

The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas: An Overview

The thought of the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274 CE), was the most important and influential of the High Middle Ages. His *Summa Theologiae* is regarded as the most comprehensive treatment of the relation of philosophy and theology. His theories remain the foundation of the Roman Catholic Church, and study of his philosophy remains vital and important today. One important fact needs to be said at the very beginning of any study of Aquinas, that is, his attempt to integrate the various strands of medieval thought into a comprehensive system conveys a better understanding of medieval intellectual life than does any other work of any other philosopher of this period. His natural law theory combines elements drawn from Platonic, Aristotlean, Roman Law, Stoicism, the Church Fathers, Augustine, Feudal Theory, and the practices of the various states existing in his day.

In the century preceding Aquinas, the intellectual life in the West suddenly sprang to life. Philosophical speculation and argument developed rapidly. One of the more difficult elements of his treatises is the manner and record of this style of doing philosophy. Common practice among philosophers and theologians was to call a public debate over a set of theses. One person would advance a positive position with respect to that thesis (the so called *Avocatus Dei* or God's Advocate) and the other would advance a negative position with respect to that thesis (the so called *Avocatus Diaboli* or Devil's Advocate). Each would then respond to the other in a series of objections, and each would be allowed the opportunity to respond to these. This manner of presenting a thesis, hearing objections and replying to them is still practiced in Western philosophy to this day. In fact, at the final stage of philosophical development, Ph D candidates are still required to advance a set of theses and defend them orally before a committee of full professors before permission is granted to write the candidate's Dissertation.

The principle contribution of Aquinas was to develop a systematic philosophical and theological response to the challenge posed to medieval Christianity by the rediscovery of the whole of Aristotle's philosophy which, except for his works on logic, had been lost to the West until the thirteenth century. Earlier medieval thought relied for its view of the world on the Bible, Augustine, Plato and the neo-Platonists. The intellectual revival which began in the twelfth century looked to Plato as its principal philosophical inspiration, despite the fact that only his *Phaedo*, *Meno*, and part of the *Timaeus* were available in Latin. During Aquinas' time, the works of Aristotle were translated into Latin for the first time. Along with these works, the work of the Arabic and Jewish scholars were also made available to the West in the Latin tongue. The problem was reconciling Aristotle with the tenets of the Christian faith. This was a very serious problem. Aristotle held that the world was uncreated, and he could be read to hold the common Greek view that the world always existed and could not have been created, but the Christian Church taught that God freely created the world, and that the world had a beginning and could not have existed prior to creation. Aristotle's prime mover was a self-absorbed intelligence that had no providential design for the world or its human inhabitants, but the Christian God was an intelligence that providentially created the world and each human being. Aristotle never explicitly affirmed the personal immortality of the human soul, and he considered proper human behavior exclusively as a prerequisite for happiness in this life, but the Christian unequivocally affirmed the

immortality of the human soul and unequivocally conditioned happiness in the next life on proper behavior in this one.

What makes matters more difficult was the nearly simultaneous introduction of Averroes as the most authoritative interpreter of Aristotle compounded these problems. Where Aristotle could be interpreted to suppose rather than to affirm that the world was eternal and necessary, Averroes explicitly affirmed that the world was such. Where Aristotle could be interpreted to hold that the individual human soul was intellectual and so immortal, Averroes categorically denied that the individual human soul was intellectual by its own power and held that it perished with the dissolution of the human being. And Averroes asserted not only that philosophical reason and religious faith are different ways of knowing, but also that the way of reason, that is, the way of philosophy is superior to the way of faith, that is the way of theology.

These problems became far more complicated by a series of events. Since we do not have the luxury of time to probe all of them, let's simply address some of their broader aspects. Let's look at three problems. First, there is a conflict within Christianity itself about attitudes concerning the "world". According to Christian faith, the world had been created by a beneficent God and corrupted by man's sin. If the Christian emphasized the world as part of the divine plan, he or she would take a much more positive attitude towards it than if the emphasis was placed on the corruption resulting from sin. Contrary to the tendencies of most of his contemporaries, Aquinas leaned to the former. Although he does not ignore the reality of sin, he tends to stress the world as a product of God's creative will, working in a way that demonstrates His divine plan and His love for man and His desire that humans achieve happiness. However, he argues that man can only find true happiness and complete fulfillment in the vision of God after death.

The second problem is the apparent conflict between Aristotle's writings and Christianity in the relationship between faith and reason. There were two attitudes here. One, to insist that there is a compatibility between these two approaches to truth, one through reason, the other through faith, which God had intended to assist man in knowing his divine plan. Second, to denigrate the capacities of human reason, and to emphasize man's sinful tendency to use his reason for self-deception and pride, and to urge him rather to rely on Christian revelation as contained in the Bible and the teachings of the Church as the only safe way to true knowledge. Aquinas stresses the first. That there really is no incompatibility between Reason and Faith, and both are necessary. The truths of faith and those of reason are not contradictory.

Finally the belief in the possibility of a harmony between man's eternal destiny and his life in the world: that is, Aristotle's account of human happiness and the Christian Doctrine of Salvation could be reconciled by appeal to our two natures. What Aquinas does is stress the difference between the end of our natural nature and that of our supernatural nature. Here the synthesis between Aristotle's account of human happiness and the Doctrines of the Church finally come together. What Aristotle provides with his practical sciences are those necessary conditions in order for any human being to achieve the ends of the body. But, there are further ends, those of the soul, which can only be achieved through revelation. A straight forward intuition, but one that is horribly complicated to prove. Hence, in examining parts of the *Summa*, one will find both tendencies in Aquinas' work. His real genius comes in as providing the arguments to do this.