

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Why Thomism Matters Today



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THE AIM OF THIS SHORT ESSAY IS

to present a brief consideration of why Thomism matters today. How can the study of the principles of St. Thomas Aquinas and his intellectual tradition help the Church in the work of a new evangelization of modern culture? I'd like to consider briefly here three main points: knowledge of God, the harmony of Christianity and modern science, and the recovery of a collective morality. Obviously, my goal is only to give intellectual impressions, not profound arguments, but I hope this essay will suggest reasons why St. Thomas Aquinas' thought is of great pertinence today.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

As we know, there is a very serious challenge today in the culture of modern Europe and North America to make intelligible to people the very notion of God. There are many causes of this. Most of them have to do with the skeptical philosophies of the Enlightenment, which posit objections to rational, philosophical knowledge of God. Other causes have to do with the more contemporary "masters of suspicion" like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, who see the idea

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of God as an illusory projection of the human person upon reality, without foundation in the observations of things we normally experience.

St. Thomas is interesting in this regard because he suggests a two-fold way of approaching knowledge of God. One is external, and the other is internal. The external way pertains to metaphysical arguments about the structure of reality and is represented well by the famous “Five Ways” of the *Summa Theologiae*, which I will briefly summarize. The basic idea is that all the realities we observe around us, including ourselves, are realities that are caused. Therefore, they require explanation by appeal to something beyond them that is not like them, that is not a caused reality. There are various orders of causality we can appeal to.

First, material, changing things are mutually interdependent and depend on something that is not material. Therefore, there must be something transcendent that is not subject to change through physical processes. Second, the world we experience is filled with realities that are caused to exist, and do not cause themselves to exist. Something must exist that is not caused to be in its very existence but that gives existence to all others. Third, likewise, all the realities we experience can be or not be: they are contingent. Something must exist that is not contingent and that simply is. Fourth, the world we experience contains degrees of perfection, of nobility, beauty, and quality. There is some common measure of degrees of perfection that applies to all things, and we are not the author of it, nor are the

things in our world. Something transcendent must be the author of degrees of perfection. Finally, fifth, the world we live in is characterized by order and intelligibility, even before we study it. This intelligibility is the ground or foundation for our study of the universe in which we make scientific progress. Therefore, there must be some transcendent intellectual cause of the intelligibility we find in things.

These arguments can be debated at length, and I think personally that they survive well under scrutiny and polemical consideration. Whatever the case, however, St. Thomas leads us to the consideration of the mystery of transcendence by this “external way.” The world around us does not merely exist in a perfect and stable way. It shows key signs of derivation. At the same time, the mystery “behind” the world that gives rise to it remains largely unknown to us. God is a hidden and transcendent mystery hidden behind the veil of the world for St. Thomas. So why should we even be interested in God?

Here, is where the “internal way” is also of great importance. St. Thomas notes that the human being is motivated internally by two key inclinations. Each pertains to one of the spiritual faculties: the intellect and the will. The intellect is naturally animated by the inclination toward the truth. The human person naturally seeks the truth and naturally does not like to be deceived. No person naturally wishes to be lied to. More importantly, the human being naturally desires to know the causes of things and seeks explanations. When we find an

effect of a cause, we naturally desire to know the cause of the effect. So, as we discover the mystery of the world around us, in the study of history, science, and philosophy, we naturally desire to know the ultimate cause of all things, and to know that reality not only in its effects, but in itself. We are thus animated by a natural desire to see God.

Second, we have a natural inclination of the will to seek happiness and to avoid anything that leads us to misery. Human beings seek happiness in all kinds of ends, and many of them are imperfect, illusory, or sinful, but the desire for happiness is inextinguishable. Human beings must seek to be happy, even when they fall into the worst kinds of ideology or delusion. Resolving the question of the genuine meaning of life is deeply related, then, to resolving the question of true happiness. What should we hope for and what should we rightly desire?

These two “internal inclinations” inscribed in the soul of the human person are the desire for the truth and the desire for happiness. St. Thomas argues that they lead us forward, ultimately, toward the natural desire to see God and the natural desire to possess the perfect good, who is God Himself.

This inner way leads to a resolution of the problem of motivation. Why should we seek God? We should do so to find the truth and ultimate happiness.

When we consider this inner way in relation to the external way of the arguments for the existence of God, we encounter a problem. The natural knowledge we have from

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this world about God is profoundly imperfect. It is only indirect. St. Thomas remarks that we know more what God is *not* rather than what God is; for this reason, St. Thomas states that divine revelation is necessary, or at least truly fitting. It is fitting that God should reveal His own life to us, so that we can come to know God as He is in Himself. Indeed, it makes sense that God should become human so as to reveal to us in our human nature what God is in His divine nature. God is a mystery of Trinitarian communion: of eternal Truth in the Word (*Verbum* or *Logos*) and of eternal Love in the person of the Holy Spirit. The Word has become flesh so that we can know God the Father in his Wisdom and his Love, in the Son and the Spirit. This mystery is not something philosophy can prove or anticipate, but it does address our natural desire to know God, as well as our natural desire to find happiness through intimacy with the highest good, God Himself.

This may all seem very challenging to contemporary people and very mysterious. But it is not meaningless. In fact, it addresses human beings in their contemporary world of consumerism and the empty pursuit of pleasure and money, and it suggests to them that

they have a higher nobility that they must rediscover. They are called to be friends with God.

MODERN SCIENCE AND CHRISTIANITY

A second theme concerns modern science and Christianity. Many people in the Global North cultures of America and Europe today self-identify as atheistic or agnostic, no longer practicing Christianity. One of the main reasons they frequently give for abandoning the faith is that the teachings of Christianity are incompatible with the discoveries of the modern sciences. This is an idea derived from modern atheistic philosophers like Auguste Comte, and it has been re-popularized today. We can presume that the basic idea is this: belief in contemporary Big-Bang cosmology and evolutionary theory tell us a story that is non-religious. Since the book of Genesis provides an account of the origins of the world that is incompatible with the modern story of physics, biology, and genetics, and especially with neo-Darwinism, you can be religious or scientific, but not both.

I do not have time here to enter into a profound discussion of the book of Genesis. However, I will say first that the book of Genesis may be read in one of three ways. There is the fundamentalist way that ignores many symbolic aspects which make the creation narrative so profound. There is a modern liberal way that ignores the deep metaphysical ideas and their historical consequences. And there is a Catholic way that looks at both the symbolic and metaphysical ideas in the text and sees that there are some historical consequences to these ideas. For

example, the symbolism of the creation of man on the sixth day suggests that the human being is the summit of the visible creation. The creation of man by breathing into him a spiritual life suggests that the human being has a spiritual soul, granting him a life of grace and friendship with God right from the beginning. Such ideas are compatible with the teachings of the modern sciences, but one cannot derive them from the sciences. They are complementary yet distinct.

St. Thomas adds a great deal in this domain. Here, I want to focus only on two ideas. The first is his idea of creation. St. Thomas famously holds that God creates by communicating to each reality, at each moment, the fullness of existence, or *esse, actus essendi*. Every reality receives the act of being from God and depends upon God for its existence. At the same time, precisely because these realities all exist and have natures (*essentiae*) that derive from God, they too are genuine causes of activity. In brief, God is the “primary cause of all reality” in all times and places, and the created entities in the world that he causes to exist are themselves genuine “secondary causes” of being. This means that the whole story of modern cosmology and evolution of living things can be easily maintained by a Catholic Christian, based on our belief about creation. God causes the universe to be, and that universe has its own internal story of development, based on the immanent history of created causes. There is no opposition of created causes and the Creator. Rather, it is because God sustains the cosmos in being that it can have an internal

history, which is studied by the modern sciences.

Second, St. Thomas speaks of the human soul as something distinct from the living forms of other animals. Human beings are different from other animals because we are capable of immaterial activities of reasoning and willing. Our reasoning takes place by use of universal concepts, and our free decisions come about through free choice that is uncompelled through animal inclinations. He argues at length that these activities of intelligence and love imply that in us there is a principle and cause of spiritual operations of knowledge and love: the immaterial and incorruptible soul. This suggests that it is rational to believe that the human story of man fits into the larger story of creation, of cosmic development from the Big Bang to today, and into the story of evolution of living things. The human body has emerged from antecedent biological processes, as the evidence of modern scientific study compellingly suggests. And yet, the story of the human being is something original because the human being also has a spiritual principle, the spiritual soul, which is created immediately by God in each human being; the soul is not simply inherited from the two biological parents. We receive our living animal body from our parents, and our spiritual soul directly and immediately from God the Creator.

This means the story of the human race is unique. It is not something we can explain by merely appealing to biological causes and physical forces alone. At the same time, the teachings of the modern



sciences can and should all be respected. The truth of modern scientific discovery and the truth of the human soul and human spiritual history go together into a larger story of creation. In this larger story, God gives being to all things and there is a hierarchical order of development. The human person comes at the end as a union of soul and body, a spiritual animal, who is able to be friends with God. St. Thomas helps us understand how the book of Genesis still allows us to see the deeper symbolic and metaphysical significance of our story as human beings, made in the image of God.

HAPPINESS AND COMMON MORALITY

The third point concerns man's happiness and common morality. One of the central problems of our time is the dispute about how to think about ethics. Do we even share common frameworks of understanding to collaborate intellectually with others on ethical problems? Three rival versions of ethics are present in the North American and European world today. The first comes from Immanuel Kant and is at the center of contemporary liberalism. It is an ethics of law and obligation. In this view, human beings are free agents

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who need to refer themselves to the moral law so that they can restrain their individual selfishness and live together in mutual respect. The key questions are ones like these: What must we never do to others? What is permissible? What must we do for others? How can we create a civil society of freedom, of permission, and of self-restraint?

The second option derives from David Hume and is utilitarian. In this view, morality is about pain and pleasure. How can we minimize human suffering and maximize human well-being or flourishing? What ethical norms help us grow in collective social well-being? Through education, medicine, and science, how can we fight off disease, ignorance, and poverty? These questions are about what is more useful for the best development of the rational animal, but they are not about the virtuous perfection of our human freedom or the meaning of human existence, at least not essentially.

St. Thomas and Aristotle promote neither an ethics of obligation nor of utility, although they do consider both these notions important. Instead, they promote an ethics of happiness. Human beings seek to be happy, and they do so through a collective social life. How can

friendships and common pursuits of truth, art, work, family life, and religion make the human person happy? What kind of civic law do we need so that human beings can participate in a common good that leads them to collective and individual happiness? What kinds of activities make human beings better, and what kinds of activities make them worse? The answer has to do with our nature. Natural inclinations and natural rights to do what is good and beautiful are the basis of positive laws that we can use in education. We can and should prohibit via law such actions that gravely harm the social good by misleading people away from true and profound happiness and from human nobility, goodness, and beauty.

The vision of St. Thomas also contains an important role for mercy. Social justice seeks to preserve the order of goodness and human nobility, but human beings do fail, and they do sin. Mercy is an important part of life because it allows people to find personal redemption and rehabilitation: a new path back to nobility and goodness. The person is never lost, at least as long as they live in this world. We must always be just, but we must also always measure our

use of justice with a measure of mercy and love of persons in their dignity.

The moral vision of St. Thomas is based on something deeply human: the search for happiness. This search is both individual and collective. Today when we speak of morality, either in the Church or outside the Church, human beings are exhausted and easily grow impatient. However, when we speak of happiness, people take note. Happiness is something difficult, but it is possible. With the help of St. Thomas, the Church today can seek to become a true school of happiness, for all those who are seeking and who are in need.

Ultimately, for St. Thomas, happiness is found in the love of the truth, in human friendships, but most of all, in contemplation of God.

The life of the Church in society is essential. The Church safeguards the living practice of worship and contemplation of God. In this sense, the Church safeguards or preserves the living practice of human happiness found through friendship with God. In this life, it happens through faith, hope, and love, and in the life to come through the vision of God and the perfect possession of God through union, by grace.

CONCLUSION

St. Thomas in all three of the ways we have mentioned helps us today to promote an alternative vision of our European and North American future. How can we come to know the transcendent mystery of God? How can we articulate well the unity of knowledge coming from theology, philosophy, and modern science so that we understand ourselves as rational animals? How can we find happiness and advance a genuine culture of spiritual morality and contemplation?

In all these ambitions, St. Thomas Aquinas is there to help us with the intellectual tradition he founded and the Order he helps to sustain, the Order of Preachers. His thought is also maintained and renewed in profound ways from the undergraduate education of institutions like Christendom College that work in vital ways to successfully promote the transmission of intellectual wisdom in modern human culture. May we ask St. Thomas Aquinas to intercede for us, and for one another, that God might bless us all in this endeavor. **P**

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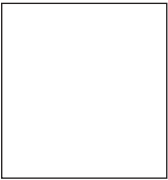


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