

Towards an Understanding of Aquinas's Self-Understanding of His Work¹

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This paper tries to provide an attempt of explanation of St. Thomas Aquinas's intellectual aims as they are revealed in some texts of *Summa contra Gentiles* and a few minor works.

Under the guise of this purposefully ambitious and commodious title I propose to take a look at a question whose answering should be of fundamental importance for contemporary interpreters, whether critical or sympathetic, of St. Thomas Aquinas. This question is not considered nearly often enough, and when it is considered, its answer is easily forgotten about as one plunges into the study of some particular doctrine of Aquinas. Thus we must return to this question frequently if our understanding of Aquinas is to be accurate and if he is to teach us in any comprehensive way. What did Aquinas take the unifying point of his intellectual work to be? And, if Aquinas is the hallmark thinker of the Christian middle ages, what relevance does his self-understanding have for Christian thinkers engaged in philosophy and theology today? I approach Aquinas's work in this paper not as a

1 An earlier draft of this paper was given at the 26th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 9-12, 1991 at Western Michigan University. I am grateful to Prof. Alasdair MacInyre and Prof. Mark Jordan for their suggestions in the paper's reworking.

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medievalist *per se*, but as a student of the history of ideas and a Christian lover of wisdom seeking orientation.

There are two reasons which scarcely need reviewing why a Christian lover of wisdom might seek orientation from Aquinas. In the Catholic Christian tradition no thinker has received higher ecclesiastical approbation as a sound and sure guide to wisdom than he. Further, it is doubtful whether any Christian thinker's ideas, save perhaps those of the inspired writers of Christian scripture (and arguably those of St. Augustine), have had a more profound and consistent influence on the history of western (broadly) philosophic thinking and the pursuit of wisdom than Aquinas. Any light that can be shed on Aquinas's self-understanding is of obvious value.

There are a good number of approaches one might take in trying to get a handle on this matter. The approach I will follow here may not be the best one, but it is, at any rate, a reliable, and I will argue, a fruitful one. It requires that we begin at the beginning and dwell on a biographical matter of considerable importance in the shape Aquinas's intellectual work took—his joining of the Order of Friars Preachers. Supernatural reasons aside, why did Aquinas freely, and contrary to a number of prevailing forces at the time, become a Dominican friar? How exactly did his Dominican vocation bear on his intellectual work? More reliable and weighty than biographical details and anecdotes here is Saint Thomas's own understanding of the friar's vocation as he makes it evident in his vigorous defense of the Dominican charism in the polemical tract he authored in Paris at the beginning of his formal academic career (most probably in 1256): the *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum et Religionem*.²

² Future citations from the *Contra Dei Impugnantes* in the article will be from the following edition: *Opuscula Theologica* v. II: *De re spirituali*, ed. Raymundi M. SPIAZZI O.P. (Taurini: Marietti, 1954). I will cite this, as the other works in the paper, by section and/or chapter, paragraph number

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The work begins in its *Proemium* with the assertion that God in His love for man uses man both to give God glory and to procure the salvation of other men. Though God could accomplish both these objectives without the help of men, nonetheless, He wishes to use certain men as instruments in the task. In doing this, God observes an order in the communicating of His wisdom and gifts through men: he uses certain elected ministers (*ministri*) whom St. Paul rightly calls "*adiutores Dei*" (*Proemium*, #1, 1-21).

After a brief treatment of the essence of the religious vocation, Aquinas takes up the question of whether it is licit for religious to teach. His replies to the manifold objections raised against religious teaching provide us with some worthwhile information of the sense of purpose he must have had in his own work as a Dominican *magister* in theology. These are his replies, in summary form, to the important objections raised: imitating Christ, who did before he taught, it is fitting that the evangelical counsels in Christ's teaching be taught by those who have first practiced them; those most suited to teaching are those who are most capable of contemplating divine things—that is, religious whose voluntary material poverty and whose renunciation by vow of "*operationes seculares*" and those things which cause unrest to the mind eminently suits them for teaching; the carrying out of any work of mercy is a suitable reason for the establishment of a religious order, but teaching is a spiritual work of mercy and form of spiritual almsgiving; if religious orders can be instituted for corporal warfare in defence of the Church, something a bit removed from the essence of the religious state, how much more fitting is the institution of a religious order to fight the *militia spiritualis* in defence of Church doctrine by employing the *arma spiritualia* of sacred scripture; if teaching Christian *doctrina* to the many is, as virginity and

(i.e. in the Marietti editions), and line number(s), as follows: I, c. 2, #28, 5-9.

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martyrdom, a form of Christian excellence to which a special eternal reward is due, then the act of teaching can no more be prohibited by an evangelical counsel than can the act of undergoing martyrdom or committing oneself to perpetual virginity (II, c. 1, #18-28).

Thomas tells us later on in the tract that mendicant friars are guilty of no sin or impropriety in neglecting to do manual labor. They merely follow the example of the Apostle Paul, who, when pastoral reasons demanded it, ceased to do physical labor and preached continually living off the means of his preaching audience. *Praedicatores moderni* unlike St. Paul must acquire the *scientia praedicandi* "ex continuo studio" and cannot count on acquiring this *scientia*, as St. Paul did, "ex inspiratione." Obeying the counsel of Christ, "Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9:60, Rheims Challoner), it is fitting that these "*praedicatores moderni*" leave off the lesser work of manual labor and take up the more useful work for the common good of preaching (II, c. 4, #196).

As regards voluntary poverty, if it was fitting and meritorious, as St. Jerome notes, that philosophers give up riches to be free from the cares they bring and have the necessary leisure for philosophic contemplation, how much more fitting and praiseworthy is it for individuals to leave all things to contemplate divine things (II, c. 5, #220).

Aquinas's clear motivation for joining the Dominicans appears to be the living of the ideal he defends at great length in the **Contra Impugnantes**: that of leaving all things to devote oneself to a life of study, teaching, and preaching to announce and expound the Gospel of Jesus Christ and defend its truth against opposed errors. Is then the Dominican charism Aquinas elucidates and defends in the **Contra Impugnantes** reflected in his personal intellectual work?

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Aquinas's formal career as a theologian commences with the inaugural lecture (or *principium*, as it was called) *Rigans montes de superioribus suis* which he delivered on the day of his inception as *Magister* in theology at the University of Paris. Though a formal exercise with a clearly-defined purpose in a formal induction process (*principia* were intended to be commendations of Sacred Scripture), we would still expect such a lecture to be a kind of alpha-point in Aquinas's self-understanding as academic teacher and writer.³

According to a popular and well-attested story, distraught with uncertainty as to the topic of his *principium*, Aquinas poured himself out in tears and prayer and received in a dream or vision the clear indication that he should choose as the *principium*'s basic text Ps. 103:13: "You water the mountains from your dwelling places on high, the earth will be sated with the fruit of your works" (my translation of Aquinas's Vulgate text: "*Rigans montes de superioribus suis: de fructu operum tuorum satiabitur terra*").⁴

In the lecture Aquinas treats of divine wisdom (*sapientia spiritualis*), its sublimity or *altitudo*, the order of its communication, the dignity of the learned (*doctores alti, illuminati, and muniti*) who would be the divine instruments of its transmission, and the conditions requisite in those hearers who would be instructed by it. Aquinas explains that as God does not communicate to the *doctores* all His wisdom nor do the *doctores* do so to the *auditores*. While God possesses wisdom *per naturam*, the *doctores* and the *auditores*

3 A description of the *inceptio* process can be found in James A. WEISHEIPL O.P., *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1983) 93-102.

4 WEISHEIPL, *Friar Thomas*, 95-6. The following text of the *principium* will be cited: *De Commendatione Sacrae Sripturae in Opuscula Theologica* v. I: *De re morali et dogmatica*, ed. R. Verardo (Taurini: Marietti, 1954).

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possess it by participation: the former *ad copiam*, the latter *ad sufficientiam*.

The *doctores* have the three-fold task of preaching, study, and disputing: "*tribus officiis, scilicet praedicandi, legendi, et disputandi*" (II, #1213, 23-4). Their dignity derives from their nearness to the divine source of all illumination and their strength in being able to defend the teaching of the faith against contrary errors.

The lecture ends with a question adopted from a text of St. Paul: "*ad haec quis tam idoneus?*" (II Cor. 2:16). Who is suitable for the exalted task of communicating divinely revealed wisdom? Thomas replies to this question citing various scriptural texts and summarizing their meaning: "*Requirat enim Deus ministros innocentes . . . intelligentes . . . ferventes . . . item obedientes.*" Aquinas reminds his audience, however, quoting St. Paul, that no one by himself is sufficient for such a ministry ("*sufficientia nostra ex Deo est.*" II Cor. 3:5), and that one should seek sufficiency and wisdom from God: "*debet autem petere a Deo.*" The lecture properly ends: "*Oremus. Nobis [sapientiam] Christus concedat. Amen.*" (IV, #1215, 49-68).

Aquinas is clearly detailing in this lecture what he takes to be the task of the *doctor Christianus*. Having sought out and received divine wisdom through study, moral rectitude, and especially petitionary prayer, the *doctor* is to be an instrument of its communication to those who lack it.

There are evident resemblances between this *principium* and the roughly contemporaneous (slightly later) **Contra Impugnantes Dei**. In the latter case one might see in Aquinas's impassioned defense of the Dominican vocation a mere service rendered to the Order of Friars Preachers; in the former case one might harbor suspicion that the lecture was a mere *pro forma* obeisance to the *opus theologicum*, but in no sense a statement of personal purpose or commitment. One might suspect that both works mask Aquinas's true desire of excelling

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in the human wisdom of philosophy and of contributing directly and in a personally creative way to the progress of Graeco-Roman (with its Islamic embellishments) philosophy.

We must proceed then to examine the blueprint behind Aquinas's comprehensive personal works. By comprehensive I mean those works whose scope is that of wisdom itself—all being (i.e. as viewed in the light of its highest causes); by personal I mean those works of a *sui generis* genre, not commentaries, literal or otherwise, on the works of another author, or recorded or edited disputed questions. These personal works best reveal Aquinas "doing his own thing" as it were—setting up his own agenda and executing it.

To speak of Aquinas's comprehensive personal works is to speak of his **Summa Contra Gentiles** and **Summa Theologiae**. For brevity's sake, I will treat here only the **Summa Contra Gentiles** (henceforth **SCG**) as it has come to be called.⁵ My concern will be with the architectonic of the work. This architectonic should indicate Aquinas's self-understanding performatively or *in actu*. Mindful of the important and intricate debate among scholars concerning the historic reasons behind the work's composition, I will restrict myself to internal evidence on the nature and *raison d'être* of the **SCG**.

The first nine chapters of Book I of the **SCG** conveniently provide the reader with the plan of the entire work. Chapters one through nine are full of the kind of information we are looking for to answer our question. What is most significant in these chapters is what Aquinas does with the notion of wisdom.

The wise man (*sapiens*) is said to be, as Aristotle noted following the reckoning of the masses, one who orders things rightly and

5 I will be following the Marietti edition of the **SCG**: **Liber de Veritate Catholicae Fidei contra errores Infidelium** v. II, ed. Ceslari PERA O.P. *et al.* (Taurini: Marietti, 1961).

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governs them well. To the wise man it belongs to order. To order one must first grasp the end or purpose of the things being ordered. Thus the wise man in the truest sense of the word "wise" (*sapiens simpliciter*) is he who grasps the end of the whole (*finis universi*), which also happens to be the origin or *principium* of the whole. This origin and end of the whole will be shown within the SCG to be an intellect. As the end or good of any intellect its own end or good is truth, truth must be the *finis ultimus* of the whole: it is of this truth that the wise man should be principally in pursuit (c.1, #1-5).

Aristotle had previously determined, Aquinas notes, that first philosophy is the science *par excellence* of the truth because it is the science of the first principle of all being, and things stand the same in respect to being as they do in respect to truth. Thus the task (*officium*) of the wise man is chiefly to meditate on the truth concerning the first principle, and, along with other things, to attack the falsity opposed to this truth. Fittingly is this two-fold *officium* of the wise man spoken of in the passage from the Book of Proverbs with which Aquinas begins the SCG: "My mouth will meditate on truth, and my lips shall detest impiety" (Prov. 8:7).⁶ it is to meditate on and declare divine truth (*veritas divina*)—truth personified (*veritas antonomastice*)—and to impugn the falsity contrary to this divine truth (c.1, #6-7).

We have already here in chapter one of the work the beginnings of an important shift from the model of speculative philosophic wisdom to that of speculative theology. This shift is effected by the use and interpolation into a straightforward discussion of wisdom and wisdom-seeking *ad mentem Aristotelis* of the above passage from Proverbs. There is more yet to come.

6 My translation of "*Veritatem meditabitur guttur meum, et labia mea detestabuntur impium.*"

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Chapter two, which avowedly provides Aquinas's intention behind the SCG, begins with a panegyric on the pursuit of wisdom (*sapientiae studium*). The authorities adduced to extol the merits of wisdom-seeking are entirely scriptural: passages from the *Book of Wisdom* and the *Book of Ecclesiastes* specifically. Four reasons are given for the study of wisdom. One is drawn from a consideration of the natural order: wisdom is the most joyful (*iucundius*) of *studia* because its study is without tedium. Two are drawn from considerations that might be called both natural and supernatural: wisdom is the most sublime *studia* (*sublimius*) because possessing it we share in God's own wisdom and, becoming thus like him, we are made capable of His friendship; and, wisdom is the most perfect *studium* because it gives man in this life a share in true (i.e. eternal) happiness. The final reason given is of an entirely supernatural sort: wisdom is the most useful of *studia* (*utilius*) because through it one attains to the everlasting kingdom (*immortalitatis regnum*).

Following this is a remark of Aquinas's that Anton Pegis has spoken of as "the only personal reflection that St. Thomas Aquinas has ever set down."⁷ With trust (*fiducia*) drawn from divine merciful friendship (*pietas divina*) Aquinas proposes to undertake the task of the wise man though he is conscious that such exceeds his powers. He will seek to manifest the truth of the Catholic faith and eliminate errors opposed to it. Borrowing the words of St. Hilary he avows: "I am conscious that I owe this to God as the chief duty (*officium*) of my life, that my every word and sense may speak of Him" (c.2, #9, 7-10, my translation).

Consonant with this statement of purpose in chapter two of Book I, Aquinas, in his last introductory chapter of the first book, specifies

⁷ See Anton C. PEGIS trans. & ed. **On the Truth of the Catholic Faith**. Bk. I: *God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), "General Introduction" 18.

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his mode of proceeding. He will begin with the manifestation, through probable and demonstrative arguments, of that more evident truth which faith professes and which is accessible to reason. He will finish with a manifestation, through probable arguments, the refutation of opposed claims, and the citing of appropriate *auctoritates*, of that less evident truth which exceeds the grasp of reason. Thus will he declare the truth of the faith.

The transition from one model of wisdom-seeking and wisdom-professing to another is here made complete. The teleology of philosophy as defined by Aristotle is lifted up into a higher teleology, and the Aristotelian order of proceeding in philosophy is altered by the exigencies of this new and supernatural wisdom. The wise man no longer ends his considerations with demonstrating the existence and determining the nature of God, but he now begins with this to secure rational support and clearness of vision for this his central object of concern so he can press to view all reality in its light. The first truth, the primordial and fundamental object of the wise man's concern, is no longer the first mover and final cause of the universe as such, but the teachings of the Catholic faith (which suggests that wisdom-seeking for the Christian must be forever *ecclesial*).

En route to elaborating, ordering, and establishing truths of the supernatural order beyond the grasp of reason in Book IV, faith concerns and philosophic concerns, philosophic and theological *auctoritates*, are thoroughly intertwined in Bks. I-III. The march *via rationis* to the existence of God in Book I is straightforward and direct, the arguments occurring in one sole chapter and only four chapters into the discussion about God. Philosophy's own exigencies and concerns are tailored to serve the *veritas fidei*, as Aquinas makes explicit at the beginning of Book II on the procession of creatures from God.

Aquinas states in Bk. II that he will consider creatures in the divine work of creation "*quantum ad fidei pertinet*" (II, c. 5, #877, 6), and

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he defends this procedure proper to the Christian *fidelis* and the *doctrina fidei Christiana* as superior to the consideration of creatures made by *philosophia humana*. The *doctrina fidei* is *maxima sapientia* because it takes its *argumentum* from, and considers creatures in the light of, their absolutely first and *superaltissima* cause—God. The particular *consideratio* of the faithful is not particularized on account of imperfection, but on account of superior perfection—a higher vantage point. This wisdom directly resembles God's own knowledge since God, in knowing Himself, knows all other things, whereas the human wisdom of philosophy proceeds from a knowledge of creatures and their immediate causes to a knowledge of God.

The greater *sapientia* of *doctrina Christiana* can thus sometimes make use of *philosophia humana* and proceed from philosophy's principles to treat of its own subject matter (“*ad suum propositum ostendum*”), much the same way first philosophy makes use of the findings (*documenti*) of all the other *scientiae* (i.e. and tailors their own considerations to its own). In this instance, the lesser and human wisdom acts as a servant to the higher and divine, the principal, wisdom (“[*sapientiae fidei*], *quasi principali, philosophia humana deservit*,” II, c. 4, #875).

In Bk. III on divine providence and God as the end of all things the use of Scripture increases significantly as do the number of strictly theological issues which intrude into the discussion: issues such as the need for the *lumen gloriae* to see God in His Essence (ch. 53); the relation of prayer to divine providence (chs. 95-6); and the role of the evengelical counsels in the divine law (ch. 131). Finally, in Bk. IV, beginning with a treatment of the internal operations of God according to the knowledge of faith and ending with an outline treatment of the divine economy—from Incarnation to the Redemption effected by sacramental grace to the four last things—the entire work is brought to a conclusion.

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It would seem then that the SCG in its architecture gives us at the same time an indication of Aquinas's fidelity to his understanding of his intellectual work at the beginning of his career, and a model for Christian wisdom seeking. What is striking in the work as a creative artifact of Aquinas's intellectual genius and evangelical zeal is, first, its identification of a distinctly Christian approach to wisdom (which it itself instantiates), and, secondly, the sharp contrast it draws between a simple Christian and a "humanly philosophical" way of looking at the world. Interestingly, it is the knowledge of being of the Christian *fidelis*, (i.e. and not the Christian *doctor* or *magister* in theology) that Aquinas contrasts with the approach to being of *philosophia humana*. Aquinas suggests that any baptised member of the faithful possesses by that fact a superior wisdom *in potentia* to that of any unbeliever.⁸

How then does the work shed light on our original set of questions? It would appear to do so in two respects. As regards St. Thomas's self-understanding it reveals explicitly and embodies performatively Aquinas's life-purpose as Dominican *magister* in theology: acquiring and transmitting a new and higher wisdom, divine wisdom. That wisdom includes, but is neither added on to as a significant afterthought, nor founded on to begin with, the lesser wisdom which it employs even as it supplants—human philosophy. Evidence of this is the way the terms *officium* and *studium*, given a clear religious sense in the **Contra Impugnantes** and **Rigans montes**, are introduced in a technical philosophic context to effect the shift to this new wisdom. Secondly, the SCG provides a methodological model for Catholic Christians working in philosophy and theology today who would learn from St. Thomas. The key to its method is this: to firmly establish the truths of the Catholic faith as the supreme principles of human

⁸ Thus, "*christiana fides hominem de Deo principaliter instruit, et per lumen divinae revelationis creaturarum cognitorem facit, fit in homine quaedam divinae sapientiae similitudo*," SCG II, c. 2, #862, 6-10.

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cognition, both in the ordering of that cognition's considerations and conclusions and in the verification of its truth-claims. It aims thus to integrate the *veritas et cognitio fidei* with the natural human desire for scientific cognition and for wisdom.

If these conclusions be true, a deeper understanding of Aquinas's self-understanding should serve as a stimulus for Christian lovers of wisdom today to integrate that desire to know with their faith-beliefs and become not philosophers but theologians. For St. Thomas, a Christian believer who seeks to know would err in stopping short with the human wisdom of philosophy, or in failing to integrate his philosophic considerations within the *doctrina fidei* and his faith beliefs. He would be both frustrating the teleology implicit in human philosophy and voiding the cognitive power *in the natural order* of the gift of faith, the infused theological virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Such a believer, however well-schooled in the wisdom of *philosophia humana*, would scarcely be worthy of the title 'Thomist'.

⁹ See Thomas's remarks on this in his *Expositio super Librum de Boethii de Trinitate*, q. 1, a. 2, and q. 2, a. 3. See also *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

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