Introduction

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0.1 The *Summa Theologiae*: A Demanding "Introduction"

Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–74) lived to be no more than 50, yet in his short career he wrote dozens of philosophical and theological works spanning multiple genres. Among these, the various *Quaestiones Disputatae*, or disputed questions, contain focused treatments of such specialized topics as truth, evil, virtue, and spiritual creatures. As revised transcripts of sophisticated graduate-level classroom exercises, these works presume familiarity with both time-honored and contemporary discussions of the relevant topics, as we see from contributions made by student participants in the exercise. By contrast, Aquinas composed the *Summa Theologiae* for students at the outset of their theological studies. In fact, his target audience for the *Summa* was not the highly educated few who succeeded in studying theology at such elite institutions as the University of Paris, where he conducted many of his disputations. Rather, they were friars from his own Dominican order – bright enough for studies but not the intellectuals who would be scholars and academics. Hence, Aquinas made sure to compose the *Summa* in clear, plain Latin, as free from jargon as any work of scholastic philosophical theology could be, and he takes pains to present topics in the order he finds most sensible for beginners. The *Summa* is the work of a master teacher.[1]

Knowing Aquinas's pedagogical intentions, we might wonder why an introductory-level work written in plain, lucid prose, itself a guide for students of modest capabilities, would require a critical guide for readers to grasp its teachings. It is no secret that philosophical works written in approachable, inviting language may nevertheless contain confoundingly difficult arguments or systems of thought. Hume's *Enquiries* still demand

[1] For discussion of Aquinas's pedagogical plans for the *Summa Theologiae*, see Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa*."

study, despite their admirable transparency. Few philosophers could write such entrancing prose as Plato or Wittgenstein, yet there has been no shortage of struggles to comprehend the *Republic* and *Philosophical Investigations*. It is the same with the *Summa Theologiae*, whose plain and straightforward expression shows us all the more clearly the difficulty of the topics Aquinas treats. In introducing students to the subject of his study, which Aquinas called "Christian religion" in the prologue to the *Summa*, Aquinas also introduces them to a stupefying number of debates and complexities in fields we would now describe as metaphysics, moral psychology, ethics, philosophy of religion, and theology. For Aquinas, the study of "Christian religion" requires both depth and breadth across these many areas.

As several of this volume's chapters make clear, the lessons Aquinas means to teach us in the *Summa* stretch our human capacities to their utmost, as we see most evidently in his treatment of the existence and nature of God. God is, as Brian Davies argues in Chapter 3, unknowable and inevitably mysterious. God is not a being like any other, is not a member of any kind; we can therefore not grasp God by any system of classification. Nor can we understand what God is like on the model of what creatures are like. If Socrates is just, then Socrates has a property – a virtue – of justice. His human potentiality for justice has been actualized. God's justice cannot be like this, however. God is complete actuality with no admixture of potentiality, and so must be absolutely simple. God must therefore be identical with perfect justice. Aquinas therefore expresses a powerful skepticism that human beings are able to form a positive conception of God.

Even familiar beings infinitely easier to grasp than God, such as ourselves, can be recalcitrant to accurate conceptualization. For instance, as Marilyn McCord Adams explains (Chapter 5), Aquinas's philosophical commitments lead him to the conclusion that the intellectual soul carries out activities without the body's participation, which in turn shows that the soul subsists per se and will survive the body's death. But if the intellectual soul is functionally independent of the organic body in this way, then how can Aquinas argue against Platonic dualism in favor of the view that the human being is unified by a single substantial form – the soul – that is the element in us explaining our essential characteristics, the constellation of structures, potentialities, and powers that characterize human being? In resolving these puzzles, Aquinas draws on both his metaphysics and psychology to offer answers that are as ingenious as they are controversial.

0.2 Reading the *Summa Theologiae*

The arguments of the *Summa* turn out to be no less challenging than those in works Aquinas writes for more sophisticated audiences. What makes the *Summa* a more introductory work is its more straightforward style and its meticulously plotted ordering of ideas. Aquinas's pedagogical sensitivity is evident throughout the work, as it had to be for Aquinas to achieve his goals. He means to discuss Christian religion in such a way that his students would grasp all they need to know to serve as moral and spiritual guides. That in turn requires him to treat a dizzying variety of topics in the course of hundreds and hundreds of pages. He asks the reader to study the entire work in order, bearing in mind the interconnections these many discussions bear to one another. Aquinas's thoughtful ordering of topics makes it easier for us to grasp these interconnections. For instance, as Michael Gorman explains (Chapter 11), the treatment of Christ, who has both divine and human natures and whose efforts redeem us from the wages of sin, comes after the discussion of divine nature, human nature, and sin. Nevertheless, it is a rare scholar who has studied every word of this text as Aquinas had intended. To help us see the *Summa* as Aquinas meant us to, most of this volume's chapters, such as Robert Pasnau's (Chapter 1), Stephen Brock's (Chapter 2), and Nicholas Lombardo's (Chapter 6), draw connections across the vast regions of this text rather than focusing on just a few of its questions.

In fact, the *Summa* often *appears* less daunting than it really is, precisely because readers treat it as a collection of individual treatises on discrete topics rather than as an interconnected whole presented in a carefully plotted order. That approach also makes it look far less theological than it really is, as we see from Jacob Schmutz's exposition of the *Summa's* reception (Chapter 12). After all, the massive Second Part concerns ethics (human action and passion, virtue and vice, wrongdoing), and much of the First Part treats human nature and created being more generally. That leaves just the unfinished Third Part, which investigates Christ and the sacraments, and the opening units of the First Part, which focus on God. Nevertheless, Aquinas did not write the *Summa* as a work of Christian humanism, since he means for us to understand creatures as products of God, dependent on him for their existence, reflecting him in their natures, and striving toward him so as to imitate him insofar as they can. The work is therefore deeply theological throughout. Even so, there is also considerable truth to the claim that the work's focus is on human beings. As Aquinas notes at the work's outset, his purpose is to convey

"what belongs to the Christian religion in a way suitable for the education of beginners." By "Christian religion," Aquinas does not mean a sort of catechism or statement of creed, but rather a way of life responsive to the distinctive truths of Christianity and expressing its characteristic virtues. As a work intended to guide us toward what Aquinas takes to be a flourishing life, which includes the right use of our cognitive and appetitive powers, the *Summa* must offer a detailed account of human nature that captures the ways in which our intellect, will, senses, and sensory appetite function. Aquinas finds it pedagogically useful to reach that goal by comparing and contrasting human beings with other intellectual beings (God and the angels) as well as non-rational animals. The treatments of God and the angels, then, serve not merely as treatises on these discrete topics; rather, they provide important background for the account of human beings, which will occupy the bulk of the *Summa*.

0.3 Human Nature

In one such discussion, Aquinas points out that human beings live in the metaphysical borderland between purely spiritual beings – God and the angels – and non-human animals. As with other animals, humans come to be when our soul informs matter, organizing it into the sort of body that lives the characteristically human life. The result is not a joining of two independent, or potentially independent, substances. Rather, as Marilyn McCord Adams points out, the soul as "the substantial form is the source of the *esse* and constitution of the whole composite" (Chapter 5, p. 91). Nevertheless, unlike the souls of other animals, which are the first principles only of organic functions, the human soul has intellectual cognition and so performs an activity that the body does not participate in. Therefore, our souls are incorporeal and incorruptible, continuing to exist even after separation from the body. Nevertheless, even in this state of separation, souls are different from angels. Since a separated soul cannot think by turning to phantasms, which requires the bodily power of imagination, God or angels must infuse the separated soul with the sorts of intelligible species through which angels cognize even particulars without need for phantasms. Our more limited minds, naturally suited to thinking by appealing to abstracted species supplemented by phantasms, will inevitably fail to reap as much cognitive benefit from these infused species as angels do.

Likewise, Aquinas explains, because the angels are entirely spiritual creatures, they can have only intellectual emotions or "affections," such

as intellectual joy or love. Like other embodied animals, humans also experience passions, which have a bodily expression. However, because of the ways in which our rational capacities interact with our sensory capacities, human passions are not simply reactions to sensory cognitive input, as Nicholas Lombardo argues (Chapter 6). The way our intellects conceive of an object influences the way our sensory cognitive powers grasp and present it. One might look at the Coliseum in Rome and see an architectural marvel, a place of massive animal slaughter, or the fruits of Vespasian's ransacking of the Temple in Jerusalem. Which perspective one takes will determine the sort of passion one will feel on contemplating the Coliseum.

0.4 Human Happiness

Aquinas intended the Dominican students studying his *Summa* to use it as a guide to human happiness or flourishing both for themselves and for those in their spiritual and moral care. It might seem odd, then, that he does not treat the subject of human happiness in detail until the beginning of the Second Part, after the 119 questions discussed in the First Part. Those 119 questions, however, contain important preliminary considerations that Aquinas will draw on in his arguments about the nature and attainment of human happiness.

Like God and the angels, human beings are intellectual: We understand the natures of things and see how they are ordered and interconnected with each other. For this reason, we are able to pursue those fields of study that Aquinas considers sciences. In addition to our ability to use our intellect theoretically, we can also use it practically. We do not simply grasp particular good things and pursue them. Rather, we have a general conception of a good, flourishing life, and we are able to deliberate about and determine for ourselves what would constitute such a life and what steps we should take to attain such a life. This intellectual element is what is highest in us and makes us God-like.

Therefore, when Aquinas explores what happiness consists in, he argues that it is an activity of our theoretical intellect, which is the highest activity of our highest capacity. In fact, as Tobias Hoffmann explains (Chapter 7), it must be an activity that makes our lives self-sufficient, so that we lack nothing fulfilling, as well as final, so that it is an end in itself and not a means to some further end. In this life, however, we can never reach perfect happiness because we will never be able to gain complete understanding. We find that perfection, Aquinas argues, only in

the vision of the divine essence itself, which is reserved for the blessed in heaven (I-II 3.8). Nevertheless, we can achieve an imperfect happiness in this life by contemplating the theoretical sciences, such as physics or metaphysics (I-II 3.5). Because, as we learn from the First Part, all creatures are in a way reflections of the divine essence, when we contemplate science we are united in our intellects with these reflections and are thereby assimilated to God. In addition, Aquinas admits that even the virtuous exercise of practical reason affords us a measure of happiness in this life, even though it makes us God-like in a less robust way: We are related to what we know through our practical intellect as God is related to what he knows, namely, as their cause. Nevertheless, for the long remainder of the Second Part, Aquinas will focus on just this sort of virtuous practical activity. That is because human beings merit the perfect happiness of the next life through practical activity informed by the virtue of charity. Because our eternal happiness depends on it, the virtuous activity of the practical intellect takes on enormous importance in Aquinas's guide to the moral and spiritual life.

0.5 Happiness Won and Lost

We have already seen that the perfect happiness of the next life, as well as one sort of this-worldly happiness, is gained through virtuous activity. Although Aquinas contends that virtuous human action will conform to universal moral rules, those rules do not dictate our virtuous choices in any straightforward way, as both Jean Porter (Chapter 9) and Matthias Perkams (Chapter 8) explain. Practical reasoning for Aquinas is not simply a matter of subsuming a particular case under a general rule and straightforwardly deducing the right course of action. For one thing, we must judge which rules are salient in the conditions in which we find ourselves and then determine which rule is best applicable here and now. Even then, moral reasoning does not follow a simple algorithm. Rules must be interpreted and applied in concrete circumstances. For instance, if a student determines that she ought to express gratitude for a scholarship she receives from a donor, she must still think carefully about how to do so appropriately. She must consider the right means (a handwritten letter or an email?), the right content (evidence of academic success or simply an expression of thanks?), the best tone (steering a course between too fawning a display, which would be demeaning to her, and too meager an articulation, which would be ungracious). In particular, she must bear in mind who her donor is (a kindly neighbor or a public figure?) and

who she herself is (a student with her particular plan of study and career goals). So, although practical reasoning is always grounded in universal rules, those rules may lead to different judgments about how to proceed, even in very similar situations, because of importantly different circumstances. This is an especially important lesson for moral and spiritual advisors, who must learn that there is no such thing as a life of simply following moral rules. The moral life requires sensitivity to detail, imagination, sympathy, and a robust self-knowledge, without which universal moral rules may be very dangerous indeed.

By repeatedly performing virtuous activity, we develop virtues, that is, dispositions or habits (*habitus*) that incline us to good activities. The virtues dispose us to attend to morally salient considerations, keeping us focused on the right goals as well as increasing our sensitivity to relevant circumstances. Because they render our sensory appetite more responsive to reason, we experience fewer and less powerful wayward passions that would render our actions unpleasant and therefore make us sluggish. Instead, those with virtue have the resolve to carry out what they have determined to do, even if it turns out to be difficult, and they find pleasure in leading morally good lives.

These so-called "acquired" moral virtues enable us to achieve imperfect happiness in this life. To attain the perfect happiness of the next life, people need special, divinely infused virtues that enable them to merit union with God. Chief among these virtues are what Aquinas calls the "theological" virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Faith disposes humans to assent to what is revealed by God. Aquinas does not deny that philosophical reasoning can lead us to at least some truths of faith. (As JT Paasch argues in Chapter 4, Aquinas might even have the resources to provide a philosophical argument for a triune God, though Aquinas himself says otherwise.) However, as Thomas M. Osborne, Jr. explains (Chapter 10), faith inclines people to believe on different grounds from those employed in philosophical arguments. The assent of faith is a response to divine authority expressed in revelation, and it is divine grace that enables one to make such a response. Through faith, one can be confident in what one believes because it is God's teaching, even if the truth of what one believes is not evident. Through the virtue of hope, people rely on God's power to help them attain a future good that is exceedingly difficult to attain: the happiness of the next life. Counting on God's power gives the hopeful person the confidence to pursue a morally virtuous life. Anticipation of that future good in turn rouses them further to persevere in that life. Finally, the virtue of charity moves its possessors to love God

above all and to love their neighbor as themselves. In addition, charity directs all the other virtues to its own end: If a person of charity acts generously or courageously, that is not simply because she values generosity or courage. That is also because she sees those she is helping through these virtues as brothers and sisters, fellow children of God.

Eternal happiness is merited through virtuous acts motivated by charity, but it is lost through sin, which is a barrier to the grace needed for the infused virtues. We sin when our activity is defective. Sometimes we fail to will and carry out activity we should, and sometimes the activity we do will and carry out fails to live up to moral standards as determined by reason or divine law. Aquinas upholds the view, widely accepted by medieval thinkers, that in either case, the evil we are responsible for is not a positive element or quality but is rather a privation. The evil of sin is the defect in our activity.

On the one hand, it seems plausible to think that if we lose the relationship with God that is the source of meritorious activity, that would be due to defective activity on our part. However, this view is also puzzling in obvious ways. How can the evil of sin, which strictly speaking is not something that really exists, have any causal consequences at all? Likewise, how can any field of study explore the evil of sin if evil does not really exist? Stephen Brock (Chapter 2), drawing on metaphysical, psychological, and moral theses from Aquinas, argues that the *Summa* helps to answer these questions by explaining the ways in which even positive things can be denominated evil. For instance, we call acts evil when they fail to live up to the standards required by morality. The failure may be a privation, but the act is a positive item. Likewise, if acts are evil, that is not because they aim at nothing at all, but because they aim at objects that reason finds to be unfitting. These objects are positive items, but pursuing them means failing to pursue a fitting end. These positive concomitants of evil allow Aquinas to subsume sin into his rational study of philosophical theology, detailing its causes, effects, and remedies – crucial topics for any work dedicated to moral and spiritual direction.

0.6 Charity

Even this brief introduction to Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* should give readers an idea of the exceptional breadth and complexity of his thought, which not only spans nearly every subfield of philosophy but draws on all of them to teach his Dominican beginners what is important for them as moral and spiritual guides. However, I do not want to leave readers

with the idea that the most impressive characteristic of the *Summa* is its complexity. Equally impressive, and evident to anyone who reads the work, is its deep charity, which we see most clearly in the way Aquinas treats those philosophers and theologians, whether his predecessors or contemporaries, with whom he carries on a discussion. He treats them always as colleagues in the same enterprise of searching for and teaching the truth. When he presents their ideas, he strives for fair and plausible ways of understanding their views. In fact, such fairness stems from one of Aquinas's most noteworthy moral considerations: Judging mere things, and judging people, are importantly different (II-II 60.4). When we judge mere things, we aim for the greatest accuracy possible. When we judge humans, however, we must also be mindful that we harm others when we think ill of them without sufficient reason. Therefore, when a person's reputation is at stake, we should try, whenever evidence allows it, to judge him or her in a positive way. It is not simply in Aquinas's *teaching* that we find a guide to life. We can also find it in the charitable spirit that animates his work.