

# THOMAS AQUINAS

CONTEMPORARY  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
PERSPECTIVES



*Edited by*

BRIAN DAVIES

Thomas Aquinas

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Contemporary Philosophical  
Perspectives

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Brian Davies

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For Margaret Urban Walker  
*with gratitude and affection*

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## Preface

The purpose of this book is twofold. Primarily, it aims to provide teachers and students of Aquinas with a convenient selection of some of the best philosophical essays on him published since *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Anthony Kenny, appeared in 1969. But it is also intended to provide an introduction or guide to Aquinas's thinking in general—one of use to those who know little or nothing about it. For this reason, the essays included range across the main areas of Aquinas's philosophical interests. For this reason also, they come with a substantial introduction to his life and thought, a chronological list of his most significant writings, and a large bibliography.

No collection of essays can fully do justice to the enormous complexity and comprehensiveness of Aquinas's thought. And an enormous number of studies on Aquinas have appeared since the volume edited by Kenny. So selecting the following essays has not been an easy task. In making my selection I have aimed to include material which clearly explains aspects of Aquinas's thinking on all the philosophical topics which chiefly concerned him: logic, metaphysics, natural theology, the relationship between philosophy and theology, anthropology, philosophy of mind and action, ethics, and legal and political philosophy. I have also aimed to include philosophically perspicuous essays which engage with that thinking at a critical level. Most of the material that follows is therefore both expository and evaluative. While intended for a wide audience, it combines historical scholarship with rigorous philosophical discussion and thus should prove useful to professionals as well as to beginners.

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## Contents

Contributors	xiii
Introduction	3
<i>Brian Davies</i>	
1. The Commentary of St. Thomas on the <i>De caelo</i> of Aristotle	37
<i>James A. Weisheipl</i>	
2. Matter and Actuality in Aquinas	61
<i>Christopher Hughes</i>	
3. The Logic of Being in Thomas Aquinas	77
<i>Hermann Weidemann</i>	
4. The Realism of Aquinas	97
<i>Sandra Edwards</i>	
5. Natural Reason in the <i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>	117
<i>Rudi A. te Velde</i>	
6. The <i>Esse/Essentia</i> Argument in Aquinas's <i>De ente et essentia</i>	141
<i>Scott MacDonald</i>	
7. The Five Ways	159
<i>John F. Wippel</i>	
8. Aquinas on What God Is Not	227
<i>Brian Davies</i>	

9.	Intentionality: Aquinas and Wittgenstein	243
	<i>Anthony Kenny</i>	
10.	Man = Body + Soul: Aquinas's Arithmetic of Human Nature	257
	<i>Gyula Klima</i>	
11.	Aquinas's Account of Freedom: Intellect and Will	275
	<i>Eleonore Stump</i>	
12.	Being and Goodness	295
	<i>Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann</i>	
13.	Law and Politics	325
	<i>Paul E. Sigmund</i>	
14.	Aquinas on Good Sense	339
	<i>Herbert McCabe</i>	
15.	Aquinas on the Passions	353
	<i>Peter King</i>	
	A Chronological List of Aquinas's Writings	385
	Bibliography	389

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Thomas Aquinas

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## Introduction

### I

Thomas Aquinas was the greatest European philosopher of the thirteenth century. Many would say that he was the greatest of all medieval thinkers. Yet his appeal and reputation have waxed and waned. In the period immediately following his death he had relatively few admirers willing to promulgate his teachings. And there were many anxious to censure it. In 1277 ideas thought to be his were ecclesiastically condemned in Paris and Oxford. His influence increased following his canonization in 1323. But his thinking never commanded anything like universal agreement in the Middle Ages. And though his impact on Roman Catholic teaching has been strong from the fifteenth century to the present, his work was largely ignored by the best known Western philosophers from the time of Descartes (1596–1650) to the middle of the twentieth century. Descartes himself sometimes mentions Aquinas with respect. But his most famous writings show little serious debt to Aquinas's major emphases. And some notable modern philosophical figures have been positively dismissive of Aquinas. According to Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), for instance: "There is little of the true philosophical spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead . . . Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith . . . The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading."<sup>1</sup>

Russell's opinion of Aquinas is still not uncommon. But it is now fair to say that it is increasingly under attack. For in the last few decades Aquinas has been more and more studied by professional philosophers, many of whom have come to view him as one of the most perceptive thinkers of all time. Hence, for example, a 1990 editorial comment in the journal *Philosophy*

asserts that "St. Thomas Aquinas is a genius whose claim to that accolade is barely debatable."<sup>2</sup> Then again, according to Anthony Kenny, one of the most distinguished of contemporary analytical philosophers: "Aquinas is . . . one of the dozen greatest philosophers of the western world . . . His metaphysics, his philosophical theology, his philosophy of mind, and his moral philosophy entitle him to rank with Plato and Aristotle, with Descartes and Leibniz, with Locke and Hume and Kant."<sup>3</sup> Kenny views Aquinas as having something positive and valuable to contribute to contemporary discussions of key philosophical issues. And so do many others. The respect which Aquinas now commonly commands is evident from the large number of publications concerning him which appear almost daily. Translations of Aquinas into English have been increasingly emerging for a number of years. So have articles and many substantial volumes. Russell was a philosophical genius. But it is now widely recognized that Aquinas was as well.<sup>4</sup>

What has brought about this revival of respect? In Roman Catholic circles, a major cause was Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), which presented Aquinas as an effective antidote to erroneous ideas and methodologies. This encyclical prompted the study of Aquinas in centers of religious education. It also inspired several generations of Catholic scholars to work on Aquinas and to recommend his principles. And its contents were effectively reiterated by the Second Vatican Council and by Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998). But why has Aquinas come much more into vogue beyond an explicitly confessional context?

One reason lies in the fact that we are now much more informed about the mind of Aquinas than were people in the early years of the twentieth century. Since the time of *Aeterni Patris* (and especially since the 1920s) an enormous amount of careful critical work has been done on Aquinas's writings. This has allowed them to be properly viewed in their historical context and with attention to what they have to say in detail (as opposed to what it might be thought that they have to say from a reading of a paraphrase or manual abridgment). And this, in turn, has led people increasingly to realize that Aquinas was a complex and subtle thinker, one whose thought developed, one whose thought was decidedly less rigid and simplistic than, for example, some of his eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century critics supposed.

Another reason for the renewal of interest in Aquinas lies in the growth of twentieth-century analytical philosophy. Analytical philosophers have always placed a premium on logical rigor and detailed attention to linguistic usage. And concern with such matters is very much a feature of Aquinas's writings (as it is with that of medieval philosophers in general). Analytical philosophy finds natural conversational companions in thinkers such as Aquinas, and many analytical philosophers have come to realize as much. Some

of them have also been led to a respect for Aquinas by to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). For many twentieth-century philosophers, Wittgenstein brilliantly showed that European philosophy from the time of Descartes was riddled with a large number of confusions and positive errors. Were these confusions and errors absent in earlier writers? Several contemporary thinkers (Kenny is a notable example) have concluded that they were, that they were notably absent in the writings of Aquinas, and that Aquinas is therefore someone with whom it is currently worth engaging.

But is he? The following essays offer answers to this question. They also provide accounts of Aquinas's thinking on topics which greatly preoccupied him. Together with the bibliographical information at the end of this book, readers should find them a helpful place to start when trying to make their own minds up on the significance of Aquinas. Several of the essays expound and consider what Aquinas has to say on matters to do with religious beliefs, such as belief in the existence of God or belief in life after death. But none of them explicitly deals with his discussions of specifically Christian doctrines, such as the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of the Incarnation. That is unfortunate since these doctrines were of major importance to Aquinas and since some of his most interesting philosophical arguments are to be found in places where he turns to them. But Aquinas's writings run to thousands of pages, and space in this volume is limited.

## II

What do we know about the life of Aquinas? Our sources for it are texts relating to his canonization process. There are also two early biographies: one by William Tocco, who knew Aquinas personally; the other by Bernard Gui, whose account depends partly on that of Tocco but may also incorporate reliable, independent information. But all of these documents leave us with many unanswered, and probably unanswerable, questions. Hence we find that the three most recent studies of Aquinas's life differ significantly on a number of matters.<sup>7</sup> They do so, for example, even when it comes to the year of Aquinas's birth, which can arguably be placed anywhere from 1224 to 1226.

Aquinas was born at Roccasecca in the (then) Kingdom of Naples. In 1230 or 1231 his family sent him to study at the abbey of Monte Cassino. But conflict between Emperor Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX made the abbey a center of imperial-papal rivalry. So in July 1239 Aquinas started to attend the recently founded university (or *studium generale*) in Naples. Here he began to learn about the writings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) and the Islamic and Jewish authors Averroes (c. 1126–c. 1198) and Maimonides

(1138–1204).<sup>6</sup> He also encountered the recently founded order of friars known as the Dominicans, which he joined sometime between 1242 and 1244.<sup>7</sup> After a troubled interlude during which his family tried to dissuade him from his Dominican associations, Aquinas studied in Paris, where he transcribed lectures of St. Albert the Great (c. 1198–1280) on Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>8</sup> He subsequently moved to Cologne, where he continued to work under Albert, where he was probably ordained to the priesthood, and where he may also have completed his commentary on the Book of Isaiah and the short treatise *De principiis naturae*.<sup>9</sup>

Following his time in Cologne, Aquinas returned to Paris (possibly as early as 1251), where he formally began his teaching career. At the outset, he lectured on the Bible and the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (c. 1095–1160).<sup>10</sup> In 1256 he became a master of theology, which again obliged him to discuss the Bible as well as to preside over a series of theological discussions referred to as “*Quaestiones disputatae*” (Disputed Questions). During this period of his life Aquinas also began to produce the earliest of the works for which he is best known today: a commentary on Lombard’s *Sentences*, the Disputed Questions *De veritate* (*On Truth*), the work known as *De ente et essentia* (*On Being and Essence*), and a commentary on Boethius’s *De trinitate* (*On the Trinity*). In addition, he started work on his lengthy *Summa contra Gentiles*.

A *summa* (summary) was an extended treatment of doctrinal matters set out in an orderly and comprehensive manner. It was a standard literary genre for medieval writers (on a variety of topics, not just philosophy and theology) from around the early twelfth century. Discussing the purpose of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas says that he aims “by the way of reason to pursue those things about God which human reason is able to investigate.”<sup>11</sup> A similar, though perhaps broader, intention can be detected in his *Summa theologiae*, which he began around 1265–68 but which remained unfinished at the time of his death. Commonly deemed to be Aquinas’s greatest achievement, the *Summa theologiae* contains three long treatises (or “parts”) that cover a very large range of topics including the existence and nature of God, the notion of creation, the nature and abilities of angels, human nature and its powers, the concept of human happiness, the characteristics of human action, the goal of human living, human virtues and vices, the life and work of Christ, and the meaning and significance of the Christian sacraments.<sup>12</sup>

Aquinas’s early biographers seem relatively uninterested in sorting out the details of his career from around 1256. But we can safely suppose that he vacated his teaching position at Paris before 1260, that he lived and taught for a time at Orvieto in Italy, that in 1265 he was assigned to establish a Dominican house of studies in Rome, and that by 1269 he was again teaching in Paris. In Orvieto he composed his *Catena aurea* (*Golden Chain*), a commentary on the four Gospels made up of quotations from the church fathers.

He also wrote an edition of a liturgy for the newly created feast of Corpus Christi and a commentary on the Book of Job. In Rome, as well as beginning the *Summa theologiae*, he worked on his Disputed Questions *De potentia* (*On the Power of God*); his theological synthesis known as the *Compendium theologiae* (*Compendium of Theology*); his political treatise, *De regno* (*On Kingship*); and a commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* (*On the Soul*). Having returned to Paris in or around 1268, he continued with the *Summa theologiae*. He also produced the Disputed Questions *De virtutibus* (*On Virtues*), *De aeternitate mundi* (*On the Eternity of the World*, a discussion of the question "Did the world have a beginning?"), and *De unitate intellectus* (*On the Unity of the Intellect*, a critique of Averroes on the nature of mind). He also began commentaries on the Gospels of Matthew and John, and commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Metaphysics*.

In 1272 Aquinas was assigned to establish yet another Dominican study house. He chose to do so in Naples, where he still continued to write and teach—forging on with the *Summa theologiae* (now into its third part) and probably lecturing on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans and the Book of Psalms. In December 1273, however, he abandoned his usual routine and wrote nothing else. He was evidently a sick man, though we do not know what, precisely, ailed him. Late in 1273 he was instructed to attend the Second Council of Lyons, but he became gravely ill en route. He died in the Cistercian Abbey of Fossanova on the 7th of March 1274.

### III

Can we quickly summarize the thinking of Aquinas? In the early twentieth century this was often presented in a number of textbooks chiefly designed for seminarians, handbooks suggesting that Aquinas has a quickly reportable system to offer. And it is still not uncommon to find people who contend that Thomism, as his thinking is sometimes called, can be easily articulated in a series of key propositions (something like the articles of the Apostles' Creed). But Aquinas is not easily paraphrased. And given what the word "Thomism" has come to mean in many circles, it is probably fair to say that Aquinas was not a Thomist. Original, brilliant, and much more sophisticated than many of his disciples, he was someone whose writings show an active mind at work, a mind concerned to explore, as well as to look for, definitive answers, a mind also prepared to acknowledge the limits of human reason. It is impossible to guess what he would say in detail on matters about which he wrote were he alive today. But anyone reading him seriously can hardly suppose that he would be anything other than horrified at the suggestion that he was offering something rightly describable as a "system."

With that said, however, it is not impossible to give some indication of arguments and conclusions which surface in the writings of Aquinas. And to start with, it is helpful to note that his readers will never properly get his measure unless they recognize that, as he puts it, “the beginning and end of all things” is God.<sup>13</sup> Aquinas’s thinking is first and foremost theistic. This is evident even from such texts as *De principiis naturae* and his commentaries on Aristotle, in which he seems to be primarily concerned with matters that present-day readers can also find discussed in works by authors with no belief in God. In saying so, I do not mean to suggest that Aquinas, as Russell claimed, was nothing but an apologist determined to dream up “reasons” in support of Roman Catholicism. And it should not be assumed that when Aquinas uses the word “God” he takes it to mean the same as do many who say that they believe in God. The point to grasp is that Aquinas had certain views about what he called “God,” views which are never too far in the background throughout his writings. He thought, for example, that we can know that it is true to proclaim that God exists. He did not think that we can know what God’s existence amounts to. But he thought that “God exists” (*Deus est*), considered as an asserted proposition, is something which can be supported without any reliance on religious authority.

Why so? St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) and Descartes argued that the existence of God can be proved on the basis of the concept of God. In their view, “God does not exist” is demonstrably self-contradictory because of what “God” means. Others have said that God is a direct object of human experience (as people might be thought to be to each other). But Aquinas takes a different line. He finds no demonstrable contradiction in the proposition “God does not exist.” He also claims that “the awareness that God exists is not implanted in us by nature in any specific way.”<sup>14</sup> Aquinas’s consistently held conclusion is that we can know that God exists only by inference from the world as encountered by means of our senses. In his view, which might be usefully compared with the writings of classical empiricist philosophers such as John Locke (1632–1704) and David Hume (1711–76): “The knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just so far as it can be led by sensible things . . . We arrive at a knowledge of God by way of creatures.”<sup>15</sup> Aquinas does not think that those who believe in God’s existence are necessarily unreasonable in doing so if they cannot produce sound inferential arguments for their position. Somewhat like Wittgenstein, he holds that there is nothing “to stop someone accepting on faith some truth which that person cannot demonstrate, even if that truth in itself is such that demonstration could make it evident.”<sup>16</sup> But, so he holds, an explicit knowledge that God exists can only be arrived at indirectly. To be more precise, his view is that we can know that God exists only by a process of causal reasoning. “Any effect of a cause,” he says, demonstrates that that

cause exists, in cases where the effect is better known to us, since effects are dependent upon causes, and can only occur if the causes already exist. From effects evident to us, therefore, we can demonstrate what is not evident to us, namely that God exists.”<sup>17</sup>

How does Aquinas think that we can do this? In his famous “Five Ways” (ST I, 2,3) he offers a series of much discussed arguments each of which concludes that there is indeed a God. Each of them begins by drawing attention to what Aquinas takes to be some general feature of things known to us on the basis of experience. They then suggest that none of these features can be accounted for in ordinary mundane terms, that we must move to a level of explanation which transcends any with which we are familiar. According to the First Way, the occurrence of change in the universe ultimately implies an unchanged changer who is not part of the universe. According to the Second Way, causal dependency in the universe must ultimately derive from a first cause who is not causally dependent, as, so Aquinas argues in the Third Way, must all things subject to generation and perishing. Elsewhere in the text of the Five Ways, Aquinas maintains that the goodness and perfection in the things of our experience must proceed from what is wholly good and wholly perfect. He also argues that the world provides evidence of intelligent agency bringing it about that certain things act in a regular or goal-directed way. In other words, according to the Five Ways, questions we can raise with respect to what we discover in day-to-day life raise further questions whose answers can only be thought of as lying beyond what we encounter.

Though they effectively introduce and have recourse to it, the Five Ways do not really highlight the heart of Aquinas’s philosophy of God, which lies in his claim that everything other than God owes to God its existence and all that is real in it for as long as it exists. According to Aquinas, apart from God there are only creatures. And although creatures *have* being, God, says Aquinas, is Being (or “Subsistent Being Itself” [*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*]). Having asked whether *Qui Est* (“The One Who Is”) is the most appropriate name for God, Aquinas replies that it is since, among other reasons, “it does not signify any particular form, but rather existence itself (*sed ipsum esse*).” “Since the existence of God is his essence,” says Aquinas, “and since this is true of nothing else . . . it is clear that this name is especially appropriate to God.”<sup>18</sup> This conclusion of Aquinas has given rise to a huge amount of controversy. Writers in the Thomist tradition have praised it in glowing terms. According, for instance, to Father W. Norris Clarke S.J., “The crown of the entire Thomistic vision of the universe is the notion of God as infinitely perfect pure Plenitude of Existence, ultimate Source and Goal of all other being.”<sup>19</sup> According to the great medievalist Étienne Gilson, the notion to which Clarke refers constitutes the true genius and originality of Aquinas and makes him

a genuine existentialist.<sup>20</sup> Others, however, have taken a different line. In the view of Anthony Kenny, for instance, Aquinas's teaching about God as *ipsum esse subsistens* can be described as "sophistry and illusion."<sup>21</sup> According to C. J. F. Williams, it is thoroughly undermined by the work of Gottlob Frege (1848–1925).<sup>22</sup>

Which party is right in this dispute? Critics of Aquinas on the topic of God and being commonly suggest that Aquinas takes "being" or "existence" to be the name of a property or attribute with which God is to be identified. But though his language sometimes suggests otherwise, it is not Aquinas's view that being is a property or attribute. Hence, for example, he holds that to say "Socrates exists" (*Socrates est*) is not to attribute a characteristic to Socrates but, rather, to say what Socrates is essentially (a human being, as Aquinas would argue). "No entity without identity," observed W. V. Quine (1908–2000). Or, as Aquinas puts it, existence is given by form (*forma est essendi principium*).<sup>23</sup> Aristotle held that there is no such class of things as things which simply *are*. Aquinas's view is that there is nothing we can intelligibly characterize simply by saying that it is. And, so he holds, to say that something like Socrates has being (*esse*) is to register the fact that "Socrates" is a genuine person and not the name of a fictional character. We can, he thinks, certainly speak of Socrates as having being (*esse*). But to do so, he argues, is not to note what Socrates is like (as we would if we said something like "Socrates has pneumonia"). Rather, it is to register the fact that we can make true statements about a human being called "Socrates." For Aquinas, Socrates *has being* if we can truly say things like "Socrates is a man," "Socrates is snub nosed," "Socrates is a clever thinker," and so on (as we cannot say, for example, with respect to Oliver Twist). As Herbert McCabe puts it, in Aquinas's view: "It is not simply in our capacity to use signs, our ability, for example, to understand words, but in our actual use of them to say what is the case that we have need of and lay hold of the *esse* of things. It is only by analogy that we can speak of the 'concept' of *esse*; we do not have a concept of existence as we have a concept of greenness or prevarication or polar bears."<sup>24</sup>

In that case, however, what does Aquinas mean when speaking of God as the cause of the being (*esse*) of things and of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*? Perhaps the best way to come to understand him is to recognize that, for him, it makes sense to ask, "Why is there anything at all?" or "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Confronted by things, we naturally ask causal questions. Confronted by Fred, we might naturally ask who his parents were. Confronted by a species of animal, we might naturally ask how this came about. According to Aquinas, however, such inquiries should lead us to a deeper level of questioning. For he thinks it proper to ask, not "What

in the world produced this?" but "What produced everything?" At the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein remarks: "Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is."<sup>25</sup> For Wittgenstein, *how the world is* is a scientific matter with scientific answers. But, he insists, even when the scientific answers are in, we are still left with the *thatness* of the world, the fact *that* it is. As Wittgenstein himself puts it: "We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all."<sup>26</sup> And Aquinas is of the same mind even though his understanding of the world is not that of Wittgenstein's *Tratatus*. We can, Aquinas thinks, explore the world and develop a *scientific* account of what things in it are and how they came to be there. But he also thinks that we are then left with a decidedly *nonscientific* question. His view is that, as well as asking, "What *in the world or universe* accounts for this, that, or the other?" we can also ask, "How come *any* world or universe at all?" or "How come the whole familiar (scientific or day to day) business of asking and answering 'How come?'"

It is here that Aquinas thinks in terms of God as the source of the being of things (the Creator) and as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. For him, the question "How come *any* universe?" is a serious causal one to which there must be an answer. And he gives the name "God" to whatever the answer is (since those who believed in God of whom he was aware [orthodox Jews, Muslims, and Christians] took God to be the cause of the existence of the universe [the Creator]). Since Aquinas thinks that God makes the universe to be, he reasons that God can be nothing in it and therefore nothing definable and characterizable as things within it are. If God is the Creator, Aquinas reasons in his Commentary on Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias*, then God must be "outside the realm of existents, as a cause from which pours forth everything that exists in all its variant forms" (*extra ordinem entium existens, velut causa quaedam profundens totum ens et omnes eius differentias*).<sup>27</sup>

In other words, Aquinas thinks that it makes sense to deny that God, like a creature, *has* being. Rather, so he suggests, we might speak of God as Being Itself. His meaning is not that God is an *is-ing* kind of thing. His point is essentially a negative one. Since the claim that God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* seems to be telling us what God is, one might expect Aquinas to defend it in an account of God's properties or attributes. But that is not what he does. We cannot, he argues, know what God is. We must content ourselves with considering "the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does."<sup>28</sup> And it is here that his talk of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* comes in. It is part of an account of ways in which God does not exist. Its chief purpose is to deny that God is a creature. As some authors would say, it is an exercise in negative theology.

## IV

Aquinas's approach to the question of God's nature often seems to be anything but negative. He argues that God is, for instance, good, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal.<sup>29</sup> Yet his readers should be warned to watch for the extent to which his writings show him to be someone who believed that God defies our conceptual equipment and is therefore seriously unknowable to living human beings such as you and me. On the other hand, however, Aquinas had little doubt that creatures such as you and I are objects which philosophers might well try to get their minds around to good effect. At one level, he took people to be almost as mysterious as God since he thought of them as created for a goal which exceeds our understanding. At another level, however, he thought of them as identifiable objects to be studied and reflected upon. So he had positive views about what it is to be human, views which he expressed with no special appeal to the teachings of theologians or to any other religious authority.

He thought, for example, that people are essentially physical animals who also have a nonphysical side to them. According to authors such as Plato (c. 428–c. 348 B.C.) and Descartes, people are very much not this: they are essentially nonmaterial intellectual things which are contingently linked, yoked, or attached to what is bodily. And in the philosophy of many contemporaries, they are nothing but material objects in motion. For Aquinas, however, people are something in between: neither wholly immaterial nor purely material. According to him, they are physical things which also function at a nonphysical level. Or, as he often observes, they are creatures with a certain kind of *soul*. Following Aristotle, Aquinas takes it that anything alive has a soul (or is *animate* as opposed to *inanimate*). "Inquiry into the nature of the soul," he says, "presupposes an understanding of the soul as the root principle of life in living things within our experience."<sup>30</sup> But what kind of soul does Aquinas take the human creature to have? What, in his view, is present in the kind of life had by people?

To begin with, he argues, people are things with a bodily life. In particular, he stresses, they are sensing things. Like dogs and cats, they can interpret the world by sight, taste, smell, and so on. According to Aquinas, however, people are also things which can know or understand. And it is this fact, he thinks, which renders them more than simply physical. For he takes sensation and understanding to be radically and significantly different. According to Aquinas, sensations are particular physical occurrences going on in particular physical organisms. And for this reason he takes them to be what we might call the ultimate in private property. He does not, of course, deny that two people can share a sensation in that, for instance, you and I can both feel

heat when sitting before a fire. But, so he thinks, the occurrence of the sensation of heat in me is different from its occurrence in you—just as my breathing is *my* breathing and not *your* breathing. Aquinas views sensations as local or confined, as, so to speak, “trapped” in the bodies of those who have them. Echoing Aristotle, however, he also maintains that people enjoy more than sensations. For, on his account, people can have knowledge, which he takes to be universal and unconfined—the ultimate in public property. And it is as knowers, Aquinas thinks, that people are more than merely bodies in motion. For, he holds, though I cannot have your very own sensations, I can have the very same thoughts as you, from which it follows, he concludes, that knowing is not a physical process since physical processes are events which occur in and to different individuals.

One way of putting all this is to say that meanings, for Aquinas (as for Wittgenstein), can never be particular physical objects. His view of understanding is that it should never be confused with encountering a thing at the sensory level and should never be identified with any individual physical process. Aquinas thinks that we cannot understand material individuals. We can confront them at a sensory level, but that, he argues, is different from understanding them. On his account, understanding is expressible in judgments or statements, and it can be shared by human beings (though not with other animals) in a way that sensations cannot. And, so Aquinas argues, since statements can be either true or false, knowledge or understanding can lead people to recognize alternatives. To understand a statement, Aquinas thinks, is also to understand its negation. It is to be able to view the world as containing possibilities, as conceivably being other than it is in fact now. And, for this reason, Aquinas also holds that with the ability to understand comes the ability to *act* and not simply to *react*. Why? Because, he thinks, action involves more than being affected by external stimuli and responding accordingly. It depends on understanding how things are and how they could be. And it consists in seeking that they should be one way as opposed to some other way.

According to Aquinas, nonhuman animals can also be said to seek. For he thinks that they have tendencies to behave in accordance with their natures, that they have “appetites.”<sup>31</sup> We speak of water naturally “seeking” its own level, and Aquinas, in a similar way, speaks of animals “seeking” to be what they naturally are and to have what they naturally need. Left to themselves, he thinks, they just are what they are by nature. They may be interfered with and may, therefore, become thwarted or defective. And how they behave in particular circumstances may be impossible for us to predict with a high degree of accuracy. According to Aquinas, however, in the absence of interference, they simply realize their natures. They “seek” to be themselves. But not, Aquinas holds, in a conscious sense. Their seeking is not based on

knowing how things might be and moving accordingly. It is not a matter of planning that a possibly attainable end should come to pass. It is a combination of instinct affected by circumstances. It is a product of complex and given structures. It is lived out rather than chosen. And, so Aquinas thinks, it therefore falls short of action—or, at any rate, of what he takes to be genuine human action. For, in his view, action is irreducibly and consciously end directed, and it depends on understanding since it is only by understanding the world that we can consciously seek to affect it. Aquinas does not want to say that we cannot act unless we have a complete understanding of the world and of how things are within it. Indeed, he thinks, we often act in ignorance. But he also holds that we cannot truly act without some conception of how things are and of how they might be. And it is thus that he views human action as end or goal directed (i.e., intentional). In Aquinas's view, human action differs from the behavior of nonhuman animals since it is done for reasons. It always invites the question "With a view to what are you doing that?"

## V

For Aquinas, then, acting persons intend (aim at) what attracts them. But what is going on as they act in specific circumstances? Aquinas's answer is that they live out or engage in examples of what he calls "practical reasoning." On his account, human action is always a reasonable business since it always involves seeking what one takes (even if mistakenly) to be somehow desirable. And, in this sense, he conceives of it as always conforming to a certain pattern of reasonableness comparable to what is involved when we reason not about what to do (practical reasoning) but about what is the case (theoretical reasoning). We may, Aquinas thinks, reason to the *truth* of some matter. We might work out how things *are*. But we can also, he says, reason as to *what is to be done*. We might work out *how to behave*. And this, he thinks, is what we are doing as we settle down to action in practice.

On Aquinas's account, essential to human action is what he calls "choice" or "decision" (*electio*). Or, to put it another way, Aquinas takes human action as a *doing in the light of alternatives*.<sup>32</sup> In saying so, however, he does not mean that action is something which *follows* choice or decision—as if acting people *first* make choices or decisions and *then* act on them. For Aquinas, actual human actions are human choices or decisions, and to describe them is to state how we have chosen or decided (what our choices or decisions have amounted to). Yet Aquinas does not think that our actions come out of the blue, as it were. According to him, particular choices or decisions reflect the way in which people think. They also reflect the character of the

people in question. Or, as Aquinas puts it, choice (*electio*) springs from *deliberation* (*consilium*), and both choice and deliberation arise from *dispositions* of various kinds.

When he refers to deliberation (*consilium*), Aquinas has in mind a reasoning process having to do with how to obtain what we want. Action, he thinks, starts with desire for something one finds attractive (something one takes to be good). But how is that something to be achieved? Here, he says, reason comes in as suggesting the recipe for success. Before choosing what to do (before actually acting), we may have to consider how best to get what we are looking for at the outset.<sup>33</sup> We may be clear as to what we want to achieve. But we might have to think about how to achieve it. Or, as Aquinas puts it:

The field of practice is attended with much uncertainty, for our acts are engaged with contingent individual cases, which offer no fixed and certain points because they are so variable. The reason does not pronounce a verdict in matters doubtful and open to question without having conducted an investigation. Such an inquiry is necessary before coming to a decision on what is to be chosen; it is called deliberation.<sup>34</sup>

The end to be achieved is not, one should notice, the business of what Aquinas means by deliberation. He does not conceive of this as helping us to determine what we want or should want. In his view, we deliberate in the light of desire. We do not desire in the light of deliberation. For Aquinas, deliberation presupposes goals, ends, or intentions.<sup>35</sup> But not all courses of action lead to the same goal. And some courses of action can be better at getting us what we want than others. According to Aquinas, therefore, deliberation has to do with means. It is a way of helping our will to have its full rein. It is rational reflection on how to obtain what we want.<sup>36</sup>

Yet what about our wants? How does Aquinas see these as entering into the occurrence of genuine human actions? This is where the notion of dispositions comes in. For, to put it as simply as possible, Aquinas views the wants reflected in particular human actions as deriving from what we are (or from what we have become), considered not just as doing this or that but as being people *of a certain kind*—people who find it desirable to act in certain ways, people with particular tastes, likes, and dislikes. His conclusion is that concrete actions reflect our characters or settled personalities. He thinks that there are patterns of action to which we tend as individuals, and that our tendencies can be affected or influenced by our past and by choices we make. We do not act in a historical vacuum. We act on the basis of dispositions.

What I am calling a “disposition” Aquinas calls a *habitus*,<sup>37</sup> and though

*habitus* can be translated “habit,” it is better rendered by “disposition.”<sup>38</sup> That is because Aquinas’s *habitus* is not a “habit” in the modern sense. When we speak today of people having a habit, we normally imply that they would find it hard *not* to act in certain ways. So, we speak of someone having the habit of smoking. A habit, for us, is a kind of addiction. For Aquinas, however, a *habitus* puts one’s activity more under one’s control than it might otherwise be. In this sense, to have a *habitus* is to be *disposed to* some activity or other—not because one tends to that activity on every possible occasion, but because one finds it natural, readily coped with, an obvious activity to engage in, and so on. In Aquinas’s thinking, to be fluent in a foreign language would be to have a *habitus*. Someone who possesses it may refrain from displaying it for one reason or another. But when speaking the language, such a person will do so easily and with a proficiency which many lack entirely. Or, again, people who are naturally or instinctively generous would, for Aquinas, have a *habitus*. They would be generous without effort. There would be little or no question of “going against the grain.” As Anthony Kenny explains, a *habitus* for Aquinas is “half-way between a capacity and an action, between pure potentiality and full actuality.”<sup>39</sup> Suppose you say that you can speak French. Your statement could be true even though you are not speaking French. But it will not be true just because it is possible for you to speak French in some abstract sense. “I can speak French” does not entail that I am speaking French at the time the statement is made. On the other hand, however, it entails more than the suggestion that it is logically possible for me to speak French. It entails that I have a genuine ability which not everyone has. In this sense, “I can speak French” ascribes to me an ability or skill which endures over time and can, as things are, be exercised in actual definite bits of behavior. In the thinking of Aquinas, it ascribes to me a *habitus* or disposition.

We may put it by saying that, in Aquinas’s view, people can acquire settled ways of acting. And, for him, this means that they can acquire a settled range of aims, tastes, or wants which play a vital role when it comes to concrete decisions. For, he holds, these express our wants—even insofar as they spring from deliberation. In choosing, so he thinks, we aim for what attracts us and we ignore or avoid what does not. And we pay attention to what attracts us even as we consider how to obtain what we want—since how we choose to achieve our purposes depends on what we are prepared to take seriously and on what we are prepared to disregard.<sup>40</sup> Or, as Aquinas frequently explains, human actions reflect the virtues and vices of people. For, on his account, virtues and vices are dispositions to act in certain ways—the difference between them being that virtues help us to act well as human beings while vices help us to act badly.<sup>41</sup> Hence, for example, with an eye on what

he calls the virtue of temperateness (the disposition to act so as not to be overcome by certain, mostly physical, desires), Aquinas writes:

Since sinful and virtuous acts are done by choice, and choice is the desire for something about which one has deliberated beforehand, and deliberation is an inquiry, there needs to be a quasi-syllogistic deduction regarding every virtuous or sinful act. And yet a temperate person syllogizes in one way, an intemperate person in another way, and a continent person in one way, an incontinent person in another way. For only the judgment of reason moves the temperate person. And so the temperate person employs a syllogism with three propositions and deduces like this: no fornication should be committed; this act would be fornication; therefore, I should not do it. And the intemperate person completely follows his desires, and so even such a person employs a syllogism with three propositions and quasi-deduces like this: everything pleasurable should be enjoyed; this act would be pleasurable; therefore, I should do it. But both the continent person and the incontinent person are moved in two ways: indeed by reason to avoid sin, and by concupiscence to commit it. And the judgment of reason prevails in the case of the continent person, while the movement of concupiscence prevails in the case of the incontinent person. And so both employ a syllogism with four propositions but reach contrary conclusions. For the continent person syllogizes as follows. No sin should be committed. And although the judgment of reason proposes this, the movement of concupiscence causes the person to reflect that everything pleasurable should be pursued. But because the judgment of reason prevails in the person, the person subsumes under the first proposition and draws a conclusion as follows: no sin should be committed; this is a sin; therefore, this should not be done. And the incontinent person, in whom the movement of concupiscence prevails, subsumes under the second proposition and draws a conclusion as follows: everything pleasurable should be pursued; this is pleasurable; therefore, this should be pursued. And properly speaking, such a person is one who sins out of weakness. And so it is evident that such a person, although knowing regarding the universal, nonetheless does not know regarding the particular, since the person subsumes according to concupiscence and not according to reason.<sup>42</sup>

Aquinas is not here asserting that people go through a complicated piece of reasoning every time they decide to act. His point is that the intellectual structure of decisions (their “logic” if you like) can be exhibited in a rational form. And, in making the point, he is anxious to stress that the ways in

which we act can be profoundly affected by the characters we have developed—whether virtuous or vicious.<sup>43</sup>

## VI

In that case, however, what becomes of human freedom? If, as Aquinas thinks, our behavior can be strongly affected by our character, can we ever really choose to act as we do? Or are we the victims of something beyond our control? Writers on Aquinas sometimes say that his answer to these questions is that people can choose to act as they do, and that people are not always the victims of what is beyond their control, since people have *free will*. But that is not quite right. What Aquinas believes in is not “free will” but “free choice.”

When Aquinas attributes freedom to people, he frequently says that they have what he calls *liberum arbitrium*. Though translators of Aquinas often render this phrase by the English expression “free will,” its significance is different.<sup>44</sup> Why? Because the thesis that people have free will is commonly taken to mean that freedom is something which belongs *only* to the will, that it is, if you like, the prerogative of will or a peculiar property of it. And Aquinas does not share this assumption. For, as we have seen, he believes that will and understanding are intimately commingled when it comes to human action. On his account, intellect and will are at no point separated in the exercise of practical reason. There is no act of practical intelligence which is not also one of will, and vice versa.

Yet Aquinas is prepared to ask whether or not the choices people make on the basis of what they think and are attracted to can be genuinely attributed to *them* and are not, in fact, the action of something else working in them in a way which renders them nonresponsible for what they do. And this is the question he has in mind when, for example, he asks in the *De malo* (*On Evil*), “Do human beings have free choice in their acts or do they choose necessarily?” and when he asks, in other works, “Do people have *liberum arbitrium*?”<sup>45</sup>

The operative word in the question “Do human beings have free choice in their acts or do they choose necessarily?” is “necessarily.” In this context, it means something like “inevitably” or “unavoidably.” If you pour acid on a human hand, the skin will immediately corrode. And it will do so inevitably, unavoidably, or, as we might say, necessarily. If you drop a ton weight on a mouse, the mouse will swiftly become an ex-mouse. And it will do so inevitably, unavoidably, or, as we might say, necessarily. But what about the actions of people? Are these what they are inevitably, unavoidably, or necessarily? Is everything we do to be thought of as coming to pass as skin

reacts to acid and as mice get squashed by weights? Aquinas's answer is "No." But why?

To begin with, he has theological reasons. For, as he says in various places, Scripture teaches that people have freedom. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we read: "God from the beginning constituted and left human beings in the hands of their own deliberation." Aquinas takes this passage as ascribing to people the freedom to decide.<sup>46</sup> He thinks that if people lacked such freedom, there could be nothing we could recognize as moral philosophy. Just as various natural sciences rest on the assumption that things undergo change, so, in Aquinas's view, thinking about morality rests on the assumption that people act with freedom. Or, as he puts it in the *Summa theologiae*: "Man is free to make decisions. Otherwise, counsels, precepts, prohibitions, rewards, and punishment would all be pointless."<sup>47</sup> If you believe that there is no change, then you cannot consistently be a physicist or a research chemist. By the same token, Aquinas suggests, you cannot seriously engage in ethical thinking if you deny the reality of human freedom.

But Aquinas's most developed defense of human freedom is neither biblical nor *ad hominem*. It springs from his conviction that human actions are done for reasons and that they cannot therefore be assimilated to processes which come about inevitably, unavoidably, or necessarily. Why not? Because, he says, it belongs to the very nature of reason to deliberate with an eye on alternatives. Some of the changes which things undergo happen, Aquinas thinks, because things are doing what they cannot avoid doing in the circumstances. But, he insists, this is not the case when people act for reasons. Why not? Basically, so he argues, because acting for reasons means thinking, and because reasons for action can never compel assent.

Here, once again, it is important to note how, in Aquinas's view, human animals differ from nonhuman ones. In fact, he thinks that they have a great deal in common, for he takes both to be living things with the ability to undergo sensations. He also takes both to have various inbuilt desires, tendencies, or instincts which greatly affect their behavior. According to Aquinas, however, people can understand how things are and respond (rather than merely react) to them on this basis. They do not just behave. They can describe what is around them, and they can behave as they do for reasons which are different from what might be mentioned when accounting for the behavior of nonhuman animals. One might well speak of the reason why the cat chased the mouse. But "reason" here has nothing to do with framed intentions. There may be reasons why the cat chased the mouse. But they are not the cat's reasons. In Aquinas's opinion, however, human action is precisely a matter of things acting with reasons of their own. He also thinks that with the ability to act with reasons of one's own comes an understanding of the world under many different descriptions. As Aquinas sees it, the ability

to understand the world under many different descriptions is why people have the ability to act with reasons of their own.

It might help here if we focus on the notion of interpreting the world. In Aquinas's view, this is something which both human and nonhuman animals do. For both of them have senses in terms of which the world becomes significant for them. According to Aquinas, however, people can interpret the world not just as *sensed* but also as *understood*. So they can speak about it. They can, for instance, not just *feel* wetness. They can *talk* about it raining. And they can ask what rain is and why it is raining now though it was not raining yesterday. On Aquinas's account, people can interpret the world by *describing* it. And, he thinks, this opens out for them possibilities of interpretation which are just not available to nonhuman animals. As Aquinas sees it, to be aware of things not just in terms of their sensible appearance but also under a description is also to be aware of things under an *indefinite* number of descriptions.

Suppose that I and a mouse smell a piece of cheese. On Aquinas's account, the cheese is significant for the mouse and, all things being equal, it will be drawn to it. According to Aquinas, however, I can perceive the cheese as more than something that is to be eaten without thinking. I can see it as somebody else's cheese or as bad for me if I want to lose weight or as what I promised to give up for Lent or as more expensive than I can decently afford, and so on. Aquinas reasons that my ability to think of the cheese in these ways is the root of my human freedom. For, he argues, there is a big difference between how we might think of something like a piece of cheese and how we inevitably think about certain other matters.

Consider the way in which we think when reasoning as follows:

If all human beings are mortal  
and all Australians are human beings,  
then all Australians are mortal.

Here we cannot but accept the conclusion given the premises supplied. And no additional information can leave us with any alternative but to accept it. We accept the conclusion of necessity.

But now consider this argument:

I want to get to Paris.  
If I catch this flight, it will get me to Paris.  
so I should catch this flight.

Might additional information leave me unable but to conclude that I should catch the flight? Well hardly. What about "If I catch this flight, I shall be

boarding an airplane with terrorists on it"? If I consider the flight under that description, then I will not conclude that I should catch it. Aquinas thinks that, when reflecting on the world, we can always view it under different descriptions. So he also thinks that we can engage with it, not because we are forced to think about it in only one way, but because we are able to think about it in different ways. And we can act accordingly. Or, as Anthony Kenny helpfully explains:

If the will is a rational appetite, an ability to have reasons for acting and to act for reasons, then the nature of the will must depend on the nature of practical reasoning. In practical reasoning the relationship between premises and conclusion is not as tight or as easy to regiment as that between premises and conclusion in theoretical reasoning. When we look at a piece of practical reasoning—reasoning about what to do—we often appear to find, where the analogy of theoretical reasoning would lead us to expect necessitation, merely contingent and defeasible connections between one step and another. Aquinas believed that the peculiar contingency of practical reasoning was an essential feature of the human will as we know it . . . He states this contingency as being the fundamental ground of human freedom.<sup>48</sup>

For Aquinas, people have freedom of choice since, unlike nonhuman animals, they can interpret the world in different ways (under different descriptions) and act in the light of the ways in which they interpret it. In this sense, he thinks, their actions are governed by reasons which are fully their own.<sup>49</sup> As we have seen, his view is that we are drawn to what we take to be good. But, so he also thinks, we are not compelled to act in any particular way simply because of our tastes. On his account, we aim for what we want in a world in which we (as thinkers) can recognize different things as likely to satisfy us in different ways. And on this basis we deliberate with an eye on means and ends. And, so he concludes, we cannot but agree that the choices we make are not necessary in the way that the scorching of skin is a necessary consequence of acid being poured on it or that the eating of a piece of cheese might be inevitable for a mouse. Our choices, he thinks, are actions which flow from what we, as individuals, are. They reflect our desires and our view of things.<sup>50</sup> And they might have been otherwise. In place of a particular repertoire of particular instincts, people, Aquinas thinks, have a general capacity to reason. And since particular matters like what to do in this or that situation are not subject to conclusive argument, people, he reasons, are not determined to any one course.

Yet Aquinas does not think that our actions come about as wholly uncaused. Some philosophers have argued that people can be free only if their

actions have absolutely no cause outside themselves. But this is not Aquinas's view. For, he argues, though people can act freely, it must still be the case that their actions are caused by God. Aquinas finds it unthinkable that any created event, including whatever we take to be there when human choosing occurs, should come to pass without God making it to be.

Why? Because of what we have already seen him teaching about God as the creator of things. For him, God is the cause of the existence of everything, the reason there is something rather than nothing, the source of *esse*. And since Aquinas takes human free actions to be perfectly real, he concludes that they must, like anything else, be caused to exist by God. Or, as he writes in the *De potentia* (*On the Power of God*): "We must unequivocally concede that God is at work in all activity, whether of nature or of will." According to Aquinas, God "causes everything's activity inasmuch as he gives the power to act, maintains it in existence, applies it to its activity, and inasmuch as it is by his power that every other power acts."<sup>51</sup>

One may, of course, say that if my actions are ultimately caused by God, then I do not act freely at all. Aquinas, however, would reply that my actions are free if nothing in the world is acting on me so as to make me perform them, not if God is not acting in me. His position is that "to be free means not to be under the influence of some other *creature*, it is to be independent of other *bits of the universe*; it is not and could not mean to be independent of God."<sup>52</sup> For him, God does not interfere with created free agents by pushing them into action in a way that infringes their freedom. He does not act *on* them (as Aquinas thinks created things do when they cause others to act as determined by them). He makes them to be what they are—freely acting agents. And, with these points in mind, Aquinas argues that human freedom is not something to be thought of as threatened by God's causality. On the contrary: his position is that we are free, not *in spite of* God, but *because of* God.<sup>53</sup> Or, as he writes in his commentary on Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias*:

God's will is to be thought of as existing outside the realm of existents, as a cause from which pours forth everything that exists in all its variant forms. Now *what can be* and *what must be* are variants of being, so that it is from God's will itself that things derive whether they must be or may or may not be and the distinction of the two according to the nature of their immediate causes. For he prepares causes that must cause for those effects that he wills must be, and causes that might cause but might fail to cause for some effects that he wills might or might not be. And it is because of the nature of their causes that some effects are said to be effects that must be and others effects that need not be, although all depend on God's will as primary cause, a cause which transcends this dis-

inction between *must* and *might not*. But the same cannot be said of human will or of any other cause, since every other cause exists within the realm of *must* and *might not*. So of every other cause it must be said either that it can fail to cause, or that its effect must be and cannot not be; God's will however cannot fail, and yet not all his effects must be, but some can be or not be.<sup>54</sup>

In terms of this account, God is not to be thought of as an external agent able to interfere with human freedom by acting on it coercively from outside. God is to be thought of as the cause of all that is real, as both free created agents and nonfree created agents exist and operate. Or, as Aquinas writes in the *Summa theologiae*:

Free decision spells self-determination because man by his free decision moves himself into action. Freedom does not require that a thing is its own first cause, just as in order to be the cause of something else a thing does not have to be its first cause. God is the first cause on which both natural and free agents depend. And just as his initiative does not prevent natural causes from being natural, so it does not prevent voluntary action from being voluntary but rather makes it be precisely this. For God works in each according to its nature.<sup>55</sup>

Commenting on this passage, Anthony Kenny describes it as teaching that "self-determination is . . . compatible with divine determination," so that Aquinas "appears to believe that freedom is compatible with some sorts of determinism."<sup>56</sup> But this is a very misleading way of representing Aquinas since he strongly denies that God should be understood as what would normally be thought to be a determining agent. Normally, such an agent is taken to be something in the world which acts on something else so as to render the second thing's behavior or processes inevitable. According to Aquinas, however, God does not act *on* things. He makes things *to be* (from nothing). When seeking to understand what Aquinas says about God and human freedom, one must, as so often when reading Aquinas, keep firmly in mind how strongly he wishes to distinguish between God, the Creator, and creatures.

## VII

For Aquinas, then, right reflection on human agency turns out to have a theological dimension. And the same, he thinks, goes for right reflection on other matters. In that case, however, how is Aquinas to be characterized as

an author? Is he primarily a theologian? Is he a philosopher who sometimes incorporated theological teachings into his writings? Is he some kind of hybrid philosopher-theologian? A number of Aquinas's readers have taken these questions very seriously. And the result has been a range of often conflicting portraits. According to some people, Aquinas is a theologian through and through. He is definitely not a philosopher. We have already noted Bertrand Russell's presentation of this conclusion, but it has also been echoed by people in sympathy with Aquinas, as Russell was not. For example, according to Mark Jordan, Aquinas "chose not to write philosophy."<sup>57</sup> For others, however, Aquinas is very much a philosopher and ought, indeed, to be thought of as one of the greatest. We have already seen Anthony Kenny suggesting as much. And he has recently found support from Norman Kretzmann. Focusing on the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Kretzmann finds Aquinas to be someone willing to approach theological topics "from the bottom up," that is, with serious regard to austere philosophical questions and arguments.<sup>58</sup> For Kretzmann, the *Summa contra Gentiles* might be aptly named the *Summa philosophica*.

What should be said with reference to this debate? To begin with, it should be firmly stressed that it would be utterly wrong to hold that Aquinas was no theologian. After all, he functioned as a master of theology. And theological concerns are paramount in many of his writings. This is evidently true when it comes to his biblical commentaries. But it is also true in the case of other works. For example, the first topic raised in the *Summa theologiae* is what Aquinas calls *sacred teaching*. And he clearly wishes to stress both that this is his chief concern in the discussions which follow and that it comprises the revealed content of Christian faith, understood as truth which cannot be arrived at by merely philosophical argument. One sometimes encounters the idea that Christian doctrine is rational in the sense that it is grounded on philosophical demonstrations which any thinking person ought to accept. But this is not Aquinas's view. He thinks that rational arguments in defense of Christian doctrine cannot claim to be probative. Christian doctrine has to be taught by God.<sup>59</sup> Hence the need for *sacred teaching*.<sup>60</sup>

Another fact to be reckoned with in this connection is that Aquinas's first teaching job was that of *baccalaureus biblicus*, a position which required him to study and expound the Bible. The same demand was laid upon him when he became *magister in sacra pagina*. For Aquinas, as for the other professors at Paris in his day, the Bible was the word of God and, therefore, something in the light of which other teaching was to be judged.<sup>61</sup> And he thought that it is here that *sacra doctrina* is to be found. For him, *sacra doctrina* and *sacra scriptura* can be used interchangeably.<sup>62</sup> In his view, access to revelation is given in the words of canonical Scripture, and especially in the teaching of Christ contained there. Christ, he says, is "the first and chief teacher of the

faith" (*fidei primus et principalis Doctor*) and, being God, knows divine truth without benefit of revelation. With him come the prophets and apostles (including the evangelists). And from all of them, and from nothing else, comes the matter of revelation. *Sacra doctrina* (the chief concern of the *Summa theologiae*) is, for Aquinas, the content of Scripture. It is also the content of the Christian creeds since, in his view, these basically amount to a restatement of what is in Scripture—a pocket Bible, so to speak. The Old and New Testaments need to be studied with care, Aquinas argues, since “the truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice.”<sup>63</sup> The creeds are needed to make the truth of faith quickly accessible to everyone. But they add nothing to what is already contained in Scripture. They merely summarize or highlight with a view to the needs of those who hear them.<sup>64</sup> Teachings such as this clearly mark Aquinas out as a theologian. And the case for calling him such becomes stronger when we note the ease with which Aquinas can move from what we might call philosophical positions to others which evidently go beyond them.

Take, for instance, the way in which his account and evaluation of human behavior proceed. As we have seen, according to Aquinas, one can give a sensible account of how people come to act as they do with no particular theological commitment. He also thinks that, even from a nontheological perspective, one can give some account of the difference between acting well and acting badly—the difference between succeeding as a human being (being a good human being) and failing as such (being a bad human being). Or, as we may put it, he thinks that it is possible to offer a sound philosophical account of human action. He also thinks it possible to give good philosophical reasons for acting in some ways rather than in others. So he can say that though “there is a true bliss located after this life,” it is also true that “a certain imitation of bliss is possible in this life if human beings perfect themselves in the goods firstly of contemplative and secondly of practical reason” and that “this is the happiness Aristotle discusses in his *Ethics* without either advocating or rejecting another bliss after this life.”<sup>65</sup> Yet, Aquinas takes God to be the ultimate (even if unrecognized) object of human desire. His approach to human conduct is infected by this conviction. For it leads him to see human actions as having more than what we might call a merely human significance. It leads him to see them as significant before God and as affecting our standing as God’s creatures.

More precisely, it leads him to see human actions as being in or out of tune with what he calls “Eternal Law.” According to Aquinas, “Law is nothing but a dictate of practical reason issued by a sovereign who governs a complete community.”<sup>66</sup> He adds, “The whole community of the universe is

governed by God's mind."<sup>67</sup> "Through his wisdom," says Aquinas, "God is the founder of the universe of things, and . . . in relation to them he is like an artist with regard to the things he makes. . . . And so, as being the principle through which the universe is created, divine wisdom means art, or exemplar, or idea, and likewise it also means law, as moving all things to their due ends. Accordingly the Eternal Law is nothing other than the exemplar of divine wisdom as directing the motions and actions of everything."<sup>68</sup>

In Aquinas's view, God and the Eternal Law are one and the same reality.<sup>69</sup> On his account, therefore, human actions must ultimately be viewed as conforming, or as failing to conform, with the goodness that God is essentially. On Aquinas's account, God, who is perfectly good, is the standard by which creatures can be thought of as good or as failing to be good. So, when people succeed or fail in goodness, they succeed or fail with respect to God. Insofar as they succeed, then, Aquinas thinks, they reflect the goodness that is God. Insofar as they fail, they stray from this goodness. Or, as Aquinas says, they sin. Drawing on St. Augustine of Hippo, he defines sin as "nothing else than to neglect eternal things, and to seek after temporal things." All human wickedness, he adds, "consists in making means of ends and ends of means."<sup>70</sup>

In other words, Aquinas takes bad human actions to be actions the nature of which can only be properly grasped if we see them as leaving us short of what God is all about. As he says in the *Summa theologiae*:

A human act is human because it is voluntary. . . . A human act is evil because it does not meet the standard for human behavior. Standards are nothing other than rules. The human will is subject to a twofold rule: one is proximate and on his own level, that is, human reason; the other is the first rule beyond man's own level, that is, the eternal law which is the mind of God.<sup>71</sup>

On this account, there is no conflict between rational human action and action which conforms to the goodness that is God. But the former is seen as an instance of the latter—the idea being that sound moral philosophy is, in the end, also sound from the viewpoint of theology.

In fact, Aquinas never called himself a philosopher. In his writings, "philosophers" always fall short of the true and proper "wisdom" to be found in the Christian revelation. Be that as it may, there is also a case for calling him a philosopher, as long as we bear in mind points such as those noted above. Though his chief preoccupations were manifestly theological, Aquinas frequently turns to them in ways that are philosophical in a fairly straightforward sense. If a philosopher is someone whose literary output is the work

of one who is not, first and foremost, a Christian believer, and if a philosopher writes with only little or no religious commitment, then Aquinas is certainly not a philosopher. But one might also think of philosophers as people prepared to try to think clearly while not invoking religious doctrines as premises in arguments. And on that understanding, Aquinas counts as a philosopher. Hence he can robustly defend the powers of what he calls “natural reason” and can write about logic, the world of nature, human cognition, human action, metaphysics, ethics, and other topics without employing theological premises.<sup>72</sup> Hence he can also write commentaries on philosophical texts by non-Christians which respect them on their own terms: as attempts to understand how things are or ought to be without recourse to theological authorities. Religious authors can write in very different ways. They can proceed with no sense of what a rigorous argument looks like. Or they can write on the assumption that there are really no serious philosophical questions to be asked either about the meaning of their religious beliefs or about the grounds on which they are held. They can also suppose that nonreligious thinkers have little to offer, and they can avoid discussing some of the questions which have most preoccupied philosophers. Aquinas does not write in any of these ways. Even his most explicitly theological works display high standards of argumentative rigor. They are also full of probing and intelligent questions concerning both the significance and truth of religious claims and the credibility of competing claims.

## VIII

The following essays explore some of these questions and the answers which Aquinas gave to them. The first, by James A. Weisheipl, situates Aquinas against the background of Aristotle and indicates how some of his teachings fed into Aquinas’s philosophy of nature. The three subsequent essays expound and discuss what Aquinas has to say on three topics to which he frequently turns with little or no recourse to theological premises. For want of a better label, you might think of these essays as devoted to some of Aquinas’s “basic metaphysics.” In “Matter and Actuality in Aquinas,” Christopher Hughes examines Aquinas’s claim that matter is somehow both potential and actual. In the following essay, Hermann Weidemann aims to disentangle the various ways in which Aquinas uses the verb “to be.” In “The Realism of Aquinas,” Sandra Edwards critically examines what Aquinas has to say on a topic which has busied philosophers since at least the time of Plato: the so-called problem of universals. In doing so, she makes some interesting and unusual comparisons between Aquinas and John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308).