

## **1: The Basic Character of Thomistic Ethics**

This course will serve as an introduction to the world, and worldview of Thomas Aquinas. We will examine his ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophical theology. This will enable us to develop an understanding of Aquinas's time, purpose, and goals. From his interaction with the philosophy of Aristotle, medieval Jewish and Muslim theology, and classical Christian doctrine and theology, Aquinas produced an impressively large and diverse body of philosophical and theological works that has helped shape Western philosophy to this day. This first lecture will serve as a basic introduction to his life and ethics.

**I. Early Life and Education:** Thomas Aquinas was born in Roccasecca, Italy in 1224. He was the youngest son of an aristocratic family. He received his education from a number of institutions: His education started at the Benedictine abbey at Monte Cassino (1231-9). He then studied at the University of Naples from 1239-44. In 1244 Aquinas joined the relatively new Dominican Order, which eventually led him to the University of Paris. That he joined the Dominicans rather than the Benedictines was a point of serious conflict with his family. His family captured him en route to the University of Paris and prevented him from leaving until 1245. In 1245 Aquinas finally reached the University of Paris. Here he met Albert the Great to become an influential teacher, and eventually close friend and mentor. In 1248 Aquinas went with Albert the Great to the University of Cologne.

Aquinas was large in stature. In tandem with his modesty and quietness, this led to teasing at his expense. Nonetheless, his gifts were readily apparent, and during his relatively short life he became one of the most influential thinkers of the Dominican order. Thomas Aquinas died in 1274, just short of turning 50.

**II. Two Monumental Works:** Thomas Aquinas wrote an extraordinary volume of philosophical and theological literature, but two of his works stand above the others as the most important (and exemplary): *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SGC) Synopsis [of Christian Doctrine] Directed Against Unbelievers. *Summa Theologiae* (ST) Synopsis of Theology. This is his greatest and most influential work.

Aquinas took issue with the teaching methods and materials of his day and saw the ST as a pedagogical tool, revolutionary specifically because of its organization. It is divided into three major sections as follows: The First Part (1a): The Existence and Nature of God (Questions 1-43) Creation (Questions 44-49) Angels (Questions 50-64) The Six Days of Creation (Questions 65-74) Human Nature (Questions 75-102) Divine Government (Questions 103-119)

The Second Part (which is further subdivided into two parts) deals with morality:  
The First Section of the Second Part (Iallae): Human Happiness (Questions 1-5)  
Human Action (Questions 6-17) The Goodness and Badness of Human Acts  
(Questions 18-21) Passions and the Sources of Human Acts (Questions 22-48)  
The Second Section of the Second Part (Ilallae): Three Theological Virtues and  
Corresponding Vices (Questions 1-46) Four "Cardinal Virtues" and Corresponding  
Vices (Questions 47-170) Special Issues Associated with the Religious Life  
(Questions 171-189)

3. The Third Part: The Incarnation (Questions 1-59) The Sacraments (Questions  
60-90) It is worth noting that the third part is unfinished due to Aquinas's death. It  
ends during his discussion of penance.

**III. Understanding of Ethics:** Ethics is the philosophical category interested in human morality and flourishing. What makes one a good person? Of what does "the good life" consist for human beings? What does it take to please God as a good person? Such are some of the basic questions with which the field of ethics is concerned. Thomas Aquinas centers his ethics around virtues. A good person is a virtuous person, and a good life is a virtuous life - the kind of life a virtuous person would live.

As the notion of virtue plays such a central role in Aquinas's ethics, a closer look at the concept is warranted. There are 7 main virtues: The 3 theological virtues: love, hope, and faith. The 4 moral virtues: wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Aquinas's definition of virtue: "A virtue is a good quality of the mind by which one lives righteously, of which no one can make bad use, and which God works in us without us." This definition of virtue comes from Augustine, nearly 1,000 years earlier.

Understanding the interplay of the three clauses in this definition, and the definition's ramifications for the seven virtues, is vital to properly grasp the foundation of Aquinas's ethics.

Understanding the first clause of the definition, "A virtue is a good quality of the mind by which one lives righteously," as it applies to the seven virtues is straightforward. The second phrase, "of which no one can make bad use," is the tricky part, because it is easy to imagine means by which one could use a moral virtue (e.g., courage) in a bad way. The clarification of the matter comes in third clause, "and which God works in us without us." Virtue is not something that can be achieved or strived for by humans. Rather, virtue is a gift implanted in us by

God, when we come into relationship with God. Like his definition of virtue, Aquinas was steeped in the theological tradition of Augustine. The work in this process is God's, and that prevents Pelagianism (i.e., a heresy involving works-based virtue where one can make oneself righteous or virtuous through one's own efforts) from entering the picture.

**IV. The Primacy of Love:** Given this, virtue is not an intrinsic part of any person's character or nature. Rather it is second personal, a gift imparted by God, infusing one's being when one enters into loving relationship with God. When one enters into a loving relationship with God - which happens through an act of surrender to God's love - God imbues the person with all of the virtues at once. Virtue then, according to this definition, can only be understood in the context of the gift-giver and gift-receiver relationship (this is what is meant by "second-personal"). When one surrenders to God's love and grace, one is connected to God in that two-personal relationship through love and faith.

A relationship of love with God is then prerequisite for the impartation is the central virtue for Aquinas. Without the love of God, there can be love, all virtues are made manifest. The good life consists of that which brings a person closer in that re with God. We become moral by surrendering to the love of God, allowing ourselves to be drawn ever nearer in relation to God in the process. All else is measured thereby.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. How do you think the events of Thomas Aquinas's life impacted his theological writings?
2. What is the significance of the second-personal nature of the virtues and how does this relate to the heresy of Pelagianism?
3. Why is love given primacy among the virtues in Thomas Aquinas's ethics?