

Introduction

The Thomistic tradition takes its name from the thirteenth-century religious thinker and saint who is its source and inspiration: the Dominican Friar Thomas Aquinas.¹ Aquinas understood himself to be a theologian, and that is what he was. This obvious biographical fact needs to be underlined at the beginning, however, since it has often since been lost sight of in treatments of his thought.² The reason for this is that Aquinas also developed a powerful, innovative, and comprehensive philosophy which has proved to be at least as perennial, if not more so, than the theological synthesis that it was originally designed to serve. His followers have kept both strains of his thought alive until this day, but not always combining the same dual expertise. Theology and philosophy have since become more distinct, and as each has fragmented into sub-disciplines of academic specialization, it becomes harder and harder for anyone to master the thought of Aquinas as a whole. Yet grasping the whole is essential to grasping the part, as evidenced by the master work of Aquinas's mind: his *Summa theologiae*. You cannot understand any part of the *Summa* unless you understand its place within the whole, and much violence has been done to Aquinas's thought by abstracting it from the larger context in order to present it in discrete units.

For a Thomist who considers Aquinas in this way, as I do, a book such as this poses a number of problems. First, the set of topics currently considered to fall within the domain of the philosophy of religion does not map easily into the traditional Thomistic universe of discourse because it combines into one philosophical discipline what Thomists would want to separate into two formally distinct disciplines of theology and philosophy. To put the matter another way, contemporary philosophy of religion appears to the Thomist as something of a hybrid. Some of its standard topics and approaches are unproblematically philosophical by Thomist lights, but others seem to be formally theological.³ The

¹ The best biography is Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C. : The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

² Notice the title of Thomas F. O'Meara's recent study: *Thomas Aquinas, Theologian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). The very title signals O'Meara's intention to emphasize that the fundamental cast of Aquinas's thought is theological rather than philosophical.

³ Chapter Two tries to explain how Thomists have traditionally understood the formal difference and inter-relationship of philosophy and theology, reason and faith.

template of this book and this series thus poses a problem for the Thomist because it blurs the formal boundaries between philosophy and theology. As much as possible, I have tried to stay on the philosophical side of the line, but often it has been necessary to bring theological issues into play in order to explicate the logic of the Thomistic position. I have endeavored throughout to make clear to the reader when the discussion crosses the line from philosophy into theology.

Because this book involves both philosophical and theological considerations, it would ideally require a Thomist author with broad competencies in both disciplines. My academic specialization is Thomistic philosophy, but as a Dominican friar I have also received extensive training in the theology of Aquinas; working in the field of philosophy of religion has enabled me to keep alive my interest in Thomistic theology. While this background does not make me the ideal person to write this book, it does make me conscious of how broad a range of knowledge would be necessary to write the perfect book of this kind. The virtue of having one person author a work like this is that it provides a unitary perspective and economy of consideration that would be lacking in a collection of separate essays by specialists in each field. The price paid for such unity is perhaps some unevenness of treatment, since no one person is equally competent in every area of the philosophy of religion, especially when it ranges over both philosophical and theological topics. I have tried to remedy my limitations through research and consultation. How well I have done that is for the reader to decide.

In the case of each of the topics considered in this book, I have endeavored to define the major issues under that rubric that have been debated within the Thomistic tradition. Given the holistic character of Aquinas's thought, a consideration of any one of the topics in the book leads naturally and inevitably into other topics. I have tried as much as possible to make each chapter able to stand on its own, but in the interests of economy I have also tried not to duplicate discussions; hence I often refer the reader in the footnotes to the other places in the book where the relevant cognate discussions can be found. Because the Thomistic tradition is not monolithic, as I outline in Chapter One, I have tried to give the reader a sense of the most important variant positions. My strategy is to begin wherever possible with the more traditional or classical position, as defined by its proximity to Aquinas's original view, and then use that as a baseline to explore more creative and contemporary interpretations of Aquinas. This means that there is quite a bit of consideration of the texts of Aquinas in this book,⁴ which strikes me as inevitable and indeed desirable in a work on Thomism. Yet this is not a book on Aquinas, so I have not gone into the historical background to his views. I treat Aquinas as a participant in an ongoing philosophical dialogue, where his views can continue to be attractive in their original form or can become attractive through creative reinterpretation. I have tried to be fair-minded in cataloguing the various disagreements among Thomists. I do have views of my own, however, and they inform my treatments; the attentive reader will figure them out by the logic of my presentation and the critical questions that I raise. But I have tried to give an accurate and fair account of all the relevant schools of thought, even when I am not convinced of their cogency. I draw from sources both contemporary and classic,

⁴ All the translations of Aquinas in this book are my own.

and from various languages; since the major audience of the book is English-speaking, there is naturally a preponderance of references to works in that language. My accounts of the various topics in this book provide an initial Thomistic orientation, not a final word, and I have endeavored to provide ample bibliographical information for the reader to pursue each topic further. I consider my task to be like that of the biblical scribe commended by Jesus for being like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. I believe there is some treasure for philosophers of religion in the Thomistic tradition, and I hope this book provides something of a map to it.

Abbreviations of the Works of Aquinas

CT	<i>Compendium of Theology</i> (Question, Article)
DA	<i>Disputed Questions on the Soul</i> or <i>De anima</i> (Question, Article)
DM	<i>Disputed Questions on Evil</i> or <i>De malo</i> (Question, Article)
DP	<i>Disputed Questions on Power</i> or <i>De potentia</i> (Question, Article)
DT	<i>Commentary on Boethius's De Trinitate</i> (Question, Article)
DV	<i>Disputed Questions on Truth</i> or <i>De veritate</i> (Question, Article)
QL	<i>Quodlibetal Questions</i> (Question, Article)
SCG	<i>Summa contra gentiles</i> (Book, Chapter)
Sent.	<i>Commentary on the Sentences</i> (Book, Distinction, Question, Article)
ST	<i>Summa theologiae</i> (Part, Question, Article)



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0078-2>

The Thomist Tradition

Shanley, B.J.

2002, XIV, 240 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0078-2