’s knowledge, or the Incarnation. Aquinas is at least as concerned as we are with making sense of obscure claims, exploring the implications and interrelations of theoretical propositions, and supporting them with valid arguments dependent on plausible premisses. And he is no less concerned than any responsible philosopher has ever been with the truth, coherence, consistency, and justification of his beliefs, his religious beliefs no less than his philosophical ones.

Still, theology is not philosophy, and if any medieval philosopher’s work seems correctly characterized as theology, Aquinas’s does (as Mark Jordan explains in Chapter 9). His active academic career was as a member of the Faculty of Theology; his biggest, most characteristic works seem to be altogether theological in their motivation; and he was officially designated a Doctor of the Church. But the modern philosophical reader should understand that although Aqui-
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Aquinas's motivation may be most readily described as theological, what he produces in acting on that motivation is thoroughly, interestingly philosophical. Some of the most fully developed and traditionally recognized components of Aquinas's philosophy are presented below in chapters by John Wippel, Norman Kretzmann, Scott MacDonald, Ralph McInerny, and Paul Sigmund, each of whom inevitably and quite naturally refers to connections between the particular philosophical subject matter and Aquinas's theological concerns.

A closer look at Aquinas's lifelong enterprise of philosophical theology will show that even its motivation can be construed as fundamentally philosophical. In Aquinas's Aristotelian view, all human beings by their very nature want to understand, and to understand a thing, event, or state of affairs is to know its causes; consequently, the natural human desire to understand will naturally, or at least ideally, spur the inquiring mind to seek knowledge of the first cause of all. Aquinas of course thinks that human beings have relatively easy access to particular knowledge of the absolutely first cause through divine revelation in Scripture. But he is convinced that a great deal of such knowledge can also be obtained through a standard sort of application of reason to evidence available to everyone without a revealed text. He is also convinced that even propositions conveyed initially by revelation and available only in that way – such as the doctrine of the Trinity – can be instructively clarified, explained, and confirmed by reasoning of a sort that differs from other philosophical reasoning only in its subject matter. Wippel's chapter [4] includes a discussion of the close connection between philosophy and theology in Aquinas's metaphysics, and Eleonore Stump's chapter [10] shows that even in Aquinas's commentaries on Scripture itself there is a good deal of philosophical material.

Of course, Aquinas is not simply a philosopher—theologian but the paradigmatic Christian philosopher—theologian. Nonetheless, he thought that Christians should be ready to dispute theological issues with non-Christians of all sorts. Since Jews accept the Old Testament and heretics the New, Christians can argue with them on the basis of commonly accepted authority, but because some non-Christians – for instance, Mohammedans and pagans – do not agree with us about the authority of any Scripture on the basis of which they can be convinced . . . it is necessary to have recourse to natural reason, to which everyone is compelled to assent – although where theological
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issues are concerned it cannot do the whole job" (SCG I.2.11). It is even more surprising that Aquinas differed from most of his thirteenth-century academic Christian contemporaries in the breadth and depth of his respect for and sense of partnership with the Islamic and Jewish philosopher-theologians Avicenna and Maimonides. As David Burrell explains in Chapter 3, Aquinas saw them as valued co-workers in the vast project of clarifying and supporting revealed doctrine by philosophical analysis and argumentation, uncovering in the process the need to investigate all the traditionally recognized areas of philosophy in a newly discerned web of relationships among themselves and with theology.

VI. AQUINAS’S ARISTOTELIANISM

Some scholars impressed with Aquinas’s achievements in general and sympathetic with his intellectual Christianity have insisted on viewing him as a theologian rather than a philosopher. They have taken a narrow view of philosophy, one that coincides better with Aquinas’s thirteenth-century understanding of philosophia than with our use of “philosophy,” and on that basis they have been willing to classify only Aquinas’s commentaries on Aristotle as philosophical works. Certainly those commentaries are philosophical, as purely philosophical as the Aristotelian works they elucidate. But if they constituted all the philosophy Aquinas had produced, no one could reasonably rank him among the great philosophers. As Jordan says below, Aquinas wrote those commentaries to make sense of Aristotle’s philosophy, not to set out a philosophy of his own. Our appreciation of his outstanding value as a philosopher depends on our seeing his ostensibly theological works as also fundamentally philosophical, in the way suggested above and developed differently by Aertsen and by Jordan (Chapters 1 and 9).

Aquinas’s aim in those many works of his requires him to take up traditional philosophical issues often, especially in metaphysics (see Wippel’s Chapter 4), philosophy of mind (Kretzmann’s Chapter 5), epistemology (MacDonald’s Chapter 6), ethics (McChenny’s Chapter 7), and politics and law (Sigmund’s Chapter 8). Even a casual reader of any of those detailed discussions will notice that Aquinas very often cites Aristotle as a source or in support of a thesis he is defending, and a reader who knows Aristotle well will recognize even more