

# Aquinas and the Life of the Mind

James V. Schall SJ

---

‘Sicut natura non deficit homini in necessariis, quamvis non dederit sibi arma et tegumenta sicut aliis animalibus, quia dedit ei rationem et manus, quibus possit haec sibi acquirere; ita nec deficit homini in necessariis, quamvis non daret sibi aliquod principum quo posset beatitudinem consequi; hoc enim erat impossibile. Sed dedit ei liberum arbitrium, qua possit converti ad Deum, qui eum faceret beatum. ‘Quae enim per amicos possumus, per nos aequaliter possumus,’ ut dicitur in III Eth. (1112b27).’

– Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 5, 5, ad 1.<sup>1</sup>

‘That *strangeness* of things, which is the light in all poetry, and indeed in all art, is really connected with their otherness; or what is called their objectivity. What is subjective must be stale; it is exactly what is objective that is in this imaginative manner strange. In this the great contemplative is the complete contrary of that false contemplative, the mystic who looks only into his own soul, the selfish artist who shrinks from the world and lives only in his own mind. According to St. Thomas, the mind acts freely of itself, but its freedom exactly consists in finding a way out to liberty and the light of day; to reality and the land of the living.’

– G. K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas*, 1933.<sup>2</sup>

## I

Last winter, on the Feast of Thomas Aquinas, I had the pleasure of addressing a colloquium on this great saint at the University of St. Thomas at Fredericton, New Brunswick, in Canada.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, it is a delight and an honor this winter, on the Feast of St. Thomas, to

<sup>1</sup> ‘Just as nature is not depriving anything to man in necessary things, although she did not give him arms and hides as in other animals, because she gave him reason and hands, by which he can acquire these things for himself; so also neither is nature lacking to man in necessary things even though she did not give him any principle by which he would be able to obtain beatitude, for this was impossible. But she did give him free choice, by which he could turn to God, who would make him happy. ‘For those things that are through friends, are equally through ourselves,’ as Aristotle says in the Third Book of his *Ethics*.’

<sup>2</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Image, 1956), 183–84.

<sup>3</sup> James V. Schall, ‘Aquinas and the Defense of Ordinary Things: On “What Common Men Call Common Sense,”’ *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars’ Quarterly* 27 (Winter, 2004), 16–22.

be here at Ohio Dominican University in Columbus. I had actually been on this campus some quarter of a century ago. By chance, I had known Sister Camilla Mullay, O. P., who was engaged in writing a history of this college before she died not too long ago.

The history of a college is the memory of a college. What a college remembers, just as what we ourselves remember, pretty much defines what we are, what we choose to stand for, what we choose to reject or ignore. Among the principal things any college with the name 'Dominican' in its title must, above all, remember is Thomas Aquinas. He was a man who seems to have remembered everything he ever read and who, subsequently, thought about everything he remembered. Indeed, he wrote about the very power of memory and its relation to thought. Aquinas knew more than he read. He also thought of a number of things no one before or after him has thought about or thought about quite so well. Yet, Thomas is most famous for his defense of ordinary things along with our natural ability to know them and to speak in our words that indicate *what they are*. We can and do, like Adam, name things, whereby we can communicate with one another about the reality that surrounds us, the reality within us.

Thomas Aquinas was a unique saint. He was, as I often like to recall, the only saint who was canonized merely for 'thinking,' as Cardinal von Schönborn once remarked of him. But this theme of 'thinking' is what I want to speak to you about this morning. Why would 'thinking' qualify for sanctity? Don't we 'think' all the time? What, after all, is so unusual about thinking? And yet, we have intimations that thinking somehow brings us to the heart of things when we hear that Aristotle, who plays such a central role in Aquinas' life, defines his First Mover, or God, as 'thought thinking on itself,' a definition that Thomas himself will respect and develop once he knows of the revelation of the Trinity, of the inner life of the Godhead. That the second person of the Trinity was called, in revelation, 'the Word' would not, I suspect, have overly surprised Aristotle. It was certainly intelligible to Aquinas.

And yet, Thomas is always very careful in speaking about what we can and cannot know about God. 'It is impossible,' he tells us, 'through natural reason to come to a knowledge of the Trinity of Persons' (I, 32, 1) At first sight, we might think this an undue restriction. It looks to be a lowering to its own limits of our power of reasoning, of which we are quite proud. But Thomas adds that those who try to prove this doctrine by reason actually 'denigrate' the faith by making its teaching simply circumscribed by the reaches of our own intellects and their mode of knowing. To claim that we can fully explain God by our own powers is, implicitly, a claim that we are God, which with any insight into ourselves, we are quite sure we are not. Still, it is all right to be what we are, individual human beings, not everything, not nothing, but something.

Nevertheless, Aquinas tells us that we can use our intellects to show that this central teaching about the inner Trinitarian life of God 'is not impossible.' We can show that the arguments against it are themselves contradictory, a principle that leads us to suspect that reason and revelation are not unrelated to each other. Indeed, because of the relations and processions within this inner life of God, Thomas concludes that God did not produce creatures because of any lack in the Godhead, as if He needed them for His own perfection or companionship. If He did 'need' creation, He would be a very limited God. Rather He produced creatures, including ourselves, through a 'love out of His own goodness' (I, 32, 1, ad 3). We do not exist because of some lack or loneliness in God but because of His abundance. This fact makes our existence more, not less, glorious.

On the surface, Thomas Aquinas lived a rather short, even uneventful life. He was dead by the time he was forty-nine. He published his first treatises when he was in his early twenties. He was still working on the famous *Summa Theologiae* when he died. He completed only up to Book 3, chapter 6, of his Commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*. He did happily finish the commentaries on the *Ethics* and the *Metaphysics*. A commentary, incidentally, is a precise rendering of the text at hand so that its complete argument is presented in an orderly fashion. To be able to understand and explain a text, as it stands, not as we would like it to stand, must be the beginning of any true education.

It was said, moreover, that Aquinas could dictate three different books to his secretaries at the same time, a feat I do not recommend even with a computer, which he did not have. I have often wondered whether Aquinas could have written more than he did with a quill if he had the latest model Dell computer. I actually doubt it. It is difficult to see how he could have done more than he did in the relatively few years given to him. It is always worth one's effort to go to the library, locate them, and simply look at the *Opera Omnia* of Thomas Aquinas, to page through some of its many volumes just to have a sense of what he had written, of its scope and variety.

Augustine lived some thirty years longer than Aquinas, but wrote at least as much. Yet, it is said of Augustine that any one who claims that he has read all Augustine's massive works is a liar. While you are at it, it is equally worthwhile to take a look at the *Opera Omnia* of Augustine, whom Aquinas cites more than any other author besides Scripture. And of Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologiae* alone reaches over 4,000 folio pages, it is said that if, when you are twenty-two, you start merely to read the corpus of Aquinas' work, and read diligently every day for eight hours, you probably could not have read, let alone comprehended or written, what Aquinas wrote by the time you are forty-nine, the age at which he died.

But my intention here is not to frighten you away from reading Aquinas because of the vastness of his output. Rather it is to indicate why it is not only possible to read him, but delightful, moving. There is no intellectual pleasure, I think, quite like reading and understanding even one article in the works of Thomas Aquinas. To learn to do so is worth your whole college career. Not to know him, I suspect, is equivalent to being educated in something but not precisely in everything, in the parts but not the whole. Indeed, not learning to read Aquinas is to deprive ourselves of the shortest and most concise avenue to those truths for which alone our minds were created in the first place.

Aquinas did live in some interesting places, places which we can still visit, in fact. He was born across from the great Abbey of Monte Cassino, between Rome and Naples. Early on, he was a student at the Abbey. Later, after joining the Dominicans, he was in Paris, in Cologne, in Orvieto, Rome, and Naples. He died in a beautiful Cistercian Abbey called Fossanova, on his way to a Council of the Church. In those years, I believe, the Dominican friars had a rule that their members, on going from place to place, had to walk. I believe Albertus Magnus, Aquinas' great teacher, was nicknamed something like 'boots,' because of this tradition. One hesitates to call this rule 'inspired,' but it is indeed a good way to see Europe, or any place else, namely on foot. Indeed, in some sense, you don't see a place until, as it were, you 'see' it on foot, particularly, I suspect, places like Paris, Cologne, Orvieto, Naples, and certainly Rome.

Thomas was said to be quite a large man, at least the size of a tackle on the Buckeyes. Still, the walking everywhere probably was not formally designed to keep the thirteenth century Dominicans in shape, though it may have had, *per accidens*, as Thomas would say, that happy effect which we moderns build so many gyms and exercise machines to achieve in lieu of walking. The alternative in the thirteenth century to going to Paris from Naples on foot was not on the airbus, or the 'rapido' train on the European railroads, or a comfortable Mercedes-Benz sedan, but a donkey or horse. Such animal transport could make the trip faster, no doubt, than walking, whether more comfortably, I leave to your imagination.

## II

In the first passage I cited in the beginning, we note that nature gave us 'reason and hands' instead of more substantial claws or hides with which to fight or protect ourselves. Notice it is assumed that we, like the animals, may need to do precisely this, defend ourselves. In a definition of man going back to his philosophic master, Aristotle, man is said to be that being in the universe who alone has this

combination of mind and hands. Without mind, hands would be merely claws or flippers; but without hands, minds could not get out of themselves into the world to make or do anything. It is a shrewd, vivid definition. The purpose of claws and hides in animals is to defend, protect, and provide for themselves. Human beings can figure out how to do this very thing even better by the use of their reason and hands.

Already here we have an instance of God expecting us to do things for ourselves. We might call it the philosophic basis of entrepreneurship, of economics, even. The world would not be more perfect, contrary to what we might at first think, if everything were done for us. Notice also that in this passage Aquinas is answering an implied objection of great force and influence. Somehow, the objection reads, whatever caused man to be the kind of being he is, God let us say, did not give him what he needed, what was necessary, to accomplish his purpose in the world. Clearly this claim is an attack on the creator. He did not give us what we needed to accomplish our purpose. He was inadequate, unjust, niggardly. Thus, since we are deprived of what we need, nothing is our fault.

Even worse, the accusation proceeds, besides not having claws or hides, God did not give us any principle by which we could easily achieve complete happiness by our own powers. It is in a passage like this where Aquinas is most succinct, most amazing. First he makes the totally laconic remark that it would be 'impossible' for God to do this. The kind of happiness for which we are created is quite beyond our natural powers to give. In other words, we are given more than we deserve. Are we therefore to despair because we do not have this principle under our own control? Not at all. Why not? Because, Aquinas states, we have been given a power of free choice by which we can turn to God. We are not, in other words, as lacking as we might at first think.

Why does that solve the problem of why we are not given, in necessary things, that is, in the most necessary things, a principle of our happiness? To answer, Aquinas simply makes a brief citation from Aristotle's treatment of friendship in the *Ethics*. If a friend does something for us or we for him, we can consider that it is done by and for us. The possibility of this happening has to do with the Incarnation, in which Christ said, in John's Last Supper, that He no longer considers us servants but friends. Thus, nature is not incomplete because something is lacking to us. From these seminal passages we can conclude both that there are things we must do for ourselves and things we must receive from our friends, including divine ones. And since we are free, we must choose to receive them as we choose to accept what our friends do for us. Who else, I ask you, but Aquinas tells us these things so briefly, so insightfully?

Let us now take a look at the second citation, the one from Chesterton's biography of Aquinas. This wonderful book of Chesterton has caused many a good philosopher to despair. How could an English journalist like Chesterton, with no apparent academic learning, who seems to have skimmed over a few books on Aquinas and looked at perhaps the *Summa*, have ever managed to tell us what Aquinas was about? Yet, few books do it better. Indeed, later on, I will mention a couple of books on Aquinas that might help you to get started in discovering him. In fact, I will mention them here – they are, besides the Chesterton book, two books of Josef Pieper, *A Guide to Thomas Aquinas* and *The Silence of St. Thomas*, any book on Aquinas by Ralph McInerny, A. D. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, and Peter Kreeft's *Summa of the Summa*.

Chesterton begins by pointing out the fact that things in reality are 'strange,' as he calls them. He calls this 'strangeness' the 'light of all poetry.' What does he mean? He means that the reality, the being, of what is not ourselves is simply there to be discovered. What we find is not some Cartesian projection of our inner mind onto things. Things are received into our minds, but after our manner of knowing them. Our minds are capable of receiving *what is*, into ourselves, into our minds. By simply being ourselves, we are in our proper knowing, what is not ourselves. We are concerned with the 'otherness' of things, with the fact that they are simply out there and we can know them. Chesterton next compares the true contemplative who beholds *what is* with the 'mystic who looks only into his own soul, or the selfish artist who shrinks from the world and lives only in his own mind.'

This latter is a sentence full of blunt philosophic controversy. It is true that we ourselves also are created things. Our self-reflection reaches to our awareness that we are not the ground of our own being. Our own minds are not complete if they only know themselves and not what is not ourselves. Chesterton adds, marvelously, that our minds are made to 'act freely.' But this freedom does not mean that we, in our freedom, create the world, as so much of modernity in its autonomy holds. Rather it means that we are free to direct ourselves to *what is*, but we are not determined to do so. We are to use our liberty to get out of ourselves to see what is there, to wonder about what it is that is not ourselves. This is how Chesterton used the word 'strangeness' to emphasize that what we encounter is never what we could have previously imagined by our own powers.

### III

In a Christmas letter I received from a doctor in Mt. Vernon, Ohio, I noticed that on the left hand border of his letter, he had placed a

photograph of Thomas Aquinas. Underneath this photo are the following words from Aquinas: 'The greatest good that one can do to his neighbor is lead him to the truth.' I despair of finding the exact source of this citation in St. Thomas. I confess looking through the questions in the *Summa* on truth. However, it does not matter. This is certainly St. Thomas. It is something that I want to comment on since truth is the purpose of thinking. Thinking for thinking's sake without a measure or standard that tells us whether a thought is true or not is simply a kind of vapid chaos of thoughts too fuzzy to manifest any order.

Today, no doubt, this emphasis on truth is an absolutely counter-cultural position. Truth is said to be our 'enemy.' Its claims divide us. Its very existence is a sign of 'fanaticism.' The truth will not make us free. No, our freedom makes the truth. Chesterton had it quite wrong. Freedom, it is said, is not limited and measured by *what is*. So understood, of course, truth makes no claim on us. We need not take it into consideration in our doing that we do, whatever we do. We insist on being 'accepted,' not 'judged.'

Yet, we have Aquinas here telling us that the greatest service we can give to our neighbor is to lead him to the truth. Is it not giving him a cup of water? The two activities are not contradictory, of course. Still before we can give anyone a cup of water, we have to know what water is. We have to know that the water we give is drinkable, not poisonous. We have to know its 'truth,' in other words, about water. And we have to act on this truth lest we be not free..

Now Aquinas was quite insightful when it came to the question of how to 'lead' someone to the truth. The *Summa* itself was written precisely for beginners. Aquinas was a common sense and a common man philosopher. While he discussed almost every topic imaginable, he had the marvelous facility of breaking the matter up into human-sized 'bites,' as it were. He wrote so that the reader could understand, step by step. This is why, in Aquinas, one can find some of his most remarkable insights in brief, two or three sentence answers to objections. In reading Aquinas, we always have to be ready to be overwhelmed by something we never thought of. Josef Pieper's books are full of these brief, deeply penetrating citations from Aquinas. I think especially of his book, *The Truth of All Things*.

Let me take, for instance, this concise answer to an objection to a question entitled, '*Utrum Veritas Sit Pars Justitiae*.' The objection stated that 'justice is to render another what is due,' the classical definition of justice. But if we give 'truth' to someone, it does not seem like a true 'debt,' like owing money. Therefore, the objection concludes, truth is not a part of justice.

Here is how Aquinas went about answering this objection. First, he recalled that man is a 'social animal,' that is, he must live in society



and in the polity, as Aristotle had said. It is natural for him to do so. But a human being owes to another that which is necessary to live in society. Obviously, men cannot live with each other in society unless they 'trust one another in manifesting the truth to one another.' The fact that someone speaks what is true 'does not seem other than to render a debt to him.' (II-II, 109, 3, ad 1). In other words, telling the truth and trusting in words spoken are the bases of our living together and therefor what we 'owe' to one another.

Aquinas, as I intimated, seems at first sight to differ in emphasis from Plato who was very dubious of words themselves, especially written words. We recall, of course, that the 'disputation,' the primary form of discourse in the middle ages, was itself oral. Issues of honesty, integrity, logic, and will are usually much more visible in oral argument than in the written word. But Aquinas did not look on the admitted 'strangeness' in things as something that hindered him from any attempt to explain them. Quite the opposite, the whole structure of Aquinas' work was presupposed to the proposition that it is possible to make things clear and to know, at the least outlines, of what could not be known. Aquinas is a philosopher of light not of hiddenness. Yet, he does not ever doubt that there are things beyond the human intellect's power to know. With Aristotle, he thinks that knowing as much as we can about divine things is the highest task that we can be about. He thinks in fact that the desire to know the truth of things, and indeed finally to know them after the manner of our limited being, is why we exist in the first place.

Thomas Aquinas is a man who spent his life thinking. The purpose of thinking is to know the truth of *what is*. We do not make what is not ourselves. Thus, we find in reality a strangeness and a brightness, a wonder about what is there and why it is there. We can act freely only if we know the truth. We do not will truth to be truth, but we find it there as if it has in itself some being, some order. We affirm *what is*. But we can choose not to know the truth, though it is not possible to act unless there is some shred of truth left in what we hold. We can and should, moreover, know what is not true. Facing the truth of things is both our glory and our burden.

In an old *Peanuts* series from November, 1952, Lucy and Charlie Brown are playing marbles. In the first series, Lucy yells happily 'I won again, I won again!' The reason she won she tells Charlie is because of his last 'stupid play.' She adds yet again, 'I won again!' And she asks Charlie, 'Aren't you happy for me?' In the next sequence, the winning continues, she tells Charlie that she has beaten him 'three thousand times. Charlie is embarrassed and says 'rats.' Lucy naturally accuses him of being a poor loser. But at last, in the final sequence, Charlie wins a game. He can hardly believe it. He throws up his arms and says, 'I've never been so happy in all my life.' But Lucy tells him, 'I just let you win because I really felt sorry for



you.’ This completely deflates Charlie, but Lucy consoles him, ‘It’s always better to know the truth’ (*The Complete Peanuts, 1950–52*, Fantagraphics Books, 2004).

But the fact is, that it is indeed, as Lucy says, ‘always better to know the truth.’ And why, in conclusion, is it so difficult to know the truth? In part, it is because our lives are not in order so that we cannot bear the truth because we know that it requires us to change our lives. So, to cover ourselves, we create our own truths. But another reason is that we do not go about studying for the truth in the right way. St. Thomas was aware of both of these problems. But on this occasion, let me say some final words about why we might find learning the important things so difficult.

The *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas is famous for being directed to beginners, not for the already learned as were his other works like his *Quaestiones Disputatae*. At the very beginning of the *Summa*, Aquinas has three brief bits of advice for students who are confused and overwhelmed by the difficulties of knowing, not understanding how one goes about learning. He assumes, of course, that the first step is, as we have seen, the will to know the truth. Nothing can replace this. We have free wills and we can direct our minds to what we want or away from *what is* before us to something that will protect us from the whole truth.

In the beginning, Aquinas tells us that a ‘doctor of Catholic truth’ does not direct himself to the already learned alone, but also to beginners, to teach them things that are ‘congruent’ to those beginning their education. Several things can impede learning. The first thing that causes difficulty, he tells us in the second paragraph of the *Summa*, is the ‘multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments.’ Since the *Summa*, which is to follow, itself has some ten thousand questions, articles, and arguments, we presume that the word ‘useless’ here is not opposed to the word ‘useful.’ The fact that many questions are necessary is not a sign of fault but a sign of the real strangeness of things to be known. But still the beginning student is happy to have an orderly and manageable presentation of important issues.

The second reason for difficulty in learning is because the ‘order of the discipline’ under question is not treated. Rather what is given to the student follows the order of the books assigned to be studied or some current event that draws popular attention. Instead of reading Aquinas or Aristotle themselves, who will form the minds in a proper order, students read ‘relevant’ books chosen for some current issue but devoid of the broader context in which the consideration could be meaningful. I tell my students, ‘don’t major in current events.’ Likewise, do not waste your time in college studying ethical or daily moral current events and think you are studying the ethics or Aquinas.

Finally, from this frequent repetition there will arise in the souls of the listeners a certain boredom and confusion. This, of course, is the reason why we should only read good or great books such as the *Summa* itself. Most universities today are so structured that they have no time for reading Aristotle or Aquinas because they are boring their young students with confusing books and questions out of context, and lies about what is really important and what the mind is for. In short, to cite Lucy, 'it is always better to know the truth.'

It will be noticed that in reading the *Summa*, at every step of the way, Aquinas tells the beginning student just where he has been, where he is going, and what exactly he is treating of in the text before him. This text is always brief, systematic, intelligible, logical.

At the beginning of the second question of the *Summa*, Aquinas gives the beginner a brief survey of what all three large books of the *Summa* contain; remember that these books contain 4006 pages.

The principal intention of this sacred doctrine is to treat the knowledge of God, and this not only according as He is in Himself, but also according to what is proportionate to the creature. . . . To expose this doctrine, we intend in the first book to treat of God, in the second book of the movement of the rational creature to God, and finally, in the third part, to treat of Christ who, insofar as He is man, is the way for us to tend to God (I, 2, Proem.).

Thus from the very beginning we know what we are about and how we will proceed. We are never intellectually 'lost' in the *Summa*.

Consequently, it is no small thing to think and to think well and properly, to think the truth. Truth is in the judgment, as Aquinas says, in the judgment of what is and what is not, whether it is or is not. All else depends upon our ability to know the truth and to act on it, to speak of it to others as if we are talking about a reality that we, with them, objectively encounter outside of ourselves. The strangeness of things includes the effort to come to terms with this very strangeness. We do this by thinking, as Aquinas said.

'Nature did not give man claws and hides like the other animals because she gave him reason by which he can acquire these things for himself.'

'According to St. Thomas, the mind acts freely of itself, but its freedom exactly consists in finding a way out to liberty and the light of day.'

'It is always better to know the truth.'

'The greatest good one can do to his neighbor is lead him to the truth.'

*James V. Schall, S. J.*  
*Georgetown University*  
*DC, 20057-1200*  
*USA*

*Email: schallj@georgetown.edu*