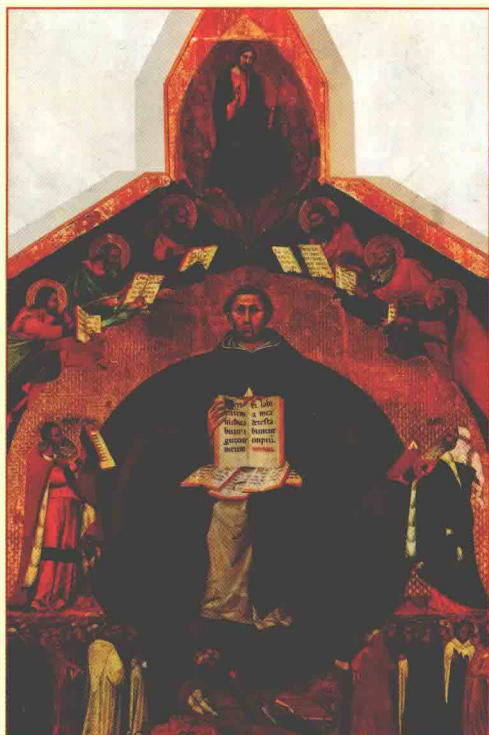


# ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON POLITICS AND ETHICS



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
PAUL E. SIGMUND

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION



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St. Thomas Aquinas  
ON POLITICS AND ETHICS

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A NEW TRANSLATION  
BACKGROUNDS  
INTERPRETATIONS

*Translated and Edited by*  
PAUL E. SIGMUND

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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The cover picture, *The Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas*, was painted by Francesco Traini following the canonization of St. Thomas in 1323, probably in the early 1330's. St. Thomas is seated holding the quotation from the Book of Proverbs ("My mouth shall meditate truth, and my lips shall hate impiety" — Prov. 8:7) which opens his *Summa contra Gentiles*. Rays of light depict the influences upon him of Christ (three rays from Christ's mouth) and of the works of St. Paul, Moses, and the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, each portrayed with his artistic symbol. There are also rays ascending to St. Thomas from books held by Aristotle and Plato — probably Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Timaeus*. From Aquinas a ray extends down to what appears to be St. Thomas's treatise, *On the Unity of the Intellect, Against the Averroists*, which has confounded the Moslem philosopher, Averroes, who lies prostrate below. At the bottom of the painting on each side are monks and churchmen who are enlightened by the works of St. Thomas. The painting, located in the Dominican church of Santa Caterina in Pisa, has been described as the greatest work of the Pisan School in the fourteenth century.

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# Introduction

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St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was the most important and influential philosopher of the Middle Ages. His *Summa Theologiae* (the correct title of the work usually called the *Summa Theologica*) is regarded as the most comprehensive treatment of the relation of philosophy and theology. In the area of ethics and politics, his influence is still felt. Contemporary theories of the just war, discussions of sexual ethics including abortion and contraception, arguments about property rights, and theories of natural law frequently refer to his writings. Political figures as diverse as Martin Luther King, Jr. and the apologists for the 1973 coup in Chile have cited his works in defense of their actions. Yet many students of intellectual history, ethics, political thought or religion have never read his writings. Courses in these areas often skip the medieval period entirely or resort to secondary sources that do not provide direct contact with his thought.<sup>1</sup> Many translations of his works, particularly in the areas of ethics and politics, are inadequate or misleading (see discussion below on Translations). The technical terminology of scholastic philosophy<sup>2</sup> may appear difficult or abstruse—although this is much less true of ethics and politics than in areas such as metaphysics. Yet behind the sometimes awkward scholastic format, Aquinas's thought is, on the whole, lucid, logical and accessible. This edition is aimed at increasing that accessibility by careful selection and comprehensible translations of the ethical and political writings of one of the towering figures of Western thought.

Besides the continuing relevance of its substantive content, there are also important historical reasons for studying St. Thomas's political and ethical works. While it would be a mistake to take his writings as typical of all of medieval thought—no single writer could be regarded as typical of what was a wide-ranging and disparate group of thinkers—his attempt to integrate the various strains of medieval thought into a comprehensive system conveys a better understanding of medieval intellectual life than does the work of any other philosopher of the period. His natural law theory, for example, combines elements drawn from Platonism, Aristotle, Roman law, Stoicism, the Christian Fathers (especially Augustine), feudal theory, and the contemporary political practice of the Holy Roman Empire and the Italian city-state. It forms an important element in *The Higher Law Background of the American Constitution* about which Edward S. Corwin wrote (Ithaca, NY: Cor-

1. A survey of teachers of political theory quoted one of its respondents who listed "having to teach medieval thinkers" as one of the most disagreeable aspects of his profession. The survey indicated that all respondents assigned Plato's *Republic*, most used Aristotle's *Politics*, four assigned parts of St. Augustine's *City of God*, but none used Aquinas.

See Steven Brzezinski and Sami Hajjar, *Teaching Political Theory: Preliminary Findings* (Laramie, WY: University of Wyoming, mimeographed), 7.  
2. The scholastic method of philosophical inquiry was developed by the "schoolmen," the teachers in the medieval schools of philosophy—hence its name.



nell University Press, 1955)—and it contributed to the transformation of the traditional, customary, and localized social order of the earlier Middle Ages into the centralized, legalistic, and rationalistic politics of the modern world.

### *The Setting*

In the century before Aquinas wrote, the intellectual life of the West had suddenly come alive. Philosophical speculation and argument developed rapidly, stimulated by the teaching and writing of Peter Abelard in Paris. John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* was evidence of the revival of political theory. Gratian's canon law collection (1139) provided the texts for the use by canon lawyers in the service of the papal centralization and the legal analysis of religious institutions. The twelfth-century revival of the study of Roman law at Bologna helped to give the emergent states of Western Europe a legal foundation, and produced a legal profession which supported the claims of kings and emperors. In England a "common law" had been forged by the king's justices in eyre (circuit judges) and a central treasury and administrative records created. At the time that Aquinas was writing, the papacy was promoting administrative and legal centralization of the church through direct legislation in Councils or by papal decrees that regularized its teaching and institutional structure. The first representative institutions were beginning to meet in inchoate form (the English Parliament dates its foundation from 1265), developing out of the king's feudal court (*Curia Regis*). In the church, legal analyses of the structure of the monastic orders and of cathedral chapters were producing theories of representation and consent which were to form the basis for more general theories that could be applied to the whole church by later writers. Drawing on the typology of Ernst Kantorowicz (*The King's Two Bodies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957) one might say that "law-centered kingship" had replaced the "Christ-centered kingship" of the earlier Middle Ages, and the foundations were being laid for the "polity-centered kingship" of the succeeding centuries. Aquinas's theories reflected and developed these themes.

### *Life*

Thomas Aquinas was born in 1224 or 1225 in the castle of Roccasecca near Aquino, north of Naples, to a family that belonged to the lesser nobility of the area. The castle was located in the northwestern province of the Kingdom of Sicily, not far from the southern boundary of the Papal States.<sup>3</sup> When Thomas was five he was placed in the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino for elementary and religious schooling. He remained there until 1238 when he entered the *studium generale*—later university—at Naples, which had been founded by Emperor Frederick II in 1224. There he became acquainted with the representatives of a dynamic new monastic order, the Dominicans who had been founded in Toulouse in 1216 in order to combat the Albigensian heresy.<sup>4</sup> The Dominicans had opened houses of study at

3. This summary is based principally on James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino, His Life and Work* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).

4. The Albigensians (From Albi in south-central France) or Cathari ("pure ones") lived ascetic lives and believed in the opposition of corrupt matter

and pure spirit. They denounced the worldliness of the church, and were the object of a crusade, declared by Pope Innocent III. The Inquisition was established to root out the remnants of Albigensianism.



the emerging universities of Western Europe to pursue philosophy and theology, while at the same time continuing to carry out their original aim of evangelization through preaching (O.P.—Order of Preachers). In the universities they devoted particular attention to the newly-translated works of Aristotle which were seen by some as a threat to the Catholic faith. In 1244, Thomas decided to join the Dominican order, but his family, which had hoped that he might join the local Benedictine order and someday become abbot of Monte Cassino, opposed his decision and his brothers imprisoned him by force in one of the family castles. After being detained by the family at Roccasecca for a year, he was permitted to leave and went to Paris to begin his Dominican novitiate, studying with the German Dominican theologian, Albert the Great, who was lecturing in the Dominican chair of theology “for foreigners” and working on the scientific works of Aristotle. When Albert established a *studium generale* in Cologne in 1248, Thomas went to Cologne to study with him.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas’s biographer, William of Tocco, states that his fellow-Dominicans in Cologne called him “the dumb ox”—referring to his physique and his laconic character (not his lack of intelligence) and possibly also to his lack of German—but that when Albert heard him in disputation he said, “the bellowing of that ox will be heard throughout the world.” In 1252 on the recommendation of Albert he returned to the University of Paris to study for the degree of master (i.e., professor) in theology. His program included lecturing under the direction of a master as a “Bachelor of the Sentences” on the standard theology textbook, the *Sententiae* (Opinions) of Peter Lombard, and engaging in public disputations on theological topics. Over the next four years he prepared his *Commentary on the Sentences* which was completed in 1256, at which time he was admitted as a master to the faculty of theology and granted a license to teach by the Chancellor of the University.

For the next three years he lectured, principally on the Gospel of St. Matthew, engaged in frequent public disputations on theological topics, and began the first of his *Summae*, the *Summa contra Gentiles* (Summary against the Gentiles) which was intended to help Dominican missionaries in their efforts to convert Moslems and Jews in Spain and North Africa. He continued to write the work after his return to the Dominican house at Naples in 1259, from which he was assigned to the Dominican priory at the papal court at Orvieto, Italy, in 1261. He remained at Orvieto for four years, completing the *Summa contra Gentiles* in 1264, and writing a number of other works. In 1265, he opened a new house of studies in Rome, where he seems to have begun his only strictly political work, the unfinished *On Kingship* or *The Governance of Princes* (*De Regimine Principum*) for the young king of Cyprus. In 1266 he began what was to be his most important work, the *Summa Theologiae* or Summary of Theology, which was initially intended as a systematic introduction to theology for Dominican novices—possibly because of his dissatisfaction with existing manuals of seminary instruction.<sup>6</sup>

5. Albert lectured on Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Aquinas’s notes and questions on his lectures have survived (Weisheipl, p. 46). A manuscript in the Naples library in Aquinas’s handwriting of Albert’s lectures on *The Divine Names* by Pseudo-Dionysius indicates that at this time he also studied the Christian Neo-Platonism of Dionysius the Areopagite, a fifth-century monk accorded almost

scriptural respect in the Middle Ages because he was mistakenly believed to be the convert of St. Paul, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles 17:34, in the first century A.D.

6. See Leonard B. Boyle, O.P., *The Setting of the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1982).



In the next two years he completed the First Part (S.T.I.), which deals with God's existence and attributes, and the relation of creatures to Him, writing the last section in 1267-68 at Viterbo where the pope was residing. Here, if not earlier, he worked with the Flemish Dominican, William of Moerbeke, who had been engaged in preparing more accurate translations of Aristotle's works than those that had been made available to the West from Arabic, by way of the Moslem-controlled parts of Spain.

In 1269 Thomas returned as a professor to the University of Paris. In the next three years he composed both parts of Part II of the *Summa*,<sup>7</sup> a monumental effort which involved writing and dictating to as many as three or four secretaries at a time, even, it was said, continuing to dictate in his sleep. (It was here, sitting at a banquet next to King Louis IX, that he is supposed to have fallen into a trance, struck the table, and shouted "That settles the Manicheans" and called for his secretary to dictate an answer to the Manichean heresy<sup>8</sup> before he realized where he was.) He also engaged in refutation of the Parisian followers of the Moslem philosopher, Averroes, arguing from Aristotle against the Averroist beliefs in the eternity of the world, the mortality of the soul, and the existence of a separable intellect that is common to all men.

He wrote many other works in this period, among them twelve commentaries on the works of Aristotle, including the *Ethics* and the *Politics*. In 1272 he returned to Naples, working on Part III (S.T., III) of the *Summa Theologiae* on Christ and redemption until December 6, 1273 when he suddenly announced that he could not write any more since "All that I have written seems like straw to me." From accounts of difficulties that he had in speaking and walking thereafter, his modern biographers conjecture that he may have had a stroke, or at least a breakdown occasioned by overwork, but earlier writers attributed the change to a mystical experience of the inadequacy of the human mind to express the divine. In February 1274 he left Naples to attend the Council of Lyons, but on the way struck his head on a tree across the road and died of the ensuing complications on March 7, 1274. During his life he had written over a hundred works including a *Summa Theologiae* consisting of 512 questions, 2,669 articles, and 10,000 objections and replies.

### *The Intellectual Challenge*

The principal contribution of Aquinas was to develop a systematic philosophical and theological response to the challenge posed to medieval Christianity by the rediscovery of the whole of Aristotle's philosophy which, except for his works on logic, had been unavailable to the West until the thirteenth century. Earlier medieval thought had relied for its view of the world upon the Bible, St. Augustine, Plato, and the Neo-Platonist writers such as Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius. The intellectual revival which began in the twelfth century looked to Plato as its principal philosophical inspiration, despite the fact that only his *Phaedo*, *Meno*, and part of the *Timaeus* were available in Latin. The works of Plato and his followers, along with Aristotle's writings

7. The first part of Part II of the *Summa Theologiae* (S.T., I-II) discusses happiness, virtue, sin, law, and grace, while the second part (S.T., II-II) analyzes specific moral questions.

8. Manicheanism, developed in Persia in the third century, held that the two principles of good and of evil, represented respectively by the soul and the body were in eternal conflict in the world.



on logic, formed the basis for the philosophical teachings of the masters in the cathedral schools who laid the groundwork for the "scholastic" philosophical method, which achieved currency in the arts and theological faculties of the emerging universities in the thirteenth century. The scholastics developed a standardized logical method of treating philosophical questions which attempted to resolve logical contradictions and disputed philosophical and theological problems through oral and written disputations.<sup>9</sup>

In theology the basic text was the Bible itself, along with the standard commentary (ordinary gloss) upon it, supplemented by Peter Lombard's twelfth-century selection of the opinions (*sententiae* or sentences) of the Fathers of the Church. (A formal *Commentary on the Sentences* was a requirement for the Master's degree in theology.)

Legal studies also developed rapidly. Those who specialized in church law (the canon lawyers) used Gratian's *Concordance of Discordant Canons* or *Decretum* to organize and integrate conflicting quasi-legal statements by the Fathers of the Church and earlier councils and popes. Gratian was supplemented in the thirteenth century by several collections of decrees (*decretales*) by recent popes. On the side of the newly emerging temporal powers the civil lawyers worked from the legislation and commentaries in the collection of Roman law (*Corpus Juris Civilis*) published by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century and revived as the basis of legal study and practice. Both the canonists (*canon*—a rule) and the civilians (*civilis*—pertaining to the city—*civitas*—of Rome) used the canon and Roman law texts to argue the respective claims of popes and emperors or kings in the numerous disputes between the spiritual and temporal powers that followed the revival of papal power and the centralization of royal and imperial authority in the eleventh century. Rival claimants either exalted papal power or glorified the kings and emperors as God's earthly representatives (minister of God, even vicar of Christ) in order to extend papal, royal or imperial claims to taxation, legal jurisdiction, or the loyalties of their subjects. Their writings discussed many of the basic problems of political theory, including the origin of political obligation, the best form of government, the nature of law, and the limits of political obligation, especially with reference to religious questions.

By the thirteenth century the specialized schools of law, theology, or liberal arts (often associated with cathedrals) had given way to a more diversified institution, first called a *studium generale* (school of general studies) and then a *universitas studiorum* (guild or corporate body of studies) with faculties of liberal arts, theology, law, etc. Aquinas studied liberal arts at Naples, and from his writings we know that he was also familiar with some of the

9. The scholastic method as developed in the oral disputations and reflected in the writings of the scholastic philosophers involved a series of steps. At the beginning of the disputation the master would announce the "Article" or subject to be debated, which was itself a subdivision of a broader "Question" being discussed. This was followed by a number of objections which were put forward by the audience, to which preliminary responses were made by "bachelors" (in present-day terms, teaching assistants) who were working with the master (professor), possibly also referring to authorities who held views contrary to the objections. The next day the master would give his response ("I answer that") to the basic issue or issues posed and would follow

this with formal replies to each of the initial objections. The disputation was sometimes taken down by a secretary and later edited by the master for publication. The oral disputation thus gave rise to the formal structure used by the scholastics to analyze philosophical and theological problems—a statement of an issue, alternative opinions or objections, contrary quotations from recognized authorities, the author's response to the problem, followed by answers to each of the initial objections. For examples of the scholastic form, see the selections from the *Summa Theologiae*, I, qu. 2, a. 3 on the existence of God (below, pp. 30–32) and I–II, qu. 90, a. 3 on legislation (below, pp. 44–45).



texts of Roman and canon law. His principal area of study, teaching, and writing, however, was theology.

Before Aquinas's arrival in Paris both the arts and theology faculties had faced an intellectual challenge to which they had reacted in an ambiguous fashion. Beginning around the year 1200 the scientific and metaphysical works of Aristotle had become available in Latin translations from Arabic, often with commentaries by Moslem philosophers. The Christian world was thus suddenly presented with a fully-integrated system of thought that was persuasive in its rational structure, uninfluenced by religious themes, and in some of its doctrines directly antithetical to Christian revelation. Aristotle described a world in which matter and motion were eternally derived by inflexible necessity from the potentiality of "prime matter" by a "First Mover" whose essential characteristic is the uncaused self-activity of reason (pure act). Man was described by Aristotle as a composite of bodily *matter* and a rational soul that was its *form*. Moslem commentators had interpreted Aristotle in ways that made his writings seem even more threatening—arguing for the existence of a single "world-soul" in which individual souls participate, thereby denying personal immortality and rewards and punishments after death, and reaffirming Aristotle's theories of the eternity and necessity of the world, which contradicted the Christian belief in the creation of the world by God.

The diocese of Paris responded to the Aristotelian threat by banning "the reading of books of Aristotle on natural philosophy and commentaries upon them" (1210)—a ban that was formally applied to the faculty of arts of the university in 1215.<sup>1</sup> The prohibition was reaffirmed by Pope Gregory IX in 1231, although it was only to be applied to the works "until they are examined and purged of all suspicion of error." The writings of the Moslem commentator on Aristotle, Averroes, began to be translated and quoted in the 1230s and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* soon thereafter. By the time that Aquinas's mentor, Albert the Great, began to lecture in Paris the ban was no longer observed by the theology faculty, and by 1255 the arts faculty made a knowledge of all of the works of Aristotle a formal requirement.

The original ban seems to have been initiated by the more conservative theological faculty in an effort to restrain the masters in the arts faculty who were showing an inordinate enthusiasm for the novel ideas contained in the new scientific and metaphysical writings. That the fears of the theologians were not unjustified was demonstrated by the action of the bishop of Paris in 1277 specifically condemning a set of 219 propositions drawn from the teaching of the Latin "Averroists"—professors at Paris who propagated the doctrines of Averroes.<sup>2</sup>

An alternative approach to the new knowledge, however, was to develop a synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and the Christian faith—rejecting the elements that contradicted Christianity but using Aristotle's analytic tools in

1. For the texts of the prohibitions and a history of thirteenth-century Aristotelianism, see Fernand van Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the West* (Louvain: E. Nauwelaerts, 1955).

2. The condemnation included several propositions drawn from Aquinas. They were specifically revoked in 1325 after his canonization. A translation of the text of the condemnation appears in

R. Lerner and M. Mahdi, eds., *Medieval Political Philosophy, A Source Book* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 335–355. In 1270 Aquinas wrote *On the Unity of the Intellect* refuting the Averroists. In *On the Eternity of the World* written in the same year, he argued that one can neither prove nor disprove by reason that the world had a beginning.



a way that demonstrated that there was no fundamental incompatibility between his philosophy and the Christian faith. Albert the Great seems to have begun to work out such a synthesis when Thomas studied with him. This quest became the central focus of Aquinas's philosophical and theological efforts.

### *Aristotle and Christianity*

The problem of the relationship of Aristotelianism and Christianity reflected at least two broader problems that Christianity had always been compelled to consider. The first was the Christian's conflicting attitudes to "the world" which according to the Christian faith had both been created by a beneficent God and corrupted by man's sin. If the Christian emphasized the world as part of the divine plan, he or she would take a much more positive attitude towards it than if the emphasis was placed on the corruption resulting from sin. Both attitudes had been present in the history of Christianity—and continue to be represented among modern Christians. Aquinas, while not ignoring the reality of sin, tended towards the first position, considering creation as the working out of the purposes of God in ways that demonstrate his love for man and his desire that humans achieve happiness—but arguing that man can only find true happiness and complete fulfillment in the vision of God after death.

A second and related problem suggested by the apparent conflict between Aristotle's writings and Christianity was the relationship between faith and reason. Again it was possible to take either of two attitudes—to insist on the compatibility of the two approaches to truth, the one through reason and the other through faith, with both intended by God to assist man in knowing his divine plan—or to denigrate the capacities of the human reason, to emphasize man's sinful tendency to use his reason for self-deception and pride, and to urge him rather to rely on Christian revelation as contained in the Bible and the teaching of the church as the only safe way to true knowledge. In contrast to some of his predecessors—for example, St. Augustine (354–431), who stressed the weakness and fallibility of human reason—St. Thomas, while recognizing the limits of man's reason and the weakness of his will, believed that the two approaches to truth are not incompatible—that as he says, "Grace does not destroy nature, but completes it." Natural reason can only go so far, but as far as it goes it can help us to know God and his creation. The truths of faith and those of reason are not contradictory.

This belief in the possibility of a harmony between man's eternal destiny and his life in this world, between what he knows by faith and what his reason tells him, and between the actions that are the result of divine grace and those prompted by his nature pervades Aquinas's philosophy—especially his writings in the areas of politics and ethics. It leads him to explore and develop a central intuition that is common both to Aristotelianism and Christianity—that of the fundamental rationality and purposiveness of nature and human nature. In Aristotle this intuition is expressed in his doctrine of final causation or teleology—the claim that "nature does nothing in vain" which both Aristotle and Thomas use to argue for an order and purpose in nature and man that can be determined by the study of their structure and development. A similar conclusion is drawn from the Christian doctrine of



divine providence, God's purposive and beneficent activity in support of his creation, which appears to coincide with the Aristotelian insight. As Aquinas argues in the Treatise on Law in the *Summa Theologiae* (I-II, qu. 91), once we grant that the world is governed by divine providence, "it is evident that the whole community of the universe is governed by divine reason." The divine purposes are accessible to some degree to rational creatures "who are under divine providence in a more excellent way" because they possess reason which they can use to perceive the goals or purposes that are proper to them, both because of the intention of nature and of God.

In describing the Thomistic synthesis as combining Aristotle and Christianity, it is important not to ignore another component, the contribution of Neo-Platonism, as contained principally in the writings of St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. In the Christianized version of later Platonism all of creation is the result of God's love as expressed through the emanation of his creative power, operating on the basis of the ideas in the divine mind through the various levels or hierarchies of created things. Man is lower than the angels, but differs from animals in the possession of reason and free will, capacities of the human soul which transcend the limits of matter and are never completely fulfilled until he sees God. God has made man for himself, and after the fall sent his Son to redeem him and to make it possible for him to receive the free gift of divine grace which will enable him to enjoy the direct vision of God which gives him complete happiness (*beatitude*). There is a "Great Chain of Being" from God through the angels to man and beneath him to animals, plants, and all created beings.<sup>3</sup>

The Platonic doctrine of Ideas or Forms formed one pole of the debate among the scholastic philosophers between the Platonist realists who argued for the real existence of universal Ideas or Forms, apart from individual things, and the nominalists who believed that universals were simply names (*nomina*) given to similar characteristics in collections of individual things. Here Aristotle was useful to Aquinas and others who followed him in developing the doctrine of moderate realism—that universals existed but only as perceived in things through the intellect's power of abstraction. The intellect could know being in its essential aspects—what made something what it was—but this did not imply a separate world of Ideas, except in the mind of God.

It is important to note that the Aristotelian belief in the possibility of true knowledge based on the action of the intellect upon sense experience meant that in the area of theory (speculative reason) it was possible to know some truths with certainty and to argue, for example, that the human experience of limitation and dependence (contingency) can lead the philosopher to reason to the existence of an unlimited and independent (necessary) being—God. On the other hand, Aristotle also emphasized the more uncertain character of practical judgments. Here the virtue of prudence would come into play, circumstances would alter cases, and experience was important in making prudential judgments about the appropriate conduct of individuals or society.

3. The classic treatment of the history of this idea is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).



*The Thomistic Synthesis  
in Ethics and Politics*

What did all this mean for ethical and political thought? It meant that Aquinas was able to use Aristotle to develop a kind of Christian rationalism in approaching ethical and political questions. Where moral theology was earlier seen as the working out of the implications of the moral commands explicit or implicit in Scripture, it now could use Aristotle's teleological method to approach fundamental ethical questions in a less authoritarian and deductive manner. Similarly in politics Aristotle's writings could be used to justify the autonomy of the temporal authority against the overriding claims of a Church increasingly intent on employing the recently developed centralized system of canon law and church courts to translate its moral superiority into a claim of legal jurisdiction over many areas that earlier had been considered part of the temporal order (e.g., peace treaties, widows and orphans, taxation, feudal relationships sealed by oaths, etc.).

The selections below illustrate the way that Aquinas used Aristotelian teleology to develop an integrated theory of ethics, law, and government. The famous Treatise on Law in the *Summa Theologiae* (I-II, qu. 90-97) is an example. The fourfold structure of the Eternal Law (God's plan for the universe), Natural Law (Man's participation in the eternal law by the use of his reason), Human Law (the application to specific societies of natural law by way of "conclusions" and "determinations"), and Divine Law (divine revelation in the Old and New Testaments which guides and extends the human understanding of legal and moral principles) draws on and synthesizes neo-Platonic ideas of hierarchy and participation, Roman law conceptions of legislation, feudal beliefs in the community origin of law and government, and the Stoic vision of a rational and moral order in the universe. But what ties it all together is a fundamental belief in the ability of the human mind to understand the purposive order of nature intended by God. Thus for Aquinas the natural law deals with the fulfillment of "natural inclinations" towards self-preservation, food, sex and family life, knowledge, and worship—divinely-implanted human needs and potentialities that provide the subject matter of natural law. Not all inclinations, of course, are "natural" but only those that form a rational set of purposes of nature in man. They are related to natural law not by rational deduction but by derivation from a conception of an integrated and socially responsible human personality oriented towards the fulfillment of potentialities intended by a beneficent and purposive God.<sup>4</sup>

This Christianized Aristotelian rationalism in ethics contrasts with the earlier Augustinian pessimism about the capacities of the human reason to know the good and of the will to do it. It came at a time when the Church had a particular need for a methodology to deal with concrete ethical problems because of the spread of the practice of auricular confession. In 1215 the Second Lateran Council made annual confession to a priest a religious duty for all Christians and their confessors needed guidance in the imposition of penance and the spiritual direction of the penitent. Thus the latter

4. For examples of the argument from natural purposes see the selections on theft (p. 71), suicide (p. 70), usury (p. 74), lying (p. 76), fornication,

adultery, and homosexuality (pp. 78-80).



section of Part II of the *Summa Theologiae* uses appeals to nature and the natural law to deal with moral questions of concern to clergy and laity alike, such as the degrees of seriousness of sexual sins and the classification of different types of drunkenness.

Political life is also based on human nature, an expression of natural human sociability and different talents. Sin has led to the need for coercion in government—and here Thomas agrees with Augustine—but it does not, as some medieval writers influenced by Augustine had argued, require all government to seek legitimation by the church.<sup>5</sup> “Infidel,” (i.e. Moslem) rulers have a right to rule which is derived from natural law, and “divine law based on grace does not abolish human law based on reason” (see selection, p. 62), although the church may nullify that right for compelling religious reasons. Jewish parents have a right, based on nature, to educate their children in the Jewish faith, although when the children become mature they have a right—again by nature—to decide on religious matters for themselves.

It is less clear where the argument from purpose or goal leads Aquinas when he discusses the relation of the spiritual and temporal powers. Aquinas argues in *On Kingship* (ch. XIV) for a hierarchy of ends with the one whose special responsibility is man’s eternal salvation directing the one who is only concerned with his earthly happiness, so that “kings should be subject to priests.” In the *Summa Theologiae*, however (S.T., II-II, 9v. 60, a. 2) he seems to argue that the ruler is responsible for the common good of civil society and governs as the representative of the community so that the only justification for clerical intervention is a direct threat to the salvation of souls.

A similar ambiguity is to be found in Aquinas’s treatment of property. He follows Aristotle in considering it as having both individual and social aspects. To resolve the tension between Aristotle’s view of property as natural to man and the attitude of the Fathers of the Church who saw it as a consequence of the Fall, Aquinas gives property a special status as something “added” to the natural law for human convenience—that is now necessary because of human selfishness.<sup>6</sup>

Aquinas’s view of society, too, combines organic and individualistic elements. On the one hand, every person has an individual soul and an eternal destiny and “man is not ordered to the political community in all that he is and has \* \* \* [but] to God” while on the other, “the whole is greater than its parts” and man can only find his fulfillment and happiness in organized society. As in the political philosophy of his mentor, Aristotle (*Politics*, Bk. I), the principles of social organization are based on human nature, and society is ordered in a hierarchy of social groupings beginning with the household, then the local community, then higher “natural” associations, culminating in the state that has within it all it needs for human fulfillment.<sup>7</sup> As in Aristotle, in the household there is also a similar order with the husband naturally superior to the wife, and the two of them cooperating

5. For examples of “political Augustinianism” see the letter of Pope Gregory VII to Bishop Hermann of Metz (1081) translated in Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050–1300* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 66–73 and the selections from Giles of Rome (1246–1316) in R. W. and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval*

*Political Theory in the West*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1950), 402–409.

6. See selection below, p. 72.

7. On the “organic” and “corporatist” elements in medieval thought see Ewart Lewis, *Medieval Political Ideas*, vol. 1 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1954), ch. 4.



in the procreation and education of children with the assistance of servants and/or slaves. However, the slaves have a family and personal life that are not subject (as Aristotle's slaves were) to the decisions of their master.

In his prescriptions for government Aquinas again takes an intermediate position. He characterizes monarchy as the best form of government because it gives unified direction to the community but he recommends that it also benefit from the virtue of the aristocracy and the democratic participation of the people. Furthermore, he is acutely conscious of the need for limits on the monarch to prevent him from abusing his power in tyrannical fashion. Those limits include the customary and statutory law of the community, the historical claims of the people in many cases to select and/or depose their ruler, the moral and spiritual guidance of the church, and above all, the ruler's own awareness of his responsibilities to God. Thomas discusses the subjects' right to resist their ruler, but he does not refer to representative institutions since parliamentary bodies were only beginning to emerge at the time he was writing, while conciliar theories of church government were not formulated until the fourteenth century.

The concept of inherent structural limits is, in a sense, a key to an understanding of Aquinas's approach. It enables him to develop a theory that maintains a middle position between faith and reason, rationalism and empiricism, individualism and collectivism, and authority and participation. If medieval political thought can be described as involving two principal traditions—a populist tradition "ascending" from the community and a theocratic monarchist tradition "descending" from God, Aquinas can be seen as representing both.<sup>8</sup> This explains both the variety of interpretations that have been given to this thought over the centuries and its continuing appeal.

### *The Influence of Aquinas on Later Political Thought*

Aquinas's initial influence was exercised through his own Dominican order. Although he was canonized in 1323 and recognized as an eminent theologian, it was not until the sixteenth century that the *Summa* replaced Peter Lombard's *Commentary on the Sentences* as the standard text for instruction in theology.<sup>9</sup> At the Council of Trent which was first convened in 1545 to combat the Protestant reformers his *Summa Theologiae* lay open on the altar beside the Scriptures, and in 1567 he was proclaimed "Angelic Doctor" by Pope Pius V.

The diffusion of Thomism in the early modern period was aided by the institutional need of the Roman Catholic church for a philosophical basis for its response to Protestant attacks, and Aquinas's thought seemed to the defenders of the church the most persuasive and systematic statement of the medieval theological and philosophical tradition. It was developed and modernized by Jesuit and Dominican writers in Spain and Italy such as Fran-

8. See selection below (pp. 115–119) from Walter Ullmann, *History of Political Thought in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1965). A similar typology is used in Paul E. Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

9. Dante puts Aquinas in heaven along with Bon-

aventure and Peter Lombard but does not accord him a special position (*Paradiso*, Cantos 1–11, 13). Dante's political theory is Aristotelian, but differs in many respects from that of Aquinas. See the argument of Etienne Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), ch. 3.



cisco Suarez, Juan de Mariana, and Robert Bellarmine, and through them exercised an influence on Grotius and the emerging theories of international law.<sup>1</sup> A similar need in the Anglican church also led Richard Hooker to make use of Thomism in his response to Puritan theological and political doctrines, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594 ff.). John Locke (1632–1704) was familiar with Bellarmine's writings, and quoted "the judicious Hooker" frequently, but his one direct reference to Aquinas in the early *Essays on the Law of Nature* seems to have been taken from Hooker rather than directly from the *Summa*.

In the nineteenth century the Catholic church drew on Aquinas's political thought to respond to the challenges of industrialism, liberalism, and socialism. Leo XIII was elected pope in 1878, after the long reign of Pius IX had culminated in the seizure of the Papal States in 1870 by the Italian nationalists, the formal definition of the doctrine of papal infallibility by the First Vatican Council in 1871, and anti-clerical agitation in France after the Franco-Prussian War. Leo began his pontificate by formally endorsing the study of Thomism in Catholic educational institutions in his encyclical, *Aeterni Patris* (1879) and drew heavily on Aquinas's thought in a number of subsequent encyclicals designed to provide an approach to contemporary political and philosophical problems based on the Catholic intellectual tradition. The most important of those encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891, outlined a social order based on widespread distribution of property, the organization of trade unions, and the guarantee of a living wage to the worker. The Catholic political parties and trade unions that had emerged in many European countries used the encyclicals and Thomist categories of thought to develop a "communitarian" or "personalist" alternative both to socialism and to free-enterprise capitalism that claimed to provide for both the individual and social aspects of private property. In these organizations, as well as in seminaries, universities, and secondary schools run by the church, Thomism provided the structure through which political and ethical questions were articulated and analyzed.

In the twentieth century the neo-Thomist movement in philosophy and the Christian Democratic parties in European and Latin American politics developed and reformulated aspects of Thomist social thought, abandoning the conservatism of its original formulation in favor of liberal theories of democracy and human rights that claimed Aquinas as their inspiration. The most important philosopher in this movement was Jacques Maritain (1891–1965),<sup>2</sup> but Yves Simon, Heinrich Rommen, and Josef Fuchs also wrote on the subject and the Christian Democratic parties in Germany, France, Italy, and Chile produced Thomist-influenced theoretical publications for their followers. In the United States beginning in the 1930s Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago interested a whole generation of American students in Thomism, and the books published by the University of Chicago Press in the Walgreen Foundation series gave wide circulation to Thomistic ideas. The post-World War II revival of interest in natural law in Europe connected with the search for a philosophical basis for human rights, and in the case of Germany with a basis for appeals against unjust

1. See James Brown Scott, *The Spanish Origin of International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934); Bernice Hamilton, *Spanish Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

2. On the development of Maritain's political thought see Paul E. Sigmund, "Maritain on Politics," in Deal Hudson and Matthew Mancini, eds., *Understanding Maritain* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).



laws such as those adopted by the Nazis, also aroused interest in the Thomist formulation of a higher legal standard.

Following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) Thomism virtually ceased to be the official philosophy of Catholicism and papal documents no longer cited Aquinas, preferring to go directly to Scripture and the early Fathers. In Europe and Latin America the Christian Democratic parties adopted a vocabulary similar to that of their secular counterparts and only rarely referred to Maritain and Aquinas. One significant exception appeared in Peru between 1968 and 1975 where a reformist military regime borrowed concepts and even economic analyses from Catholic-influenced theories of worker participation and worker ownership that could trace their genealogy to Thomist doctrines of the social function of property.<sup>3</sup>

While the direct influence of Thomism, particularly as mediated by Catholicism, has diminished, his religiously-based but rationally grounded philosophy of man and society has a continuing appeal. His writings on philosophy, ethics, and politics are now viewed not as *the* answer to all the problems of the contemporary world, but as a particularly brilliant and influential approach to understanding God, man, and the world that permits us to rank Aquinas with Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Marx, and Freud among the thinkers who have enabled us to see the world differently because of what they wrote.

### *Evaluation*

Who was Thomas Aquinas and why was he important? First, he was a committed Christian who was attracted to the religious life from an early age, working in a dynamic new religious order with branches in many parts of Western Europe. Second, he was an academician in the forefront of the intellectual life of his day teaching, debating, writing, and making use of the scholastic method which had been developed in the nascent universities of Western Europe to engage in the logical analysis and resolution of philosophical and theological problems in defense of Catholic orthodoxy. Third, he was an Aristotelian who devoted most of his life to studying and understanding the newly available works of the Greek philosopher and relating them to the truths of Christianity in the belief that reason and faith were not contradictory, but merely two different ways through which God had made it possible for man to know truth. Aristotle gave him concepts such as matter and form, act and potentiality, substance and accident, and above all a belief in final causality—teleology or purposiveness in nature—which he used to organize and systematize the intellectual inheritance of Christian Europe in a rationally defensible way. A fourth element in his thinking which is not usually noted is the influence on Aquinas of Neo-Platonism—through Proclus, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius—with its vision of a hierarchical and ordered world beginning with God and proceeding through various degrees or levels of being as emanations of God's overflowing being (in Christian formulations, God's love). Man is a unique part of this "Great Chain of

3. See Peter T. Knight, "New Forms of Economic Organization in Peru: Toward Workers' Self-Management," in Abraham Lowenthal, ed., *The Peruvian Experiment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), ch. 9. See also Alfred Stepan, *The State and Society: Peru in Comparative*

*Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), ch. 1 on the "organic statist" approach to government, which was transmitted to Latin America through St. Thomas and the papal encyclicals.



Being" because he links earth and heaven, and possesses a soul which receives a special aid, grace, from God, enabling it to transcend its natural capacity so as to achieve the direct vision of God after death required for complete happiness.

As applied in Aquinas's political and ethical thought, these elements result in a vision of an objective and purposive order of justice in the universe in which reasons and purposes can be found for what we observe in the external world, in society, and in man. The teleological outlook of Aristotle is used to fashion a rational philosophical basis for the Christian belief in a purposive and loving Creator. Their combination leads Aquinas to look for an order and harmony in human society, politics, and ethics that is free of contradiction, although not of tension. There is no place in Aquinas's thought for Niebuhr's "impossible ethic" or Machiavelli's opposition of personal ethics and a political ethic of survival. Protestant Christians are critical of the excessive rationalism of Thomistic ethics, and its refusal to recognize that there are contradictions between a rationalistic teleological ethics and certain aspects of the message of Christ (e.g., sacrificial love, martyrdom, rejection of wealth and worldly possessions, and "turning the other cheek"). Radicals are suspicious of Aquinas's emphasis on the "natural" character of a social order which they insist is subject to human control and conditioned by economic structures.<sup>4</sup> At least until the changes in Thomism introduced by twentieth-century neo-Thomists in favor of democracy, freedom, pluralism, and human rights, liberals were suspicious of its clericalism, implicit authoritarianism, sexism, and a hierarchical outlook that seemed to prefer order to freedom.<sup>5</sup> Recognizing that many aspects of Aquinas's ethical and political views that are not accepted today (e.g., his preference for monarchy, his qualified acceptance of slavery, the prohibition of taking interest, his attitudes towards Jews, the defense of the burning of heretics, his belief in the natural inferiority of women) were historically conditioned or the result of an uncritical acceptance of Aristotle, the modern reader can still share Aquinas's central belief that man should use his intellect critically to resolve human problems of individual and social conduct. In addition, as a number of contemporary philosophers and political theorists have recognized, Aquinas shares with his mentor, Aristotle, a belief in the human capacity to identify goals, values, and purposes ("teleology") in the structure and functioning of the human person that can provide the basis of a theory of ethics that responds to the argument of the eighteenth-century philosopher, David Hume, that values cannot be derived from the facts of human existence.<sup>6</sup>

Aquinas may be too optimistic about the possibility of certain knowledge in ethics and politics, giving less attention than he should to historical conditions and the limits of human reason.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless his thinking contin-

4. For one instance, however, in which Aquinas has been interpreted in a radical quasi-Marxist direction, see the selection by Julio Silva Solar (pp. 178-180).

5. On the reinterpretation of Aquinas as a liberal, see the selection by the editor (pp. 180-188).

6. Cf. John Wild, *Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 59-63; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), ch. 7; Paul E. Sigmund, *Natural Law in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, 1971; reprint, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), conclusion; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Alisdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd ed., 1984), chs. 12, 13, 16, 18.

7. Note, however, that as an Aristotelian, Aquinas did not believe that it was possible to achieve