
Study Guide for *Aquinas for Armchair Theologians*

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Thomas Aquinas is viewed as the very embodiment of the medieval, monastic scholar. We picture him cloistered away in a dark, cold room, sitting at his desk and writing in silence and solitude. Doubtlessly, the image is not entirely inaccurate.

Yet Aquinas believed that no human being could be fully realized in isolation. We are inherently social creatures, he taught, and we need social and intellectual interaction to reach our full human potential. He believed that human reason is a practical faculty that develops only with use. In fact, he wrote his greatest work, the *Summa Theologica*, as a complex dialogue with the great scholars of the past, including Aristotle, Augustine, and Maimonides.

Thus, it is appropriate as you read *Aquinas for Armchair Theologians* to follow Aquinas's example. Do not merely read passively, but engage the text. Enter a dialogue with Aquinas . . . and with others.

The following questions are intended as conversation starters for your study group. (If you're really an advocate of that whole monastic lifestyle, you have my permission to contemplate the questions alone, in quiet solitude.) Don't feel that there is a right or wrong answer in each case. If Aquinas is correct in his belief that we all are endowed with God-given reason and intellect, your ideas and opinions can be just as valid as those of Aquinas himself. Just don't count on being named a saint anytime soon . . .

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Beginnings

1. Thomas Aquinas is widely considered to be one of the greatest minds that Christianity—and Western civilization—has ever produced. Before your group begins to read *Aquinas for Armchair Theologians*, have its members discuss their pre-existing impressions of him. What comes to mind when you hear the name Aquinas? What were his specific contributions to Christianity and to modern ways of thought? Is his legacy a positive or negative one?

Your group also might explore some more general questions about religious thought and belief, such as the following: Are the beliefs of Christianity reasonable? In what sense? Do Christian moral beliefs come purely from the Bible or can they emerge from other sources as well?

Have each member in your group write down his or her individual answers to these questions. Put the responses aside and hold onto them until the group has finished the entire book.

2. Aquinas lived a quiet, intellectual life, and yet he became more influential historically than the kings and popes of his day. What is it that makes an individual influential? Do you think that there are contemporary examples of figures like Aquinas who, due not to their *actions* but to their *ideas*, will be talked about for centuries? Who are they and why will they be remembered?
3. Given that Aquinas is considered to be such an “orthodox” thinker today, why do you think that his works initially were condemned upon his death? Is the condemning of ideas, as opposed to actions, ever justified?

Humans, Angels, and God

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1. Aquinas divides our rational faculties into two parts, “reason” and “intellect.” What is the difference between these two ways of reasoning?
2. Why does Aquinas believe that Christianity requires both faith and reason? (What is the distinct role of faith, and what is the distinct role of reason?) Do you think that faith and reason can exist side-by-side? Is it contradictory to claim that an article of faith can have a rational basis, or does the fact that it has reasonable grounding mean that the belief is *not* an article of faith?
3. Does Aquinas’s “First Mover” argument for the existence of God succeed? Why or why not? Are there other rational arguments for the existence of God that you think are more compelling? Should we even try to prove God’s existence by rational argumentation?
4. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther was famous for declaring that Christianity rested not on reason but on “faith alone.” Did Luther or Aquinas get it right? What are the benefits and risks of each position?

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Why Is There Evil? Do Humans Have Free Will?

1. What is the “problem of evil”? Do we need, or should we expect, an explanation for the existence of evil and suffering in the world? Is any such explanation possible?
2. What does Aquinas mean by his claim that evil is a “privation” of the good? In what sense, according to Aquinas, was even Hitler good? In what sense is “sin” a privation of the good? Take any contemporary tragedy—September 11, war, famine, disease—and describe how Aquinas would explain the existence of this tragedy in the face of an all-powerful, all-good God? Do you find his argument plausible?
3. Does it undermine God’s ultimate power to grant that human beings have free will? Does it undermine his perfect knowledge? Why or why not?

1. What is metaphysics?
2. Pick any object in the room around you. Following the method suggested by Aquinas in his metaphysics, can you list the object's essential characteristics? What are its accidental ones? Is there an "objectively" right and wrong answer in each case?
3. What makes a human being a human being? Have each person in your group make a list of the characteristics essential to human nature, then compare notes. Are there any characteristics that are named on every list? How does one go about settling disagreements on a topic such as this?
4. Aquinas tells us that metaphysics is pursued by the intellect, rather than by reason. What does he mean by this distinction? (You may need to go back to chapter 2 for part of the answer.)

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Law and Morality

1. What does Aquinas mean by the “natural law”?
2. Can one realistically develop a Christian morality for the twenty-first century by using the Bible alone or does one, at least at times, need to employ something like the natural law? Offer some examples that support your position.
3. Contrast Augustine’s and Aquinas’s views of human nature. Who was right? What leads you to believe this?
4. Take a modern ethical issue like cloning or in vitro fertilization. What do you think the “natural law” has to say about the practice? If there are disagreements in your group, can you resolve them (as Aquinas thought possible) by using your common reason and intellect? (Aquinas tells us the process may be a slow and laborious one—indeed, it may take a lifetime—so don’t assume too quickly that the method does not work.)

The Ins and Outs of Sex

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1. What are the three “ends” or purposes of sex according to Aquinas? Do you agree with his claim that each and every sexual act must be directed toward each of these three ends? Why or why not?
2. What is Aquinas’s ranking of sexual sins? Some critics think that his ranking shows the difficulty of tapping into the true natural law, and claim that his views on rape, masturbation, and sodomy reflect the prejudices of his time period. What do you think? Is there a rendering of sexual—or any other—sin that does *not* reflect the judgments of its particular time period? Can we ever truly capture “the eternal law of God” via reason?
3. How has Aquinas shaped the modern debate, especially among Catholics, with regard to birth control? Do the demands of the natural law on birth control change in a time period in which overpopulation, rather than survival of the species, has become the primary concern?
4. Scientific studies have shown that higher animals, including primates, at times engage in activities such as masturbation and homosexuality. What implication, if any, does this have for Aquinas’s natural law arguments against these practices?

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“Just War” and Double Effect

1. Are there moral rules that limit the waging of war? If so, from where do these moral principles arise? The Bible? The natural law? Someplace else?
2. Consider any recent war as an example. Were Aquinas’s *jus ad bellum* criteria (the criteria that establish whether it was permissible to enter the war) satisfied by either side? Could such criteria ever be satisfied by *both* sides in such a conflict, so that both sides, in effect, are fighting a “just war”? What do you think Aquinas would say?
3. What does Aquinas mean by his famous principle of “double effect”? Does this principle capture an important moral truth, or does it, as some of its critics claim, attempt to split moral hairs in a legalistic, even ridiculous, fashion?
4. You are at war with an unjust nation whose leader—imagine a figure like Saddam Hussein—has intentionally placed women and children at key military installations in his country to deter your attacks. Do you attack the installation regardless? Are you guilty of murder if you do?

Your grandmother is sick and in pain. The only medicine that might ease her pain has the side effect of hastening her death. Should you give her the medicine? Are you responsible for her death if you do?

What do you think Aquinas’s principle of double effect would say about each of these two circumstances?

Abortion, the Role of Women, and Other Noncontroversial Issues

1. Why are most acts of abortion condemned by Aquinas's principle of double effect? Why might Aquinas support the act of abortion in the case of an ectopic pregnancy?
2. There clearly are biological differences between men and women. What, if any, are the social and moral implications of these differences? Are there roles, jobs, and responsibilities that, according to "nature," men should fulfill but not women (and vice-versa)?
3. Imagine that Aquinas himself is sitting in on your group. If you disagree with his portrayal of women, how would you go about convincing him that he is wrong? What evidence do you think would be most persuasive to Aquinas?
4. There are lots of things that we do that are, in one sense, "unnatural." We cover our nakedness with clothes, warm our homes with heat, and overcome the darkness with electric lights. Is there some way of distinguishing "good" unnatural acts from the "bad" ones that Aquinas thinks we must avoid? What standard can one use for drawing the distinction?

1. In what sense did Martin Luther King ground his civil disobedience on the principles of Aquinas?
2. According to Aquinas, what, in general, distinguishes a “just” from an “unjust” form of government? He calls “democracy” an “unjust” form of government. Why does Aquinas make this surprising claim? Do you agree with his logic?
3. According to some early Christian commentators, one should obey the king even if his commands are unjust because he is appointed by God. This is the so-called “divine right of kings.” Why and when does *Aquinas* think that one should obey the king/ruler? When should one disobey the king/ruler?
4. Which of Aquinas’s political arguments are paralleled by principles used in the founding of the United States? Which are at odds with the ideals of the “founding fathers”?

1. Have the group select a topic of interest not covered in *Aquinas for Armchair Theologians*. Try reading a few pages of Aquinas directly on this topic and discuss Aquinas's arguments. There are many affordable paperbacks that collect portions of Aquinas's writings; several are listed in the "Further Reading" section of *Aquinas for Armchair Theologians*. There are also good internet Web sites where one can find the complete works of Aquinas absolutely free of charge. Georgia State University has put forth a directory to Web sites on Aquinas. It can be found at <http://www.library.gsu.edu/liaisons/tdemetra-copoulos/philosophy/Aquinas/index.htm>.
2. Revisit the questions posed in the first question under chapter 1 of this study guide: What comes to mind when you hear the name Aquinas? What were his specific contributions to Christianity and to modern ways of thought? Is his legacy a positive or negative one? Are the beliefs of Christianity reasonable? In what sense? Do Christian moral beliefs come purely from the Bible or can they emerge from other sources as well?

Now return to the written answers to these questions that you saved, and compare notes. How have your impressions of Aquinas changed during the course of reading and discussing *Aquinas for Armchair Theologians*? Have you rethought your views on the central relationship between reason and faith? Have your views changed on any other substantive topic covered in the book? If your views have changed, what does this say about Aquinas's idea that true Christian faith is built upon the process of studying, discussing, and using reason to advance understanding?