Pints with Aquinas

WHY YOU CAN (and should) READ THOMAS AQUINAS



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INTRODUCTION

I couldn't make any judgment on the *Summa*, except to say this: I read it every night before I go to bed. If my mother were to come in during the process and say, "Turn off that light. It's late," I with lifted finger and broad bland beatific expression, would reply, "On the contrary, I answer that the light, being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes," or some such thing. In any case I feel I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas loved God because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas.

- Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*

I. ON ST. THOMAS

St. Thomas Aquinas is certainly one of the greatest philosophers who ever lived (to my mind he is the greatest), for at least eight reasons: truth, common sense, practicality, clarity, profundity, orthodoxy, medievalism, and modernity.
First, and most simply, he told the truth-that simple and unfashionable purpose of philosophy that is so often fudged ("nuanced") or forgotten today. The following quotation should be chiseled on the doorposts of every philosophy department in the world: "The study of philosophy is not the study of what men have opined, but of what is the truth."

2. Descartes says that the one thing he learned about philosophy in the university that stuck with him was that one could not imagine any doctrine so bizarre or unbelievable that it has not been seriously taught by some philosopher or other. What was true already in 1637 is triply true today. St. Thomas, however, is the master of common sense. He has an uncanny knack of sniffing out the obviously right position amid a hundred wrong ones. This holds true especially in ethics, the real test of a philosopher. Some great philosophers, like Descartes, Hegel, and Heidegger, have no philosophical ethics at all. Others, like Hobbes and Hume and Kant and Nietzsche, have ethics that are simply unlivable. St. Thomas is as practical and plain and reasonable in ethics as Aristotle, or Confucius, or your uncle.

3. St. Thomas was a master of metaphysics and technical terminology; yet he was also such a practical man that as he lay dying he was talking about three things: a commentary on *The Song of Songs*, a treatise on aqueducts, and a dish of herring. Ordinary people, Popes, and kings wrote to him for advice and

always got back sound wisdom. I know of no one since St. Paul who is so full of both theoretical *and* practical wisdom.

4. Those who love truth passionately usually also love simplicity and clarity of style so that as many people as possible can benefit from this precious thing, Truth. Fr. Norris Clarke, S.J. of Fordham University, the most Aquinas-like mind I know of all men living, says there are three kinds of philosophers: those who at first seem clear, but upon further readings become more and more obscure; those who at first may seem obscure but become clearer and clearer upon each reading (St. Thomas is the prime example of this kind), and those who seem obscure at first and remain obscure.

St. Thomas aimed only for light, not heat. There is almost never anything personal in the *Summa*, no rhetoric, no appeal to the irrational; nothing but lucidity.

5. And depth-no philosopher since St. Thomas has ever so successfully combined the two fundamental ideals of philosophical writing: clarity and profundity. Continental European philosophy in this century has sought and sometimes found depth, by focusing on the truly fundamental issues, but at the expense of clarity. English philosophy has sought and often found clarity, but at the expense of depth, concentrating on second-order linguistic quest ions rather than on those the average person wonders at: God, man, life, death, good, and evil.

6. A sixth reason for St. Thomas' greatness is decisive only for Catholics, but it should at least be decisive for *all* Catholics: according to the Church's own teaching authority (and to be a Catholic *means* to believe in such a thing), St. Thomas is the primary theological Doctor (Teacher) of the Church. During its proceedings, the Council of Trent placed the *Summa* on the high altar in second place only to the Bible. Pope Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris* (1879) told all Catholic teachers to

“restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas . . . and let them clearly point out its solidity and excellence above all other teaching”.

Even non-Catholics must go to St. Thomas to understand Catholic theology and philosophy. You can never understand a philosophy from its critics or dissenters. In four colleges and universities, I have never had a good course on any philosopher (including many philosophers I disagree with) from a critic, and never a worthless one from a disciple.

7. St. Thomas was crucial for the medieval era. He fulfilled more than anyone else the essential medieval program of a marriage of faith and reason, revelation and philosophy, the Biblical and the classical inheritances. In so doing, he held together for another century the medieval civilization’s intellectual soul, which in his century was threatening to break up like a ship battered by huge waves of division, caused mainly by the rediscovery of the works of Aristotle and the polarization of reactions into the fearful heresyh unting of traditionalists, and the fashionable compromising of modernists. Aquinas stands as a shining example of an alternative to both the fundamentalists and the liberals of his day and of any day.

You may not agree that St. Thomas is history’s greatest philosopher, but he was certainly the greatest philosopher for the two thousand years between Aristotle and Descartes. He represents the medieval mind par excellence, and the Middle Ages are the parent and source of all the divergent streams in the modern world, like a mother whose many children went their own various ways.

Not only does St. Thomas represent a unity of ingredients that were later to separate, but also a unity of ingredients that existed separately before him. In reading St. Thomas you also meet Thales, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, Justin, Clement, Augustine, Boethius, Dionysius, Anselm, Abelard, Albert,

Maimonides, and Avicenna. For one brief, Camelot-like moment it eemed that a synthesis was possible. Our fractured world has been praying "Forgive us our syntheses" ever since.

8. Finally, St. Thomas is important for us today precisely because of our lack. Timeless truth is always timely, of course, but some aspects of truth are especially needed at some times, and it seems that our times badly need seven Thomistic syntheses: (1) of faith and reason, (2) of the Biblical and the classical, the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman heritages, (3) of the ideals of clarity and profundity, (4) of common sense and technical sophistication, (5) of theory and practice, (6) of an understanding, intuitive vision and a demanding, accurate logic, and (7) of the one and the many, a cosmic unity or "big picture" and carefully sorted out distinctions. I think it a safe judgment that no one in the entire history of human thought has ever succeeded better than St. Thomas in making not just one but all seven of these marriages which are essential to mental health and happiness.

For some reason, many people seem so threatened by St. Thomas that they instantly label any admiration for, use of, or learning from him as slavish, unoriginal, and authoritarian-something that they do with no other thinker. Of course St. Thomas cannot be the be-all and end-all of our thought. He cannot be an end, but he can be a beginning, like Socrates. Of course we must go beyond him and not slavishly confine our thought to his. But there is no better bottom story to our edifice of thought.

II. ON THE SUMMA THEOLOGICA

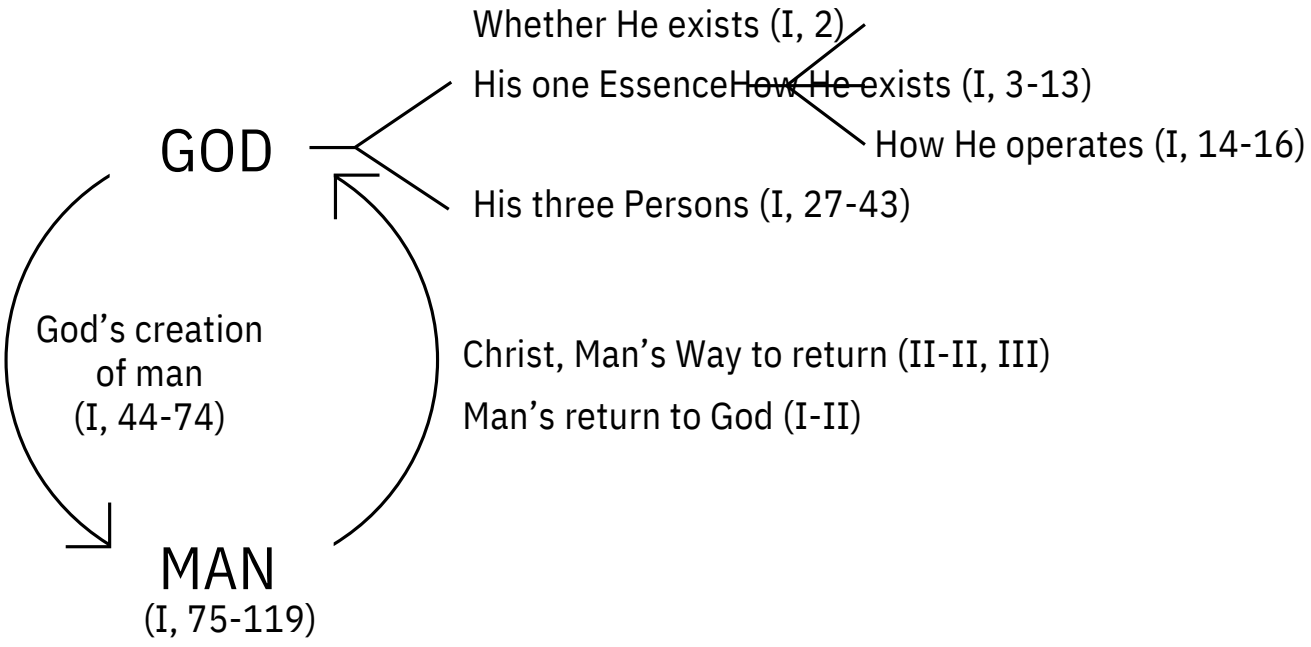
Many theologians and philosophers in St. Thomas' time wrote Summas. A Summa is simply a summary. It is more like an encyclopedia than a textbook, and it is meant to be used more as a reference library than as a book. There is extreme economy in the use of words. There are no digressions and few illustrations. Everything is "bottom line". Such a style should appeal to us busy moderns.

The medievals had a passion for order, because they believed that God had a passion for order when He designed the universe. So a Summa is ordered and outlined with loving care. Yet, though very systematic, a Summa is not a *system* in the modern sense, a closed and deductive system like that of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, or Hegel. It uses induction as well as deduction, and its data come from ordinary experience and divine revelation as well as philosophical axioms ("first principles").

A Summa is really a summarized debate. To the medieval mind, debate was a fine art, a serious science, and a fascinating entertain ment, much more than it is to the modern mind, because the medievals believed, like Socrates, that dialectic could uncover truth. Thus a "scholastic disputation" was not a personal contest in cleverness, nor was it "sharing opinions"; it was a shared journey of discovery. The "objections" from the other side are to be taken seriously in a Summa. They are not straw men to be knocked down easily, but live options to be considered and learned from. St. Thomas almost always finds some important truth hidden in each objection, which he carefully distinguishes from its error. For he believed not only that there was all truth Somewhere but also that there was some truth everywhere.

The structural outline of the *Summa Theologica* is a mirror of the structural outline of reality. It begins in God, Who is "in the

beginning". It then proceeds to the act of creation and a cons ideration of creatures, centering on man, who alone is created in the image of God. Then it moves to man's return to God through his life of moral and religious choice, and culminates in the way or means to that end: Christ and His Church. Thus the overall scheme of the Summa, like that of the universe, is an *exitus-redditus*, an exit from and a return to God, Who is both Alpha and Omega. God is the ontological heart that pumps the blood of being through the arteries of creation into the body of the universe, which wears a human face, and receives it back through the veins of man's life of love and will. The structure of the *Summa*, and of the universe, is dynamic. It is not like information in a library, but like blood in a body.



It is essential to keep this "big picture" in mind when reading the *Summa* because there are so many details that it is tempting to focus on them and lose the sense of their place and order. St. Thomas never does that. His style is atomistic and "choppy" but his vision is continuous and all-encompassing.

Why is the style so choppy? St. Thomas chops his prose into bite-sized segments for the same reason Mommy cuts Baby's meat into bite-sized chunks. The *Summa* would lose much of its clarity and digestibility if it were homogenized into continuous, running prose, like watery stew. (A current British version has done just that.)

The best preparation for reading the *Summa* is a review of basic, common sense logic, i.e., Aristotelian logic, especially the "Three Acts of the Mind", as the medievals labeled them: understanding, judging, and reasoning, with their respective logical expressions: terms, propositions, and arguments. The reader will be constantly confused if he does not first have in his mind a very clear idea of the differences between terms (which are either clear or unclear), propositions (which are either true or false), and arguments (which are either logically valid or invalid). He should also have a clear idea of the structure of a syllogism, the basic form of deductive argument, which connects the subject and predicate terms of its conclusion through the middle term in its two premises, the first of which (the major premise) states a general principle and the second (the minor premise) brings a particular case under that principle. The conclusion then demonstrates the result of applying the general principle to the particular case.

A knowledge of the basic ideas and technical terms of Aristotle's philosophy, which St. Thomas used as his philosophical language, is also essential. For beginners I recommend Mortimer Adler's amazingly clear *Aristotle for Everybody*, and for intermediate students W. D. Ross' one-volume *Aristotle*.

The *Summa Theologica* is divided into four overall Parts (I, 1-11, 11-11, and III). Each Part is divided into Treatises (e.g., On the Creation, On Man, On Law). Each Treatise is divided into numbered "Questions", or general issues within the topic of the treatise (e.g., "Of the Simplicity of God", "Of the Angels in Comparison with Bodies", "Of the Effects of Love"). Finally,

each “Question” is divided into numbered “Articles”. The 16 “Article” is the basic thought-unit of the *Summa*. What we mean in modern English by an “article” -an essay- is what St. Thomas means by a “Question”, and what we mean by a “question”a specific, single interrogative sentenceis what he means by an “Article”, e.g., “Whether God Exists?”, “Whether the Inequality of Things Is from God?”, “Whether Sorrow Is the Same as Pain?”

Each Article begins by formulating in its title a single question in such a way that only two answers are possible: yes or no. St. Thomas does this, not because he thinks philosophy or theology is as simple as a true-false exam, but because he wants to make an issue finite and decidable, just as debaters do in formulating their “resolution”. There are an indefinite number of possible answers to a question like “What is God?” If he had formulated his questions that way, the *Summa* might be three million pages long instead of three thousand. Instead, he asks, for example, “Whether God Is a Body?” It is possible to decide and demonstrate that one of the two possible answers (yes) is false and therefore that the other (no) is true.

Each “Article” has five structural parts. First, the question is formulated in a yes or no format, as explained above, beginning with the word “Whether” *(Utrum)*.

Second, St. Thomas lists a number of Objections (usually three) to the answer he will give. The Objections are apparent proofs of this opposite answer, the other side to the debate. These objections begin with the formula: “It seems that . . . “ (Oportet). These Objections must be *arguments*, not just *opinions*, for one of the basic principles of any intelligent debate (woefully neglected in all modern media) is that each debater *must* give relevant *reasons* for every controvertible opinion he expresses. The Objections are to be taken seriously, as *apparent* truth. One who is seeking the strongest possible arguments against any idea of St. Thomas will rarely find any stronger ones, any more strongly argued, than

those in St. Thomas himself. He is extremely fair to all his opponents. I ink he descends to name-calling only once in the entire *Summa*, when he speaks of the "really stupid" idea of David of Dinant that God is indistinguishable from prime matter, or pure potentiality -an idea not very far from that of Hegel and modern "process theologians"! Cf. p. 81, n. 21 and I, 3, 8 (p. 84).

Third, St. Thomas indicates his own position with the formula "On the contrary . . . " (*Sed contra*). The brief argument that follows the statement of his position here is usually an argument from authority, i.e., from Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, or recognized wise men. The medievals well knew their own maxim that "the argument from authority is the weakest of all arguments" (see S.T. I, 1, 8, obj. 2). But they also believed in doing their homework and in learning from their ancestors-two habits we would do well to cultivate today.

The fourth part, "I answer that" (*Respondeo dicens*), is the body of the Article. In it, St. Thomas proves his own position, often adding necessary background explanations and making needed distinctions along the way. The easiest (but not the most exciting) way to read a *Summa* Article is to read this part first.

Fifth and finally, each Objection must be addressed and answered not merely by repeating an argument to prove the opposite conclusion, for that has already been done in the body of the Article, but by explaining where and how the Objection went wrong, i.e., by distinguishing the truth from the falsity in the Objection.

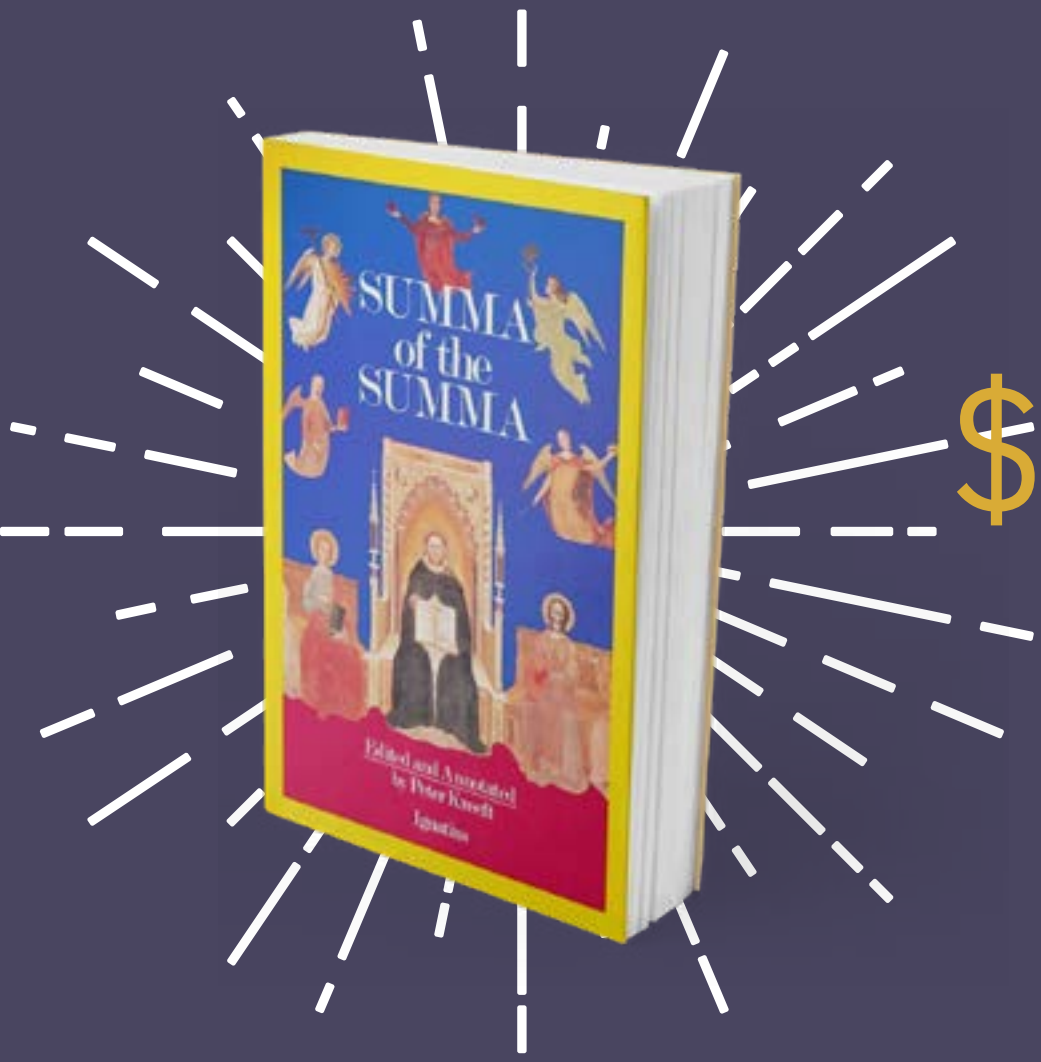
No one of these five steps can be omitted if we want to have good grounds for settling a controverted question. If our question is vaguely or confusedly formulated, our answer will be, too. If we do not consider opposing views, we spar without a partner and paw the air. If we do not do our homework, we only skim the shallows of our selves.

If we do not prove our thsis, we are dogmatic, not critical. And if we do notunderstand and refute our opponents, we are left with nagging uncertainty that we have missed something and not really ended the contest.

Like Socratic dialogue for Plato, this medieval method of philosophizing was very fruitful in its own day-and then subs equently neglected, especially in our day. That is one of the unsolved mysteries of Western thought. Surely both the Socratic and the Thomistic methodological trees can still bear much good fruit. Perhaps what stands in the way is our craze for originality and our proud refusal to be anyone's apprentice. I for one would be very happy to be Aquinas' apprentice, or Socrates'.

SUMMA *of the* SUMMA

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS IS UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE GREATEST PHILOSOPHERS WHO EVER LIVED.



$29.72

His writings combine the two fundamental ideals of philosophical writing: clarity and profundity. He is a master of metaphysics and technical terminology, yet so full of both theoretical and practical wisdom. He is the master of common sense.

His major work, the *Summa Theologica*, is timeless, but particularly important today because of his synthesis of faith and reason, revelation and philosophy, and the Biblical and the classical Greco-Roman heritages.

This unique book combines selected essential philosophical passages from Thomas' Summa with footnotes and explanations by Kreeft, a popular Thomist teacher and writer.



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