

Commentator's Introduction

Because the doctor of Catholic truth ought not only to build up the advanced, but also to instruct beginners – as the Apostle says, “As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat”¹ – we propose in this work to set forth whatever belongs to the Christian religion in a way which is suitable to the instruction of beginners. In our view, novices in this doctrine are frequently hindered by the writings of other authors. Partly this happens because of the multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments. Partly it happens because the things they need to know are set forth not according to the intrinsic order of the subject, but according to the needs of the writer's own plan of exposition, or according to the opportunities which offer themselves for discussion. Indeed, they are hindered partly because frequent repetition of the same thing generates loathing and confusion in their minds. And so, to avoid these and similar faults, with confidence in divine help, we will try to pursue what pertains to sacred doctrine as briefly and clearly as the subject permits. – Thomas Aquinas²

WHAT IS GOD?

From childhood, Thomas Aquinas pestered his teachers with the question “What is God?” The doctrine of the One God is His answer to the question.

Yet it is an answer that not even St. Thomas himself considered remotely adequate to the reality, for in the end, he concluded that in this life we cannot grasp what God is in His own essence. Human intellect extracts the forms of things from sense impressions, but God is not something that can be tasted or touched, except metaphorically. In the next life, the blessed will truly see God by the supernatural elevation of their intellects, but we do not so see Him now.

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:1b–2a (DRA).

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Preface, broadly translated.

Yet even in this life, though we cannot say what God *is*, we can say *that* He is, and we can make many other true statements *about* Him. Working these things out is the Angelic Doctor's purpose.

REGULATING THE FIREHOSE

Reading St. Thomas for the first time – and the second, and the third – is a bit like drinking from a firehose. This *Commentary* is something like the regulator in a compressed water delivery system, adjusting the pressure of the outflow so that we can take it in. Although the book is all in one style, I've written it for more than one audience and purpose. This does not mean that each audience has the same priority. My first aim is to make Thomas Aquinas's reasoning about the nature and existence of God more accessible to those who are new to it. But although I avoid the narrowest technical questions, I also want to make it more thoroughly understood by those who have encountered it before. I have in mind not just scholars – scholars of all fields, not just philosophers and theologians, and of all persuasions, not just Thomists – but also students and general readers.

Naturally I cannot please everyone, and I hope that my failings will be regarded with charity. From long experience, I know that trying to write accessibly is itself sometimes viewed as a fault, and I disagree. St. Thomas himself considers it his duty and vocation to try to be as clear as possible. I strive for precision but avoid stilted and cumbersome formality. I try to convert what is idiomatic in Latin into what is idiomatic in English, and do not view an occasional contraction as slumming.

PERPLEXITY

A certain portion of my intended audience (not all of it) is those whom the great Jewish scholar Maimonides called “perplexed.” At least I hope some perplexed souls will read it, and I will speak of them first, for this book aims to fill a gap: Better yet, a chasm. Allow me to use my own students to illustrate. They know, of course, that there is a lot they don't know about history, mathematics, and the sciences. That is not the sort of chasm I mean, because they know it is there, and they know they can fill it. Typically, however, they are astonished to find that rational arguments can be given *at all* concerning God's existence and attributes. No one has told them that this is possible. In fact, they often tell me that they have been told that it is *impossible*, for in some areas our intellectual culture transmits ignorance more effectively than knowledge. Some of them resist the news that one can reason about these things. Then again, some welcome it like a freshet of water in a parched land.

I am not speaking only of folk with no exposure to faith. Much the same chasm of understanding is found among those who have gone to church all their

lives and consider themselves Christians. My church-nurtured students are only slightly less likely than their secularist counterparts to buy into today's relativistic notion that "my reality" may be different from "your reality" – an absurdity if ever there was one, because we are all in the same world together. How paradoxical that an intellectual culture that teaches "Reason alone! Have nothing to do with faith!" allows reason a narrower and narrower circle of inquiry, and finally doubts its own foundations. So thin are our ideas about what the mind can reason about that not only questions about God, but also questions about right, wrong, happiness, meaning, purpose, and the good life are commonly treated as off limits for rational inquiry. Paradoxically, this tendency persists even though in recent decades, both ethical philosophy and philosophy of religion have enjoyed strong revivals among the specialists.

Sometimes we hear that people become relativists about God just because they are exposed to so many theories about Him. This explanation seems implausible, for in that case, why wouldn't people who are exposed to multiple theories of subatomic structure become subatomic relativists? People often say, "God is real for you, but not for me," but I have never heard anyone suggest, "Neutrinos are real for you, but not for me."

What then are the real reasons? Perhaps one is that although people today are certainly exposed to many *views* about God, they are exposed to very few reasoned arguments about Him. Another possible reason is that whereas in fields such as physics, phenomena are taught first and competing explanations are taught afterward, in matters concerning God, this order of presentation is often reversed. One *begins* with the competing views, long before he is presented with any means of deciding among them.

A third possible reason is the fallacious notion of religious neutrality, which needs more explanation because it is more subtle and insidious. People who say "I have no opinion," "I am suspending judgment," or "I am keeping my mind open" may think they are being reasonable and tolerant, but the point of suspending judgment is not avoiding judgments altogether, but gathering what we need to make better ones. As G. K. Chesterton remarked, "The object of opening the mind as of opening the mouth is to shut it again on something solid."³ Therefore we must never *permanently* suspend judgment, and in fact, there is no such thing as having no opinion. The person who supposes that he is floating in a permanent state of suspended judgment is always attached to some judgment unawares. Usually his tacit judgment is that *it doesn't matter* whether there is a God, and he chooses to live as though there isn't one.

In fact, he is not even managing that. If by a god, small g, we mean that which is most important in all reality, that which deserves our unconditional commitment, then everyone favors some candidate for that honor, even if

³ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*. In *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, Volume 16 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 212.

a false one. The man who is living as though there is no God is really living as though something other than God were god, which would be fine if he had hit on the right one, but he has probably not considered the question. Sex, wealth, love, knowledge, power, reputation – a myriad of gods compete.⁴ Everything depends on getting it right.

The pedagogy of Thomas Aquinas differs in all three respects. In the first place, he does not merely discuss views of God, but presents reasoned arguments about Him. In the second place, although he always gives the Objectors the first word, the Tradition is always in the background; it is that massive faith and body of thought against which their Objections are presented. In the third place, he never imagines that neutrality is possible. Refusing to decide is a decision. Not choosing is not one of the options.

REMOVING OBSTACLES

One of the goals in this book is to humanize the teachings of Thomas Aquinas – more precisely, to make their humanity more obvious. To many people, including not only students and general readers but a great many scholars, his arguments seem to concern dry, dusty abstractions of no human interest, and this is not at all the case. For people ask such agonized questions about God! How do we know that He is good? Maybe He is evil. How do we know that we should worship the God of whom St. Thomas speaks, rather than, say, Zeus? Maybe all gods are made up. Even if God is good, why should we imagine that He takes any interest in us? Surely we are making too much of ourselves to hope for that.

St. Thomas takes all these questions seriously. But he does more. By vocation, he was a Dominican, a member of what is called the Order of Preachers. Although the Dominicans are known for their scholarship, a preacher is always more than a scholar, and even more than a teacher. As St. Paul urged, “admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”⁵ We may lose sight of the human interest of St. Thomas’s questions, but St. Thomas never does. His aim is always that man may come to enter into fellowship with the God who would otherwise be unknown to him. This was the desire of St. Paul when he preached in the city of the philosophers:

So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, *To an Unknown God*. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”⁶

⁴ I have addressed St. Thomas’s views about such candidates in *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’s Treatise on Happiness and Ultimate Purpose* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:14 (RSV-CE). ⁶ Acts 17:22–23 (RSV-CE).

But the notion of dry, dusty irrelevance is not the only obstacle I hope to remove. To those unfamiliar with St. Thomas's vocabulary, his arguments may seem like word salad; well, we can learn the vocabulary. To those unfamiliar with the *genre* of the scholastic disputation, his arguments may seem stilted; well, we can learn how the *genre* works. Even with these obstacles removed, his arguments are difficult; well, we can paraphrase and explain them.

But must they be so *complicated*? Even the doctrine of Divine Simplicity is complicated! This obstacle is greater than the other two, because we want things to be easy, and St. Thomas, it seems, won't let them be. Our quarrel with complications comes from being in a hurry. Hurrying has a history of its own, for the popularity of "made simple" books is not just a feature of the present generation. Alexis de Tocqueville thought that it was a persistent feature of any country which devalues traditional authorities. In an aristocratic order of society, one might model his thinking, for better or worse, on the opinions of people who are esteemed to know something. But in a democratic order of society, this option seems to disappear – and yet there are far too many matters to know for everyone to think them all through for himself! One result is that people seek shortcuts. But another is that they model their thinking, not on the traditional authorities, but on the transient opinions of the crowd instead. Paradoxically, to people who think "everyone is just like me," the dictate of the crowd doesn't seem like an authority.⁷

Perhaps this is why the prevailing intellectual fashions all present themselves as very simple. Materialism, for example, says matter is all there is. Relativism says right and wrong are different everywhere. Bible-alone fundamentalism says the plain sense of Scripture is the sole authority on every question. What could be easier? Since *unnecessary* complexity is bad, the problem with these simple ideas isn't that they are simple, but that reality is more complex than they are. Yes, there may be such a thing as matter, but the meaning of a book about matter is not matter. Yes, how to express gratitude for kindness may vary from place to place, but gratitude itself is right everywhere. Yes, the Bible may be true and authoritative, but it isn't self-interpreting, it doesn't address every subject, and besides, another authority besides the Bible is needed to know what belongs to the Bible and what doesn't.

So yes, Thomas Aquinas's thought is complicated. So is trigonometry. So is chemistry. The explanation must be as subtle as the reality we are trying to explain.

⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume 2 (1840), Book 2, "Influence of Democracy on Progress of Opinion," especially Chapters 1, "Philosophical Method among the Americans," 2, "Of the Principal Source of Belief among Democratic Nations," and 3, "Why the Americans Display More Readiness and More Taste for General Ideas than Their Forefathers, the English."

THE PARTNERSHIP OF FAITH AND REASON

Thomas Aquinas considers sound reasoning a preparation for faith, a “preamble” to it. For if it could be proven that there couldn’t be a God, or that if there is, it would be impossible for Him to disclose Himself to us, then why would anyone be interested in what something passing itself off as Divine Revelation has to say about Him? On the other hand, if sheer philosophical reasoning can show that He is real and active, or even that this is likely to be the case, then when Revelation does come in, it extends what reason has to work with.

Revelation is *reasonable* to accept, because it can be shown to be possible, necessary, likely, authentic, and even confirmed by experience, although this confirmation is not like the proofs of geometry; it is more like the knowledge that lovers have of each other, because they have become second nature to each other.⁸ But consider: We would be unable to say that Revelation *is* possible unless we trusted that God exists and has the power to disclose Himself. So for those who think philosophically – not necessarily for everyone – the demonstration that He exists and has the power to disclose Himself comes first. *That* demonstration really is something like the proofs of geometry.

In saying all this, I don’t mean that St. Thomas’s demonstrations can’t be questioned. For that matter, geometry can be questioned! But it isn’t *reasonable* to accept only what cannot be questioned, for there is no such thing. Rather we should accept what we have good reason to believe.

Reasoning illuminates some things Divine Revelation leaves obscure, such as what it could possibly mean for God to be eternal. On the other hand, Divine Revelation illuminates many things which reasoning alone leaves obscure, such as how we can be healed of our alienation from God. In a general audience on Thomas Aquinas, Benedict XVI explained more precisely as follows:

Faith, in fact, protects reason from every temptation to mistrust its own capacities, it stimulates it to open to ever more vast horizons, it keeps alive in it the search for foundations and, when reason itself applies itself to the supernatural sphere of the relationship between God and man, it enriches its work. According to St. Thomas, for example, human reason can without a doubt attain to the affirmation of the existence of one God, but only faith, which receives divine Revelation, is able to attain to the mystery of the Love of God, One and Triune.

On the other hand, it is not only faith that helps reason. Reason also, with its means, can do something important for faith, rendering it a threefold service that St. Thomas summarizes in the preface of his commentary to Boethius’ *De Trinitate*: “To demonstrate the foundations of the faith; to explain through similarities the truth of the faith; to refute the objections that are raised against the faith” (Question 2, Article 2). The whole history of theology is, fundamentally, the exercise of this effort from the intelligence, which

⁸ See my *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’s Treatise on Divine Law* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. xxvi.

shows the intelligibility of faith, its internal articulation and harmony, its reasonableness and its capacity to promote the good of man.⁹

In the lovely image of John Paul II, faith and reason are the two wings of the human spirit. Both are needed to fly.¹⁰

PUSHBACK

Needless to say, not everyone takes this view. Many view faith and reason as enemies. Consequently, when St. Thomas uses philosophical reason, one sort of critic accuses him of “baptizing the philosophers,” but when he quotes Scripture, another sort accuses him of “blind dependence on authority.” St. Thomas does consider the authority of Revelation greater than that of any purely human reasoning: “[A]lthough the argument from authority based on human reason is the weakest, yet the argument from authority based on divine revelation is the strongest.”¹¹ Interestingly, though, the *Treatise on the One God* rarely grounds any claim on the Bible alone. Whatever reason can establish, it uses reason to establish, turning to Scripture after pure reasoning has gone as far as it can go. Even in Question 12, Article 13, which draws from Revelation to explain how the mind can be uplifted by grace, St. Thomas is depending on his previous demonstration in Question 1, Article 1, that it is *reasonable to think that our minds need* such uplifting. Many of the biblical quotations St. Thomas offers merely confirm or deepen points already established by argument. Sometimes they explain how the Objectors – who often do rest their case on Scripture – are misreading it.

One would think that ratiophobes, who are irrationally hostile to reason, and fidephobes, who are irrationally hostile to faith, would be entirely different groups with no overlap whatsoever. Curiously, in our own time ratiophobia seems strongest among the fidephobes – and suspicion of reason among those who are suspicious of faith. Perhaps this is because those who reject all faith are no longer in a position to express faith in reasoning itself. G. K. Chesterton anticipated this development:

The great march of mental destruction will go on. Everything will be denied. Everything will become a creed. It is a reasonable position to deny the stones in the street; it will be a religious dogma to assert them. It is a rational thesis that we are all in a dream; it will be a mystical sanity to say that we are all awake. Fires will be kindled to testify that two and

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, “On Aquinas, Philosophy and Theology.” General Audience, June 16, 2000. Translation by Zenit News Service, available at www.zenit.org/article-29626?l=english.

¹⁰ “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.” John Paul II, encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), preface.

¹¹ I, Art. 8, ad 2.

two make four. Swords will be drawn to prove that leaves are green in summer. We shall be left defending, not only the incredible virtues and sanities of mental life, but something more incredible still, this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be of those who have seen and yet have believed.¹²

But there are other difficulties. Sometimes, after St. Thomas has demonstrated some attribute of God – for example that He is not composed of parts, or that He is pure actuality without potentiality – we may recoil, not because we don't understand the demonstration, but because our minds can't encompass such a Being. "I just can't conceive Him."

Well, no, nobody can. In this life, being able to conceive Him is an unreasonable expectation. Our finite minds can draw true inferences about Him and conceive *that* He is, but they cannot conceive *what* He is in His own Being. (And by the way, St. Thomas establishes this point by reasoning too.)

Should this inability trouble us? In one sense, no. There are a lot of things we can't conceive, even in this finite created world. For instance, I accept the curvature of space, but even though I grasp the mathematics of multidimensional geometry, I can't picture more dimensions than the ordinary three. It isn't because I can see such things as the curvature of space that I accept them, but because they follow from and make sense of other things I know. If it is like this even with things less ultimate than God, then why not with God? We want Him to be simple in the sense of being easy – but although He is simple, He is not simple in *that* sense!

This is why we have to make inferences about Him, rather than knowing Him just by *looking*.

Contemplation is good, yet in this life even contemplation falls short of its target. To be sure, a "general and confused" knowledge of God's existence is implanted in us by nature. For we naturally desire happiness – moreover, since this desire is natural, happiness must be a real existent thing,¹³ and whether or not we know it, He is that happiness. But to have a general and confused knowledge of God is not the same as to see Him in His Being. In that sense of knowledge, "This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching."¹⁴

But in another sense, we should be troubled that we cannot yet see God. We don't want just demonstrations, we want *vision*. So does St. Thomas himself.

¹² G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, Chapter 20 (public domain). The final sentence alludes to Jesus's ironic remark upon appearing to the disciple Thomas, who had said he would not believe in Christ's resurrection unless he saw Him for himself, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." John 20:29 (RVS-CE).

¹³ "It is impossible for a natural desire to be void of object, for nature does nothing in vain." *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.5.13. Later on we return to the question of whether nature does nothing in vain.

¹⁴ Q. 2, Art. 1, ad 1.

This hope is poured out in a hymn he composed for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, a lyric which he also seems to have used as a private prayer:

O Christ, Whom now beneath a veil we see, may what we thirst for soon our
portion be,
To gaze on Thee unveiled, and see Thy face, the vision of Thy glory and Thy
grace.¹⁵

St. Thomas holds that in heaven, all veils between us and God, all need for inferences, even faith itself, will drop away, for at last the redeemed will see God face to face, knowing Him as they are known.

In the meantime, however far short of seeing God's face they may be, St. Thomas's inferences and demonstrations may preserve us from a multitude of deadly errors. For otherwise we might deny God's own reality; we might worship what is not God as though it were; and even if we have the additional help of Divine Revelation, we might mistakenly think that the things that Revelation teaches must be *contrary* to reason – a fairy tale – just because they are too good, too *awefull*, to be true.

ESOTERICISM

I mentioned that some consider it unnecessary, or even a bit vulgar, to try to be clear and accessible. Among those who take this view, a certain snobbishness comes into play, of course. But sometimes even a certain deliberate esotericism comes into play, which may in the end be very much the same thing. The proponents of a certain approach to the interpretation of texts, widespread among the disciples of the late Leo Strauss, are convinced that the greatest thinkers always drop hints of secret meanings, like Hansel and Gretel dropping breadcrumbs in the forest, concealing them in otherwise baffling contradictions and inconsistencies which only insiders and sophisticates will be able to decode. I do not often come across this attitude among persons whose first training is in general philosophy. Since I do frequently meet it among those whose first training is in political philosophy, which was Strauss's intellectual home and my own first training, let me say a word about it.

Although the esoteric approach may suit some works of some writers, it certainly does not suit Thomas Aquinas. If he had been a Gnostic, a Freemason, an adherent of one of the ancient Greek and Roman mystery cults, or even a Platonist, perhaps he would have been deliberately esoteric too. However, the whole notion of a secret doctrine available only to adepts and initiates is contrary to the tenor of his faith. Although Jesus concludes some of His parables with the remark "He who has ears, let him hear,"¹⁶ even in this case the purpose is not to hide the truth but to warn that

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Adoro Te Devote*, trans. James Russell Woodford (public domain), final stanza.

¹⁶ See for example Matthew 13:9 and 43 (RSV-CE).

those who deaden themselves to divine truth will not fathom it. Some things may be hard to understand – St. Peter makes this remark about the letters of St. Paul¹⁷ – but God is unwilling that any should perish.¹⁸ Not even the “mysteries of salvation” are mysteries in the sense of secrecy, but rather in the sense that if God had not disclosed them, they would not have been known.

St. Thomas is never deliberately baffling, and his approach to seeming inconsistencies in his sources is not to treat them as clues to secret meanings, but to find out whether they can be harmonized or resolved. In fact, he considers it an idle distraction to worry too much about whether some writers may have concealed their true meanings. Here is what he says about that sort of thing in his own commentary on Aristotle's treatise *On the Heavens*:

Now, some claim that these poets and philosophers, and especially Plato, did not understand these matters in the way their words sound on the surface, but wished to conceal their wisdom under certain fables and enigmatic statements. Moreover, they claim that Aristotle's custom in many cases was not to object against their understanding, which was sound, but against their words, lest anyone should fall into error on account of their way of speaking. So says Simplicius in his Commentary. But Alexander held that Plato and the other early philosophers understood the matter just as the words sound literally, and that Aristotle undertook to argue not only against their words but against their understanding as well. *Whichever of these may be the case, it is of little concern to us, because the study of philosophy aims not at knowing what men think, but at what is the truth of things.*¹⁹

So, for example, when St. Thomas calls philosophy a “discipline” in some places but a “science” in others, I do not think we should leap to the conclusion that the terminological difference is a subtly buried clue for adepts. After all, philosophy is a science *and* a discipline. And when his paraphrase of Isaiah changes “waiting” for God to “loving” Him, I do not accuse him of concealing a disagreement with Isaiah. After all, those who wait expectantly for God wait for Him *because* they love Him. My concern with St. Thomas's language is simply to unfold it, explain it, and exhibit some of its implications.

ARISTOTLE, THE “DESTROYER,” AND REASON, THE “WHORE”

I mentioned that certain critics accuse St. Thomas of baptizing the philosophers. The strongest objections are mounted to his use of Aristotle, and the most

¹⁷ “There are some things in [Paul's letters] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction.” 2 Peter 3:16b (RSV-CE).

¹⁸ “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9 (RSV-CE).

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Exposition of Aristotle's Treatise on the Heavens*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher and Pierre H. Conway (Columbus, OH: College of St. Mary of the Springs, 1964), available at <https://isidore.co/aquinas/DeCoelo.htm>. In the final sentence, to which emphasis is added, where Larcher and Conway have “feel,” I have substituted “think.” The Latin term *senserint* can bear either meaning.

famous accuser is the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. Luther held that the doctrine of justification – how we can become just and acceptable in the sight of God – is the pivot of the entire Christian faith. This being the case, one would expect that Luther would say a great deal in condemnation of St. Thomas's views on justification. Surprisingly, he doesn't; his wrath is stirred more by St. Thomas's use of Aristotle.²⁰ "The whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light," he thunders.²¹ "Thomas wrote a great deal of heresy, and is responsible for the reign of Aristotle, the destroyer of godly doctrine," he proclaims.²² In another place he writes, "This is the procedure of Thomas. First he takes statements from Paul, Peter, John, Isaiah, etc. Afterwards he concludes that Aristotle says so and so and he interprets Scripture according to Aristotle."²³

In fact, Luther often issues anathemas not only against Aristotle but against reason *as such*, perhaps viewing him as its representative and symbol. His intention may have been to uphold the use of human reason in service to God, while condemning its employment in proud defiance of Him. However, he is notoriously careless about the distinction. Consider his *Disputation Concerning Man*. On the one hand he writes "it is certainly true that reason is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of his life, the best and something divine Nor did God after the fall of Adam take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it."²⁴ Yet just a little later he seems to take this praise back, condemning "those who say that the light of God's countenance is in man, as an imprint on us . . . in like manner, that it rests with man to choose good and evil, or life and death."²⁵ Since those whom he is criticizing take these two propositions straight from the Latin translation of the Bible, his condemnation is baffling. For the psalmist sings, "The light of thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us," and Moses, exhorting the Hebrew people to follow the Commandments, says, "Consider that I have set before thee this day life and good, and on the other hand death and evil."²⁶

Is it really true that Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle slavishly? Actually, in his own works he corrects Aristotle whenever Aristotle's arguments are

²⁰ "As is often noted, Luther's criticism of Aquinas on justification is relatively infrequent, and it is more often other Aristotelian aspects of his thought that are singled out." Robert Stern, "Martin Luther," endnote 22, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 ed.), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/luther>.

²¹ Martin Luther, *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Thesis 50 (1517), in *Luther's Works*, American edition, 55 vols. (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86), Vol. 31, p. 12.

²² Luther, *Against Latomus* (1521), *ibid.*, Vol. 32, p. 258.

²³ Luther, *An Opinion about Thomas Aquinas* (1532), *ibid.*, Vol. 54, p. 39.

²⁴ Martin Luther, *Disputation Concerning Man* (1536), Theses 4, 9, *ibid.*, Vol. 34, p. 137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Theses 29–30.

²⁶ Respectively, Psalm 4:7 (DRA), corresponding to verse 6 in contemporary translations, and Deuteronomy 30:15 (DRA).

defective, whether from either a philosophical or a Scriptural point of view. For example, Aristotle is unaware of the spiritual virtues, knows nothing of divine grace (although as to the poets, he does have an idea of divine inspiration), and has no conception of its need. True, St. Thomas doesn't usually include such corrections in his commentaries on Aristotle's works, but the point of his commentaries is not to approve but to elucidate.

Nor is it true that he places Aristotle in the place of Scripture. Consider for example what he says about Aristotle in connection with the famous passage in the Gospel of John which runs,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.²⁷

Besides explaining the meaning of these words, St. Thomas points out that they contradict the views of a number of philosophers, including Democritus and other materialists, who thought the world arose by chance; Plato, who thought that the Ideas of all things that are made exist not in God's mind but independently; other Platonists, who thought that God and the Word were different beings, one higher and one lower; and, yes, Aristotle, who thought that the world is coeternal with God.²⁸

THINGS TO LEARN AND UNLEARN

In saying that I want this book to be helpful to all sorts of readers, of course I include the specialists in Thomas Aquinas. It is hard to see how one can argue about the differences among the various schools of Thomism unless one has some rough agreement about what St. Thomas says, and my purpose is to elucidate it. Of course sometimes what he says is itself a bone of contention among the schools, but most of the arguments about him are not about that, but about other things – for example whether he can be adapted to modern thinkers, such as Kant, accommodated to modern methods, such as the tools of the analytical movement in philosophy, or made to answer a thousand objections, interesting to us, which he himself does not consider.

But since St. Thomas famously wrote the *Summa theologiae* for “beginners,” the *sine qua non* for the present book is that it be useful to beginners in the *Summa* – a category which is by no means restricted to first-time readers, although I keep them in the forefront of my mind. My beginners will include not only students and general readers, but also scholars of various approaches and various fields of study who are trying to find their way.

²⁷ John 1:1–3 (RSV-CE).

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, Lesson 1, trans. James A. Weisheipl (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1998).

St. Thomas's own beginners were beginners in the theology, who were already instructed in philosophy.²⁹ Not all of my own beginners will have been. Of those who have, most will have been instructed in very different traditions than his, such as Kantianism. Philosophers like Aristotle were concerned with finding out what can be found out. By contrast, modern ones like Kant are more concerned with showing what *can't* be found out. It isn't that St. Thomas is uninterested in the limits of reason, but he considers what reason cannot find out only after thoroughly exploring what it can, and those influenced by Kant reverse that procedure. Moreover, in the popular culture the prejudice against asking the big questions is very strong, a strange thing indeed if one reflects that by nature, human beings desire to know the truth of things. This prejudice is even stronger in my own country, which prides itself on being what it considers "practical." For all of these reasons, beginners need a lot of help – I certainly did – and I try to provide whatever may be needed on the way.

"Whatever may be needed" includes more than things to learn. A colleague at a conference of Thomists remarked to me many years ago, "There are so many things I have to *unlearn*." He meant, perhaps, two things.

One of the things he might have meant was that in scholarship, we take certain ways of thinking which undermine knowledge for granted, considering them advancements in knowledge. I was taught, for example, that although we used to believe that we perceive things, now we know better, for actually we only perceive our mental images of things. Oh, really? In that case, shouldn't we say that we don't perceive our mental images either, but only our images of these images? And do we even perceive those? That regress has no limit. No wonder we become locked in the mazes of our minds: If we are convinced that the mind *just is* a maze, how can we help it?

My colleague might also have been observing that we all hold innumerable convictions that we are not aware of possessing, beliefs which impede inquiry just because we don't notice that we hold them. This is obviously true among people in the everyday scramble. For example, someone who spends all his time trying to make money may think that he has no concern with metaphysics, when in fact he has staked his life on the metaphysical assumptions that matter is all there is and that desire for it is all that matters. But the danger is equally great among scholars and scientists, whom we mistakenly think of as spending all their time trying to answer the big questions. Actually, because of hyperspecialization and careerism, even most of us who do practice scholarship and science ask little questions – and worse yet, even when we ask fairly big ones, the way we frame them may presuppose answers to even bigger ones we refuse to ask. Consider this infamous confession by the late Harvard population biologist Richard Lewontin:

²⁹ Similarly, in our day those who are preparing for ordination as priests study "pre-theology," which means philosophy, before theology proper.

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite of* the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite of* its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite of* the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover that materialism is absolute for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door.³⁰

For those of us who were brought up to believe that science is following the evidence wherever it leads, these words are astounding, for according to Lewontin, science is *not* following the evidence wherever it leads. If the evidence leads away from materialism, he thinks we should shut that evidence out, because science is *by definition* nothing but systematic materialism. Since he was interested in the origin of life, I think Lewontin would have classed himself among those who ask the big questions, yet he wasn't really facing them.

ST. THOMAS AND MODERN SCIENCE

The Lewontin fallacy points up the foolishness of suggesting that "science" means accepting a materialistic metaphysics without question. Of course, it does not follow that we should accept St. Thomas's own science or metaphysics without question. One might protest that St. Thomas's system of thought has been discredited by modern scientific discoveries. Let's think about this.

If the protester is thinking of his cosmology, he has a point, for St. Thomas was plainly mistaken about the architecture of the physical universe. The universe is not, in fact, a set of nested, rotating spheres with the earth at the center and the fixed stars at the periphery. For our purposes, however, this fact is irrelevant. Nothing in St. Thomas's arguments about the existence and attributes of God depends on geocentrism or concentric spheres. Moreover, he is aware that science develops, and is quite open to evidence that established theories concerning such things as astronomy are incorrect. As he explains, reason can be employed, not only to establish proofs, but also to establish merely probable explanations for things:

not as furnishing a sufficient proof of a principle, but as confirming an already established principle, by showing the congruity of its results, as in [astronomy] the theory of eccentrics and epicycles is considered as established, because thereby the sensible

³⁰ Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons," *New York Review of Books* 44:1 (January 9, 1997), pp. 28-32.

appearances of the heavenly movements can be explained; not, however, as if this proof were sufficient, forasmuch as some other theory might explain them.³¹

But a number of other Thomistic views – views which, we will find, really do have bearing on St. Thomas's arguments about the existence and attributes of God – are also commonly found objectionable. Chief among these are St. Thomas's hylomorphism, his teleology, his distinction between actuality and potentiality, and his realism about values. Let's think about whether any of these points really have been discredited by modern science.

1. *Hylomorphism* is the view that human beings are not just bodies, but unions of body and soul. It is helpful to remember that by a human soul, St. Thomas does not have in mind a ghost, a mass of ectoplasm, or an airy something merely inhabiting a human body, but the form or pattern of an embodied human life. This pattern is the active principle that *makes* a certain mass of chemicals the body of a living human being. When Mr. Smith dies, we do not point to the dead flesh and say, "Here is Smith, but he has stopped working." Rather we say, "Smith is no longer present. This used to be Smith's body, but now it is only his remains." Someone might object, "There is no such thing as a soul. What you call Smith's soul is only something that his living body was doing, until it stopped." Yet in a way this objection seems to assume the very thing that it denies, for to speak of what the body is "doing" *just is* to assume a pattern of activity that constitutes its life. The pattern of activity of given matter is not itself the matter; even to make sense of the idea of the body having a pattern of activity, there must be something more than the body. According to Thomas Aquinas, this *something* is the soul.

Someone might also object that if we are to use the term "soul" in this sense, then since there is a pattern even to the life of a tomato plant, it follows that a tomato plant has a soul. How absurd! Well, yes, it follows, but no, it isn't absurd. According to St. Thomas, the relevant distinction between us and tomato plants is not that we have souls and they don't, but that we have *rational and immortal* souls and they don't. In fact, our rationality and immortality are connected, for the Thomistic argument for the immortality of the soul depends on the fact that we perform certain intellectual operations which transcend the ability of any bodily organ. Since these functions of the soul do not *depend* on the body, they must be able to survive the body's death. The view that not all intellectual operations are ultimately reducible to physical processes is often denied, but it has not been discredited. Those who speak this way are merely expressing their hope and confidence that someday it will be. In the meantime, the reducibility of intellectual operations to physical processes is hotly debated even among brain scientists.³²

³¹ Q. 32, Art. 1, ad2, substituting "astronomy" for "astrology." St. Thomas is speaking of the science of the movements of celestial bodies. For his criticism of astrology in our sense of the term – using the stars to tell fortunes – see I, Q. 115, Art. 4, and ad 3.

³² These remarks are adapted from several longer discussions in my *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on Happiness and Ultimate Purpose* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University

2. *Teleology* is the view that “final” causes – ends, or purposes – reside not just in our minds but in things themselves. It would be foolish, of course, to suggest that they reside in things in the *same way* that they reside in minds. When I say that the flower “seeks” the light, I do not mean that the flower is thinking about doing something, but that it behaves as though it were. Purposes in minds, and purposes in things, are not identical, but analogous.

Far from modern science having refused teleology, our biology, psychology, and even physics depend on it. For example, as I show later in this book, contemporary physics makes extensive use of what are called variational principles, such as the tendency of a physical system to “seek” a state of minimum potential energy. Another discussion defends St. Thomas's teleological argument that God and nature “make nothing in vain,” pointing out that some of our characteristics – in particular, our longing for something that transcends this world – confer no conceivable advantage in passing on our genes, and so cannot be explained by in terms of natural selection. The teleological explanation seems more plausible than its competitors. We seek the transcendent because there is such a thing, and our nature is so fashioned as to seek it.

The long-mocked hypothesis of natural purposes is enjoying a revival in contemporary philosophy too. In general, two conditions must be satisfied in order to conclude that the purpose of P is to bring about Q. First, P must actually bring about Q; second, it must be the case that the fact that P brings about Q is necessary for explaining why there is P in the first place. For example, breathing does oxygenate the blood, and apart from this fact there is no way to explain why we should even have a power to breathe; therefore, the purpose of breathing is oxygenation.³³

3. The Thomistic idea of *actuality and potentiality* requires us to distinguish between that which has fullness of being, and that which *could be* but is not. Something which is not fully actual may have latent possibilities of development, lines along which its potentialities can be further actualized. By contrast, if something is fully actual, then everything it can be, it is. Something like this distinction seems indispensable for describing everyday experience. There is nothing strange or occult in saying that the acorn carries the *potentiality* to become an oak tree, or that the child carries the *potentiality* to become a man. Rather than discrediting these ideas, modern science has elaborated them. We understand genetics and embryology much better than we did.

A certain kind of materialism might prefer to say that in reality, everything either is or isn't, so that potentialities exist only in our minds. That blunt sort of

Press, 2020), especially “Materialism, Soft and Hard,” on pp. 204–206, and “Mortal and Immortal Souls,” on p. 473. See also, in that book, the discussions of how we know what we know.

³³ My brief remarks about teleology in this book are adapted from several longer discussions in one of my other commentaries. See especially *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on Happiness and Ultimate Purpose* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), esp. pp. 118–122.

thinking was always inconvenient, and modern science makes it even more so. Consider, for example, the discovery of “virtual” particles, which pop in and out of being but “exist” as potentialities. One does not say that they either exist or do not exist, but that they exist with a certain amplitude of probability. And I trust that no one will deny the idea of potential energy, which describes a *potentiality* to become some actual kind of energy, such as energy of motion.

4. Finally, Thomistic *realism about values* maintains that some things are by nature nobler or more excellent than others. In other words, value is not just in the eye of the beholder, for I may like something that is objectively unworthy of my esteem, or I may dislike something that deserves better of me. Perhaps not all things are comparable in this way; I doubt that chocolate is intrinsically better than vanilla, or vanilla than chocolate. But knowledge is nobler than ignorance, and a man is more excellent than a snail.

It might be held that this is not so. One can measure the weight of a rock on a scale, but by what instrument can the excellence of an object be measured? But there is an answer: By the instrument of the mind. I can distinguish whether I like classical music better than a mere drumbeat, or vice versa. But I can also distinguish whether I like it better from *whether it is better*, and if my friend disagrees with me, we can argue about the matter, offering rational considerations for judgment.

Or consider the hierarchy of the powers of living things. Plants have only vegetative powers, which include nutrition and procreation. Animals have not only vegetative but also sensitive powers, which enable them to desire and know particular things in their surroundings. Rational beings, such as ourselves, have not only vegetative and sensitive powers, but also intellectual powers. These enable us to grasp universals – for example, to know not just a good taste, but the *idea* of good taste, and the idea of good in general. So the intellectual powers are higher than the sensitive powers, but the sensitive powers are the next highest because they rank above the vegetative powers.

Curiously, although today we do still speak of higher and lower kinds of organisms, a materialistic fetish drives many people to insist that the difference between higher and lower is not in the nature of things, but a projection from our minds. This is not even good materialism, because it recognizes some features of the natural world, but averts its eyes from others. Why should we *not* say that a creature which has vegetative, sensitive, and rational powers is higher than one which has only vegetative powers? Perhaps someone might object, “By that way of thinking, a worm is a higher thing than a beautiful rose. Should I prefer a worm to a rose in my vase?” Undoubtedly, a rose is higher in the order of appeal to the senses; I would rather have a rose than a worm in my vase. But a worm is higher in the order of being. I am not much like a worm – but in the amplitude of my powers, I am more like a worm than a rose.

Perhaps these four Thomistic views are untrue, but it is difficult to see how any discoveries of modern science have refuted them. All too often, what we mean by modern “discoveries” are merely modern attitudes.

WHY NOW?

I have already explained why Thomas Aquinas's thought is timely, but let me discuss another matter of timing. This commentary is the culmination of a series of commentaries I have written on themes in his *Summa theologiae*. The first was about law; the second, about virtue; the third, about happiness and ultimate purpose. The fourth one returned to law, this time focusing on divine law, and this one, of course, is about God, from whom all these things flow. More than a few people have wondered why I am "working backwards." After all, a metaphysician would have begun with the questions about God, perhaps never even reaching the questions about law with which I began. Having begun with the questions on law, I am ending with the questions on God.

However odd this order of inquiry may seem to metaphysicians, it seems to me entirely natural. For no matter how unsympathetic we may be to what we call religion, no matter how this-worldly we resolve to be, we are driven "out of this world" by our very questions about the world. Consider: We live in a certain way – but does it *matter* how we live? One would have to be a rock not to want to know whether man is merely the meaningless and purposeless result of a process that did not have him in mind. One would have to be a stone not to want to know how the world can be so beautiful that it hurts, and yet so full of other kinds of pain. One would have to be unconscious not to want to know how we fit into it – or don't. All people desire to know these things, although many of them stifle their desire. For questions about God and moral reality are inseparable from questions about reality at large. The inquiry into *how we should live* – in my case, into the rule of law – inescapably implicates *how things are*.

I am aware that in today's academy, this view is unfashionable. For reasons no one fully understands, our intellectual culture is trying to make the transit of a watery arctic waste, all the while insisting that there is no such thing as a boat and no such thing as the waters. On this view, there is no reality, only "social constructions of reality." Such views are almost too absurd to engage, for we really all know better. This becomes transparently obvious when we ask someone who says we can never know what really is, "Do social constructions really exist?" Yet we dive deeper and deeper into this insanity. We have come to such a pass that when some people say they "identify as" amputees and ask to have their limbs cut off, or "identify as" paraplegics and demand to have their spines severed, medical journals seriously consider their demands.³⁴

Whether or not it happens in our day, this inversion of the proper relation between *thought* and *thing* must come to an end. Ultimately, the human mind

³⁴ See for example Sabine Müller, "Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID): Is the Amputation of Healthy Limbs Ethically Justified?" *American Journal of Bioethics* 9:1 (January, 2009), pp. 36–43, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19132621>.

must reflect the way things are; reality is not going to obey the human mind. And so eventually we come back to the shape of reality, and eventually we come back to its First Cause, and thus this book.

I am not trying to make original contributions to metaphysics. Now and then along the way, I do offer a modest suggestion – for example, in the commentary on Question 2, Article 3, I resolve a possible objection to one of St. Thomas's arguments in a way which makes it a closer cousin of the Kalaam version of the cosmological argument than it is usually thought to be – but this is not really my purpose. Whether or not I can teach metaphysicians anything, I hope that even they may find it interesting to see how things look to those who, as it may seem to them, are backing into their domain after starting from somewhere else.

OVERVIEW

Obviously this is not a commentary on *all* of what St. Thomas says about God. It does not even cover everything in the relatively small part of the *Summa theologiae* which is devoted exclusively to the existence and nature of God. A line-by-line commentary even on just this part of the *Summa* could never fit entirely into the pages of a single book; that which St. Thomas does in just a portion of a book would for us require five or six volumes. If someone would like to undertake that task someday, I welcome him to it. Instead, I have dissected carefully chosen excerpts on a variety of topics which demonstrate the overall direction and shape of the argument. Thus, a more accurate title for this book would have been *Commentary on Certain Articles Dealing with God Selected from the First Half of the First Part of St. Thomas's Summa Theologiae*, but good luck fitting *that* on a book cover.

The goal, then, is not to explain everything, but to explain just those parts which equip readers – especially beginners – to work through the omitted parts on their own. What makes this feasible is that the units of argument in the *Summa* are individual Articles, each of them relatively self-contained, and each of my excerpts is a complete Article. Excerpting just enough, but not too much to fit inside a single volume, is not easy, but can be done provided that the discussion of the included sections explains certain ideas and arguments which would otherwise be encountered only in the sections not included. This is what I have tried to do.

It would scarcely be denied that in order to develop a rational account of God, we must reason as well as we can. St. Thomas begins, though, by arguing that we also need the help of certain truths revealed by God to the Jews and later to Christians. Not only does revelation tell us about things human reason could not have worked out without help, but it heightens our understanding even of things that human reason could have worked out without help. We can therefore expect that St. Thomas will employ the tools of both philosophy and divine revelation.

We first see him deploying tools he will use again later to establish the reality of God. As we explore further we find out that He is unique, not just one being among many; that He is simple, not compound; that He is perfect, the very fullness of Being; and that He is supremely good, not the source of evil.³⁵

Taking the term in its proper sense, we find that He is infinite. He is present in all things, not in the sense that they are parts of Him but in the sense that His causality penetrates them and gives them their proper powers and possibilities. He is unchanging, not because He does nothing, but in the sense that whatever He can be He already is, and whatever He does He does always. Thus, although He is eternal, He is nevertheless present in all the change and flux of time. We are now in a position to see more deeply than before how He is utterly one.³⁶

Now there is a problem. At the outset, St. Thomas had shown that our minds need the help of revelation to know what they need to know about God, and St. Thomas returns to the point. However, now that we have begun to see how incomprehensibly great and powerful He is, it may seem that revelation would be useless to us because our little minds would be unable to take in what it had to teach. At this pivotal point St. Thomas investigates the language of analogy, showing in what sense even finite beings like us can make sense of claims which are beyond our own experience without becoming vague or equivocal.³⁷

Analogically, we can say not only that God is Being, good, and one – things we have already seen in part – but we can also say more. Not only does God supremely know truth, He is Truth itself, in person. Not only has he made living things, but He lives even more truly than they do.³⁸

By this time, St. Thomas has assembled the materials he needs to show that God is also free. In particular, nothing compelled Him to create. In His supreme knowledge and wisdom, and without any need to do so, He chose to make all that is, and He loves all that He has made. Moreover, both mercy and justice are present in all His works.³⁹

We now encounter another obstacle. As we saw, earlier St. Thomas had argued that God is altogether good and that He is not the cause of evil. In light of the fact that we experience evil and undeserved suffering, how can this be? One might have expected him to meet this objection at its lowest point, excusing God on grounds that His power is limited or that He does not exercise providence. But no: He meets it at its highest point, arguing that in God's omnipotent providence and goodness, He allows some evils – for now – for the sake of good.⁴⁰

St. Thomas's arguments about providence lead into the question of what God ultimately has in mind for us. Having explored His being, activities, and

³⁵ Q. 1, Art. 1; Q. 2, Art. 3; Q. 3, Art. 7; Q. 4, Art. 1; Q. 6, Art. 2; and, out of order (as explained later), Q. 49, Art. 2.

³⁶ Q. 7, Art. 1; Q. 8, Art. 1; Q. 9, Art. 1; Q. 10, Art. 2; and Q. 11, Art. 3.

³⁷ Q. 12, Art. 13, and Q. 13, Art. 12. ³⁸ Q. 14, Art. 1; Q. 16, Art. 5; and Q. 18, Art. 3.

³⁹ Q. 19, Art. 3; Q. 20, Art. 2; and Q. 21, Art. 4. ⁴⁰ Q. 22, Art. 2, and Q. 25, Art. 3.

attributes, we turn finally to his intentions for human beings. This concluding theme, which brings us to the very brink of the Gospel, is the supreme happiness of the blessed in heaven. Is it really possible for Him who is supremely to be known and loved at last to be known and loved supremely?⁴¹

ARCHITECTURE

The *Summa* is composed of “Questions,” which we would call topical headings, subdivided into “Articles,” which really do ask particular questions. All but two of the Questions on which I touch come from the portion of the *Summa theologiae* conventionally called the *Treatise on the One God*. From each included Question, I have carefully excerpted a single pivotal Article. For example, in Question 2, I zero in on Article 3, which contains demonstrations of the existence of God. I omit both Article 1, about whether the existence of God is self-evident (which, if true, would make demonstrations unnecessary), and Article 2, about whether His existence can be demonstrated in the first place (because I am exploring the demonstrations themselves).

By the way, there are some surprises here. For example, although Question 2, Article 3, presents the famous “Five Ways” – St. Thomas’s five celebrated demonstrations of the reality of God – he actually provides other demonstrations of God’s reality as well. Thus I touch on the Argument from Beauty in the commentary on Question 6, Article 2, and offer remarks about the Argument from Desire in the Discussion at the end of Question 10, Article 2.

I have not included any excerpts from Questions 5, 15, 17, 23, and 24. What absolutely needs to be said about goodness in general (Question 5) can be folded into the discussion of the goodness of God Himself in Question 6; what absolutely needs to be said about the ideas in God’s mind (Question 15), into the general discussion of His knowledge in Question 14; and what absolutely needs to be said about whether there is falsity in God (Question 17), into the discussion of whether God is truth in Question 16. I also draw no excerpts from either Question 23, about predestination, or Question 24, about the Book of Life, because what absolutely needs to be said about these topics can be worked into the discussion of Divine Providence in Question 22.

On the other hand, I have included one excerpt which is not from the *Treatise on the One God*, but from the portion of the *Summa* conventionally called the *Treatise on Creation*. This is because, in my view, the discussion of whether God is supremely good, in Question 6, badly needs to be supplemented by the discussion of whether He is the cause of evil, in Question 49. Plainly, this is a departure from St. Thomas’s own order of presentation, and I do not undertake it lightly. I have not forgotten his complaint in the Preface about writers who take things up out of logical order! Since I cannot discuss every

⁴¹ Q. 26, Art. 3.

single Article of every Question, though, this single exception seems necessary, and I hope the Master would agree. It simply seems impossible that readers could be satisfied by the invitation to consider God's goodness without broaching the later question about evil.

Frankly it has been a little surprising that pulling Question 49 out of sequence can be made to work, because the *Treatise on the One God* builds up momentum as it goes along. More and more, one sees where the arguments are going and anticipates them. Even so, although the order of the queries is largely cumulative, it is not entirely so. For example, on one hand we must establish whether God exists before discussing whether He is simple, perfect, and so on – but on the other hand, the argument about His perfection does not depend on the results of the argument about His simplicity, and so St. Thomas could, perhaps, with some changes, have taken up these topics in a different order.

Sometimes he also mentions a point which he will not demonstrate until later. For instance, one of the Objections to the proposition that God exists, in Question 2, refers to God as being of infinite goodness, but St. Thomas does not actually prove God's goodness until Question 6, nor does He prove His infinity until Question 7. Even so, there is no circularity, for the Objector's wording makes clear that he is speaking only of what is *commonly meant* by God. He argues that *if by God we mean* a being of infinite goodness, then for the reason he gives, God could not exist. So on the one hand, St. Thomas's own argument against the Objector in no way assumes what has not yet been proven. But on the other hand, what comes later on in the *Treatise on the One God* fills out and expands certain elements in his earlier arguments, including his demonstrations of God's existence, so that the further we go along in the *Treatise*, the more convincing the earlier arguments become.

Several readers of my previous books have complained that although in my first commentary, *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on Law*, I provided a free online partner volume, called the *Companion to the Commentary*, I haven't done that for the subsequent books. It's true that I haven't provided *Companions* for each subsequent *Commentary*, but that is only because I now incorporate the Discussions right into each book, as I have in this one. Isn't that better? That was the original plan with the first *Commentary* too, but my editor was concerned that they would make the book too long, so I exported them. Long or not, now you have everything in one place.⁴²

Although the reasoning of Thomas Aquinas is enormously powerful, he doesn't think that he has placed his conclusions beyond the reach of any possible further challenge, and I certainly don't imagine that I have placed them there either. I do hope that I have explained them with enough clarity that those who still wish to take issue with the Angelic Doctor will be able to

⁴² The *Companion* to the first *Commentary* also contained line-by-line commentary on a few additional Articles, but I now try to pack all that sort of thing into my books too.

quarrel with his actual reasoning, instead of with straw men, ghosts, or projections of their own minds. And so the point is not to foreclose all dispute, but to make dispute more fruitful.

St. Thomas always begins with the Objections. The *utrum* or “whether” which makes up the title of each Article is almost always phrased in such a way that the traditional answer is “Yes,” but the Objectors offer reasons to think the answer should be “No.” Following the Objections there is always a brief section called the *sed contra* or “on the other hand,” which is not yet St. Thomas’s own argument but a brief restatement of the Tradition. Then follows the *respondeo* or “I answer that,” presenting his own reasoning, and finally the Replies to the Objections, taken in order.

Since St. Thomas is quite difficult, for all of this I offer both the public domain translation of the Fathers of the Dominican Province, and my own paraphrase, in parallel columns. For the paraphrase I always consult the Latin, not just the English, but the paraphrase is not another translation. Each of my previous commentaries has employed paraphrase in the same way. Not everything in this book is for everyone, and of course some scholars who are already highly accomplished in Thomas Aquinas may find the paraphrase superfluous. In my experience, however, most readers are grateful for it – and not just students. Another reason for the paraphrase is that it provides an opportunity to give another reading of the original text in those cases where I do not quite see eye to eye with the translators. Fortunately, this does not happen often.

Interspersed with the text and paraphrase, I offer line-by-line commentary. Today the term “commentary” is sometimes used for another style of discussion, which is better described as “interpretive essay.” There is a place for interpretive essay, but the line-by-line approach which I employ is the *classical* style of commentary. It is the style used not only by St. Thomas’s contemporaries, but also by St. Thomas himself, for example in his commentaries on the works of Aristotle. In fact, the composition of a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard was required in his time as a qualification for those teaching theology. A writer whom I once encountered mocked the classical line-by-line approach as merely a series of footnotes. Such criticism, I think, is self-indulgent. Among the many advantages of the classical style of commentary is that it forces close attention to the text. By doing so, it discourages carelessness, prevents the commentator from discussing what interests him and ignoring the rest, and makes the hand-waving and cherry-picking sorts of interpretation more difficult to pull off.

Following the line-by-line commentary come the Discussions, at least one for each Article. In a more freewheeling style, these Discussions explore various issues adjacent to St. Thomas’s arguments. Many of them involve objections which he does not take up, but which would certainly be proposed by readers today.

In the course of this book, I often say things like “the Objector says.” Some readers have protested that I shouldn’t speak like that, because the Objectors are only fictitious persons – St. Thomas is composing the Objections on his own. Of course he is! Intriguingly, though, he endows these hypothetical opponents with a bit of personality. Sometimes they are downright devious, especially in how they take quotations out of context or misconstrue the propositions they are arguing about. This makes the whole disputation more lively and interesting – for doesn’t this happen when real people are disputing too? On the other hand, St. Thomas is generous to his fictitious personages. Sometimes, for example, he writes that what an Objector has said is true if taken in a certain sense, but not if taken in another – reminding us that precision is not just a fussy preoccupation with tidiness, but crucial for avoiding grave mistakes.

At times, my paraphrases hew very closely to St. Thomas’s own manner of expression. Sometimes, though rarely, my word choices are more literal than the normally very literal Blackfriars translation. At still other times, though, the paraphrase is very free and even somewhat reconstructive, changing the structure of a sentence, the organization of a paragraph, or the very words – whatever it takes to get across the argument. Often it is necessary to plug gaps in what St. Thomas actually says, filling them in with what I think he has in mind. Of course I may be mistaken about what he has in mind, but since I present the Blackfriars translation and the paraphrase in parallel columns, the reader has all the data to judge for himself. That still leaves numerous things to be explored in the line-by-line commentary.

In many ways the paraphrase itself amounts to an interpretation of the work, even before we get to the line-by-line explanations. For example, at one point in Question 18, Article 3, St. Thomas has the Objector say that “the principle of life in the living things that exist among us is the vegetative soul.” The Blackfriars translation renders this very literally, but for most readers, mere transcription will not do. Even the expression “among us” may be a bit obscure; moreover, the meaning of the word “principle” as the source, foundation, origin, or beginning of something may be unfamiliar to us; furthermore, although the expression “vegetative soul” is precisely correct, it is wildly misleading in English. For in the first place, we may not realize that by “soul” St. Thomas means not necessarily an immortal soul but only the form or pattern of an embodied life, and in the second place, we may be unaware that the term “vegetative” refers not just to plants, but to basic functions shared by all creatures from plants on up. From all these considerations, I recast the line as “among the living things that exist with us in the created world, life springs from each thing’s inherent pattern of nutrition and reproduction.”

Even more than in those previous commentaries I wish that there were room in the book for *three* columns – not just translation and paraphrase, but also the original Latin. Unfortunately, that would not only make the book much longer, but also put the price (which is plenty high already) out of range for students,

general readers, scholars, and even many libraries. Fortunately, the Latin is easily accessible online.

I have noted in previous commentaries that St. Thomas often uses the rhetorical device called *inclusio*, or envelope structure, in which the writer briefly states a theme, develops it, then briefly restates it before going on to his next theme. This is especially well adapted to oral delivery, for it helps both the speaker and the listener keep track of the argument. On a small scale, he uses it in almost every Objection, for their common pattern is like this:

Envelope opens:	Apparently, P.
The argument:	Here is why P.
Envelope closes:	And so, we see that P.

But on the largest scale, the whole *Summa*, from *Prima* to *Tertia*, is a single great envelope, a vast loop portraying how created things go out from God and return to Him. In this way, the envelope structure of the book mirrors one of its great themes. Here in the *Prima*, we see mostly the outbound phase of the great loop, but as St. Thomas says, “the end corresponds to the beginning” – the origins of things anticipate their final aims.⁴³

HOUSEKEEPING

Finally, by way of housekeeping, a few words about sources and citations.

When St. Thomas borrows from one of his sources, the Blackfriars translation includes quotation marks. This is a little misleading, because the Latin does not contain any, and except in the case of Holy Scripture, he is usually not quoting but closely paraphrasing. Like most writers of the day, he often gives only a few words of each Scriptural passage, expecting his readers to recognize it. My commentary expands these fragments. One reason for expanding them is that many of the works to which he refers are unfamiliar to all but the most rarified specialists today. A greater reason, of course, is that our memories are not as capacious as those of his original readers. The printing press and the internet are marvelous tools, but they have made us lazy.

Some of the details of the citations in the Blackfriars translation are not in the Latin either, and occasionally the added details seem to be incorrect. I have quietly corrected these citations so that we have just St. Thomas's own words. The precise location of each passage he has in mind is given in the line-by-line commentary instead, and when I think the translators are mistaken I say so.

⁴³ This point comes up in many places, esp. I-II, Q. 1, Art. 8; Q. 2, Art. 5; Q. 2, Art. 8; and Q. 5, Art. 4.

Where the Blackfriars translation gives abbreviations for the Latin title of works mentioned by St. Thomas, I have usually substituted English titles. However, I have not done this when the Latin title itself is most commonly used in English, for example in the case of St. Augustine of Hippo's *Enchiridion*, or *Handbook*.

Since I am writing not only for scholars but for others as well, I take certain troubles for the convenience of those others. In particular, in quoting from works other than the *Summa theologiae* (such as the writings of Aristotle and St. Augustine), I try to use reliable editions that are in the public domain and available on the Internet. Sometimes this is impossible or inconvenient. The specialists, of course, will have their own favorite translations. Whenever I am quoting from an unpaginated electronic edition of a book, my notes omit page numbers. Sometimes I modernize language, such as the stilted archaisms in the common translations of works by Pseudo-Dionysius, but when I do so, I always say so.

I employ several translations of the Bible. The Douay–Rheims American (DRA) translation faithfully renders the Latin of the Vulgate which St. Thomas is following. It is also careful about distinctions which contemporary translations, like the Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition (RSV-CE), tend to blur, such as the difference between “precepts,” “ceremonies,” and “judgments.” However, the contemporary translations are sometimes clearer, often more musical, and almost always easier to the modern ear. Today's readers sometimes think St. Thomas is misquoting the Bible, just because the DRA divides chapters, verses, and sometimes whole books differently than recent translations do. For example, Psalm 18:6 in the DRA corresponds to Psalm 19:4a–5 in most contemporary translations.⁴⁴ Whenever we run into such discrepancies I explain them in the footnotes.

Since a portion of my readers may be encountering St. Thomas for the first time, it may be helpful to explain the method by which I refer to other sections of the *Summa Theologiae*. The *Summa* is divided into the *Prima Pars*, or First Part, the *Prima Secundae Partis*, or First Part of the Second Part, the *Secunda Secundae Partis*, or Second Part of the Second Part, the *Tertia Pars*, or Third Part, and finally the *Supplementum*, or Supplement, which was completed after St. Thomas's death by making use of works he had written earlier, such as his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. These main parts are abbreviated “I,” “I-II,” “II-II,” “III,” and “Supp.” A Question, abbreviated “Q.” in the singular and “QQ.” in the plural, followed by a numeral, is not one query but a set of related queries; each of the individual queries is addressed in an Article, abbreviated “Art.” with a numeral. Usually, though not always, an Article phrases the query in such a form that the traditional answer is “Yes.”

⁴⁴ DRA: “He [God] hath set his tabernacle in the sun: and he [the sun] as a bridegroom coming out of his bridechamber, Hath rejoiced as a giant to run the way.” RSV-CE: “In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.”

Possible Objections to giving a “Yes” answer are enumerated as “Obj. 1,” “Obj. 2,” and so forth; St. Thomas’s Replies to the Objections are enumerated as “ad 1,” “ad 2,” and so forth.

As in all my books, where pronouns are concerned, I generally follow the traditional English convention – the one everyone followed, before politically motivated linguistic bullying became fashionable – according to which such terms as “he” and “him” are already “inclusive.” Except where the context clearly indicated the masculine, they were always used to refer to a person of either sex. Readers who choose differently may write differently; I ask only that they extend the same courtesy to me. In the meantime, since my language includes masculine, feminine, neuter, and inclusive pronouns, any rational being who feels excluded has only him-, her-, or itself to blame.

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I admire those writers whose memories are precise enough to say things like “Thanks to my colleague so and so, who pointed out to me over a glass of stout that St. Thomas’s argument about necessity could be taken in another way.” Although I have had a few conversations of that nature – in particular with such friends as Hadley Arkes, F. Russell Hittinger, John Hittinger, Robert C. Koons, Kenneth Grasso, Francis Beckwith, and Daniel Bonevac, but others too – the good they have done me has mostly been osmotic. Over a period of years, I have absorbed oxygen and nutrients from the general excellence of their company, but I cannot tell that kind of story.

I gratefully acknowledge permission from Regnery Publishing to adapt some paragraphs of material from my previous works for this one. Bits and pieces from my previous commentaries from Cambridge University Press are included too. Sometimes I first try out arguments in the blog at my website, *The Underground Thomist*.⁴⁵

To Robert Dreesen, my editor at Cambridge University Press, who has shepherded all these commentaries since the first, I am deeply grateful; likewise to my many copyeditors, and to all those who have refereed, reviewed, endorsed, or recommended these works to others.

The opportunity to teach my students is a great gift, but for a much-needed one-semester leave for the purpose of completing this book, I thank the University of Texas at Austin.

⁴⁵ <https://undergroundthomist.org>.

My debt to my wife, Sandra, begins years before what I would call the real opening of my intellectual life. We are now beginning our sixth decade of marriage. In the early days, when I would spout the veriest nonsense – about how good and evil have no rational basis, about how we aren't responsible for our actions – the sort of thing that got me hired as a university teacher – other people would either argue with me or say “How very true.” She didn't; she laughed. “You don't believe those things,” she said. “No one can.” I was most indignant. “I do! I do!” But as it turned out, she was right.

May God bless this wise and patient woman, whom He has made a true instrument of His grace, to others but especially to me, for all these years.