Thomas Aquinas: Theory of Knowledge and Learning

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THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING
Though Thomas Aquinas’ theory of knowledge experienced a resurgence in Neo-Scholasticism—especially in traditional Catholic and in Protestant classical schools—it educational influence is currently minimal, limited to isolated pockets of educational traditionalism. Why is this so? An answer may be considered by examining the following: the historical context of Aquinas and of Scholasticism, Aquinas’ epistemological arguments related to the nature and acquisition of truth, the interplay of faith and reason in Aquinas’ theological arguments, and an assessment of Aquinas in light of current perspectives. Such exploration will show that, while the ideas of Aquinas continue to be granted token acknowledgment in the study of educational history and philosophy, the applicability of these ideas is limited.

**Background and Context**

The work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) impacted not only the fields of philosophy, theology, and apologetics but also the field of educational foundations, which primarily addresses historical and philosophical foundations of education. Educational theory and practice are driven by epistemological understandings, and—because Aquinas’ epistemology has been so influential—it is integral to understanding educational developments in the West. Epistemology is “the branch of philosophy which studies the nature, sources, and validity of knowledge.”\(^1\) It addresses the reliability of knowledge and valid means of arriving at truth. Aquinas synthesized answers to epistemological questions that impacted education in the Middle Ages and beyond, but context is needed prior to exploring further how he answered these questions.

With count and countess as parents, Thomas was born into a noble family related to both Italian and French royalty. At the age of five, he was sent to a Benedictine monastic school, and as a teenager entered the university at Naples. When he was 18, to his parent’s dismay, he

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announced that he sensed a calling to enter the mendicant order of the preaching Dominicans. Fearful of how Thomas’ vow of poverty might reflect negatively on the family, they locked him away as a prisoner in their home for over a year in hopes of convincing him otherwise, but he remained undeterred.\textsuperscript{2} As a tall young man with a quiet, serious personality lent to prayer and reflective thinking, Thomas was well-suited to the intellectually-oriented Dominicans.\textsuperscript{3} He studied at the University of Paris, lectured at the University of Cologne, and at 25 years old, became ordained as a priest. At 31, he was assigned as professor of theology, which involved commenting on works of great authors, disputing ideas in a debate format, and teaching. His students knew him as a humble, kind, devoted professor who worked hard and was at times absent-minded.\textsuperscript{4} On his journey to visit Pope Gregory X, Thomas fell ill and died at the age of 49 before arriving at the Vatican.\textsuperscript{5}

Thomas’ writings were by far the most impactful of the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{6} His \textit{Summa Theologica} became his most important work and quickly became, along with the Bible and Peter Lombard’s writings, one of the principal sources studied in theology courses at the University of Paris.\textsuperscript{7} In this work, he used the philosophy of ancient Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, to explain key doctrines of Christian faith.\textsuperscript{8} In his \textit{Summa Contra Gentiles}, Thomas provided an apologetic guide for Christian missionaries to Muslims in Spain, and in \textit{De Magistro} he presented a theory of teaching and learning.\textsuperscript{9}

\begin{itemize}
\item[Madonna M. Murphy] (2006, \textit{The History and Philosophy of Education: Voices of Educational Pioneers}, 112).
\item[Ibid., 112-3.]
\item[Ibid., 113.]
\item[Gerald L. Gutek, \textit{A History of the Western Educational Experience}, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1995), 103.]
\item[Murphy, \textit{The History and Philosophy of Education}, 113.]
\item[Avery Cardinal Dulles, \textit{A History of Apologetics} (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), 114.]
\end{itemize}
The Dominicans produced a number of scholars, such as Aquinas and Abelard, who became so popular that thousands of students traveled to hear them lecture, contributing to the rise of the university. The university had emerged from cathedral schools that had originated to train Benedictine and Augustinian monks, and as cathedral schools experienced decline, the universities—affiliated with the mendicant Franciscan and Dominican orders—grew in number and in popularity. This growth coincided with and was stimulated by other factors, including a revival in European commerce and the reintroduction of Aristotelianism through Arabic scholars.

As the crusades came to an end, Arabic culture and philosophy began to spread throughout Western Europe. One example of this was through a Spanish Arab by the name of Averroës (1126-1198). Within three decades after his death, Averroës’ commentaries on Aristotle became widely disseminated throughout both Islamic and Christian academia but were controversial on both sides. Among Muslims, Averroës was considered an unorthodox heretic. Among Christians, there was the conundrum of addressing significant contradictions to biblical doctrine while attempting to synthesize valid Aristotelian truth claims. Troublesome in Averroistic Aristotelianism was the claim that the world is eternal and absolutely necessary. According to Averroës, the only immortal aspect in humanity is the “agent intellect, which each individual shares in common with the entire human species.”

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10 Gutek, A History, 98.
12 Dulles, A History of Apologetics, 111.
13 Gutek, A History, 98.
Redemption. Motivated by the desire to correct Averroës’ distortions and to evaluate Aristotle through the lens of biblical truth, Aquinas developed his philosophical system.

Though Aquinas may be the most renowned name affiliated with scholasticism, this educational method had already been impacting Europe for nearly two centuries prior to Aquinas. The scholastic movement had been displayed in the works of Anselm, Peter Abelard, and others. After Averroës, however, the method was used to fortify Christian faith by organizing revealed truths using an Aristotelian system of deductive logic. Aquinas, then, became the leading scholar in this effort. In his synthesis of Aristotle and Christianity, he taught that reason should be the primary means of acquiring knowledge. For knowledge beyond the realm of reason, however, people must rely on faith. This form of scholasticism, known as Thomism, became the official philosophic position of the Roman Catholic Church.

Epistemological Arguments Related to the Nature and Acquisition of Truth

As Aquinas synthesized Aristotle and Christian theology, he built his epistemology on a strong foundation of metaphysical support. He identified three methods of scientific inquiry: natural science, mathematics, and metaphysics. Of the three, metaphysics is the “first philosophy” and is different from the first two in that it exists and can be understood apart from matter. Examples of abstract concepts that can exist without matter would include theological concepts of God and angels, and other abstractions, such as number sense—for example, the concepts of one, many, less, or half. Although these concepts may exist in matter, matter is not required for their existence; the concept of these abstractions can exist in and of themselves.

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16 Knight, Philosophy & Education, 54.
17 Edgar and Oliphint, Christian Apologetics, 311, 337, 365.
18 Knight, Philosophy & Education, 55.
How does one come to know abstract concepts of being? Aquinas’ answer was through the means of analogy, and this leads us to his epistemological theory.\(^{19}\)

Theories of knowledge address three questions: Is it possible to know anything? If so, what can we know? And how can we know it? Answers to these questions are threads woven throughout Aquinas’ writings and were inspired by Aristotle. According to Aristotle, knowledge is “the actualization of the general concepts in the intellect, based on the data from the external world reported by the senses.”\(^{20}\) Though Aquinas agreed with Aristotle on the value sensory perception, he expounded this learning theory to include the supernatural.

Truth for Aquinas was acquired through both faith and reason. Humans are the only rational animals; therefore they are the only creatures who naturally think. And what do they think about? Above all, they contemplate their purpose. They do this as they sensually perceive the universe and observe that there is design and order, cause and effect. Aristotle claimed that these observations would lead to the deduction of a First Cause, an Unmoved Mover. Aquinas agreed with Aristotle and considered this Mover to be God, and—because God was pure reason—rational beings have the capacity to understand Him and the rational world He created. This leads to a dichotomy: a natural world that is known through reason, and a supernatural realm that is known through faith.\(^{21}\)

Another dichotomy is extended to types of truth: analytic truths and synthetic truths. Analytic truths are self-evident and may be conveyed through statements such as “God is good” or “If A = B and B = C, then A = C.” These statements do not depend upon experience but may be declared as true by logic and intuition. Conversely, synthetic truths do rely on experience and

\(^{19}\) Edgar and Oliphint, *Christian Apologetics*, 396-7.


\(^{21}\) Knight, *Philosophy & Education*, 56-7.
must be tested by empirical science. For example, to know that “The church is five miles from city hall,” one must measure the distance from one point to the other. In a departure from Aristotle, Aquinas held that, of the two types of truth, analytic truths were superior because they formulated first principles:

Wherefore the intellect naturally knows natures which exist only in individual matter; not as they are in such individual matter, but according as they are abstracted therefrom by the considering act of the intellect, hence it follows that through the intellect, we can understand these objects as universal; and this is beyond the power of sense.\(^{22}\)

Though truth may be known through both faith and reason, those truths arrived at through faith hold supremacy, and—when the two paths overlap—they still lead to the same conclusions, whether by faith, by reason, or by a combination of the two.\(^{23}\) An example of this overlap may be found in Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* in which he outlines the *Quinque Viae*, his five ways of reasoning for the existence of God through arguments for motion, causality, necessity, contingency, and design.\(^{24}\)

In his *Compendium of Theology* Aquinas presented the dichotomy intellect: potential and active. He denied the Platonic idea that knowledge was caused passively by a “sharing in, or influx of, some intrinsically subsisting actually intelligible forms.”\(^{25}\) Instead, it is through the senses that particular forms of things are perceived. These particular forms, however, are only potentially intelligible until something active brings them to actuality in a universal sense.

Aquinas used the analogy of light to color to illustrate this concept. Color is a particular thing that is potentially knowable. However, it cannot be known in a universal sense until light acts upon the particular color. Then it can be known and understood. Particular forms are only

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\(^{22}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 12, a. 5: 1c, p. 52.

\(^{23}\) Knight, *Philosophy & Education*, 57-8.

\(^{24}\) Edgar and Oliphint, *Christian Apologetics*, 405-7.

potentially known, but they are actually known when the active intellect casts light on them, perceiving them in a universal sense. “We would not need to posit [an active intellect],” Aquinas alleged, “if the forms of things were actually intelligible, as the Platonists held.” In order for anything to be known, learners first need to engage their sensory perception, which is their potential intellect. Secondly, they need to engage their active intellect, which brings light to the perceived thing and makes it understood. These dichotomies of faith and reason, analytic and synthetic truths, and potential and active intellect hold clear implications for Aquinas’ theory of teaching and learning.

Aquinas’ Theory Applied to Curriculum and Instruction

The curriculum and instruction of Scholasticism were so integrated that it is difficult to discuss one apart from the other. They included four main elements: commentaries, disputed questions, sermons, and theological synthesis. Commentaries were writings and lectures on established works acknowledged by the Roman Catholic Church. A candidate for the master’s degree was required, for instance, to read and comment publicly on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. Therefore, the commentary itself was both a form of curriculum and instruction at the medieval university.

Disputed questions were conducted for the purpose of both teaching content and of training in rhetorical and persuasive communication skills. At the University of Paris, the Dominicans and Franciscans often debated one another. One of their key points of contention was disagreement on what the highest power of the soul was. The Franciscans believed that it was will, which in essence was love, and that it was this will/love that was the means whereby humans could relate with God. In contrast, the Dominicans alleged that it was the intellect that

26 Aquinas, *Compendium*, 62.
27 Fărcaș, “Thomas Aquinas,” 70.
allowed people to know God. Scholars were expected to engage regularly in these debates of *quaestiones diputatea* in front of the student body, and this practice laid the foundation for how debates continue to be held today.\textsuperscript{28} Debates comprised a list of pros and cons, arguments in support of and objections against particular theological issues. These disputes began with the objections first that were then followed by the replies intended to reject the objections. Though conducted orally, disputed questions were also a written theological genre that is exemplified in *Summa Theologica*. Question 27, for example is “Of the Cause of Love” and includes four points of inquiry. The first of which is “Whether good is the only cause of love?” Three objections are presented, one of them which states, “The Philosopher says that ‘we love those who acknowledge their evils.’ Therefore it seems that evil is the cause of love.” The corresponding reply rejects the objection by stating, “Those who acknowledge their evils, are beloved, not for their evils, but because they acknowledge them, for it is a good thing to acknowledge one’s faults, in so far as it excludes insincerity or hypocrisy.”\textsuperscript{29}

Disputed questions were also practiced in debates between the liberal arts faculty and the theology faculty. The two faculties often clashed because the liberal arts—based on the *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric and on the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—relied heavily on classical Greek and Latin writings. Such writings were often studied based on the commentaries of the Arabic Averroës, whose worldview, as noted earlier, conflicted with the Christian perspective held by those on the faculty of theology. Two examples of Aquinas’ contribution to these debates included his *On There Being Only One Intellect: Against the Averroists* and *On the Eternity of the World*.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} Fărcaș, “Thomas Aquinas,” 68-9.
\textsuperscript{30} Fărcaș, “Thomas Aquinas,” 68.
Sermons comprised another form of both written curriculum and oral instruction. Preaching, especially for the Dominicans, was considered a teaching activity. Those who had earned the status of “master” preached to current university candidates for the master of theology degree. A series of sermons would make up a conference. Unfortunately, only relatively few of Aquinas’ sermons have survived as examples of this genre. Two of which are “On the Child Jesus” and “On the Parable of the Sower.”

Theological syntheses make up the final theological genre that also served as a means of curriculum and instruction. These were catechisms and systematic theologies presenting various doctrines of the Church. Examples from Aquinas’ writings include *Summa Theologica*, the *Compendium of Theology*, and *Summa contra Gentiles*. All of Aquinas’ theological syntheses began with the transcendence of God and ended with an application to practical life. All of these theological genres represent applications of Aquinas’ epistemological theories.

In addition to the theological genres listed above, the instructional method of discovery should also be noted as being integral to Aquinas’ teaching and learning theory. Some assumptions are required, however, before discovery can be acknowledged as a valid means of knowledge acquisition. First, there must be an assumption of Christian personalism—that human beings are individuals endowed by God with a personal intellect. This idea is in direct contradiction with Averroës’ concept of the “oneness of the intellect”—that there is only one single intellect that is shared with all humanity. Individual personhood requires a distinct intellect; otherwise, there would be no separate self to do the discovering. There must be two distinct individuals: a teacher and a learner. Second, there must be an assumption that rejects Plato’s notion that truth has been deposited in the human soul and that learning is simply an act

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32 Ibid., 72-3.
of remembering what the soul already knew before it became a physical being. Therefore, in order for discovery learning to occur, there must be a separate intellect for each person and that intellect must not have entered the world already having truth deposited in it.\textsuperscript{33}

Although knowledge itself has not been implanted in the human soul, according to Aquinas, the “seeds of knowledge” are already in the soul. The seeds make up the potency, or potential intellect, discussed above. Discovery learning occurs when actualization is brought about by a double cause: an inner cause and an outer cause. The inner cause is the agent intellect in each individual person. The outer cause is sensible reality. Without these assumptions, the “seeds of knowledge, and the double cause, discovery learning could not be possible.\textsuperscript{34}

The theological genres and discovery learning as outlined above were all Thomistic methods of formal instruction. Aquinas, however, distinguished between formal schooling, \textit{disciplina}, and informal education, \textit{educatio}. While formal schooling focused on \textit{scientia}, specific subject matters that make up bodies of knowledge, informal education develops a person into one who is good and virtuous.\textsuperscript{35}

Whether in formal or informal settings, who serves as the teacher and what is the role of the teacher? Unlike the current popular learning theory of constructivism that emphasizes autonomous learning, Aquinas rejected the theory that individuals could teach themselves or could independently construct knowledge, truth, and reality. For Aquinas, God, angels and other humans could serve as teachers. God’s presence in the soul as \textit{magister} is not a supernatural phenomenon. It is part of natural revelation that God would teach people by bringing light to the “seeds of knowledge” in the agent intellect. Angels, too, can be teachers, but—being lower than

\textsuperscript{33} Fărcaș, “Thomas Aquinas,” 74-5.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 75-6.
\textsuperscript{35} Gutek, \textit{A History}, 95.
God—they cannot provide universal concepts or truths that serve as foundational for further rational thought. Only God can do that. Neither can angels do what human teachers do, which is to actualize potential knowledge by modeling the rational process. What angels can do, however, is to reinforce the light of human intellect.  

Aquinas’ view of the human teacher’s role was influenced by the Dominican synthesis of faith and learning. Teachers serve dual roles: that of theoretician and that of practitioner. In the first role, teachers are philosophers, researchers, and reflective scholars. In the second, they are instructors engaged with their students—planning, organizing, and delivering the content. This synthesis of theory and practice would be embraced by current-day proponents of critical pedagogy who encourage teachers to integrate theory and practice. They would reject, however, the central role Aquinas espoused for teachers as deliverers of content who held an authoritative role in matters of curriculum and instruction.

Critical theorists would also reject Aquinas’ perspectives regarding the discipline of young children. In line with other Scholastics of his day, Aquinas encouraged external discipline for children. External control was necessary until sufficient growth had occurred in children for them to practice self-control, or self-discipline. Once the external discipline was internalized, the child’s intellect would then control the will. For current-day educational theorists, this approach appears far too similar to that of B.F. Skinner’s behavioristic theory of operant conditioning to be embraced by a post-Freudian era.

**Through Time and Other Lenses**

Today, university students in teacher preparation programs study only token passages of Thomas Aquinas’ epistemological ideas. Other than connecting him to Scholasticism, Neo-

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38 Ibid., 146.
Scholasticism, traditional Catholic schools, and the classical education movement, they know little else of his theory or his impact. In this closing section, a brief overview through time and other people’s lenses will help to formulate a fuller view of his impact and what critical perspectives have been presented of his ideas.

Nearly three centuries after Aquinas taught there, Ignatius Loyola studied at the University of Paris where he was exposed to the *Summa Theologica*. Ignatius was so impacted by the Dominican teaching of Thomism, he required that Aquinas to be taught in all Jesuit theology classes and that Aristotelian principles be taught in all teaching of metaphysics.\(^{39}\) Others, however, such as the Christian Humanists of the same era as Ignatius, were not as appreciative of Aquinas. They criticized his views and portrayed his theological ideas as substandard. Though some of this criticism was because of his implementation of Aristotelian logic, much of it was because they did not believe his use of Latin was as refined as it should be. Rodney Stark judged, however, that “In fact, Aquinas, wrote excellent Latin. But it was not the flowery, poetic style prized by Valla and other Humanists.”\(^{40}\)

Diarmaid MacCulloch pointed out that, along with the Christian Humanists of the sixteenth century, Reformation leaders were also attacking Scholastic theologians. Martin Luther, for example, believed that Thomists were intentionally conspiring with pagan Aristotelians to destroy the truth,\(^{41}\) and he criticized the Nominalist Scholasticism that had permeated university theology faculties for nearly two centuries. In Spain, however, a revival of Thomism prevailed, and when the Spanish began committing injustices against natives in the New World, it was the Thomist worldview rather than Humanism that motivated the Dominicans.

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40 Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 384n.222.
to intervene. Thomists helped to drive the Counter Reformation, and they capitalized on the printing press as much as did the Humanists.\(^{42}\)

In the forward to Harry Lee Poe’s *Christianity in the Academy: Teaching at the Intersection of Faith and Learning*, Dallas Willard discussed “the unceasing human problem” regarding faith versus reason, and he therein commends the work of Aquinas for illustrating how the two processes interact to reveal truth. Through Aquinas’ influence,

> human capacities for thought and study were accepted as good and necessary things, though limited in what they could provide in the way of knowledge about reality and about human well-being and well-doing. They were to be encouraged and cultivated, but only in proper subordination to the contents of the tradition of revealed truths—God-told truths.\(^{43}\)

Later in the book, Poe references Aquinas in the problem of applying biblical truth to academic curricular issues. As instructors may grapple with how to accomplish this, Poe simply declared, “Faith’s most appropriate place in a discipline is where it already is.”\(^{44}\) He went on to applaud Aquinas for encouraging people to research what was possible and to be motivated by the knowledge that a Creator God existed.\(^{45}\)

Poe offered a comparison of the times in which Aquinas lived to the current day, especially relating to how the typical medieval person perceived order and how a typical person today perceives it. In the Middle Ages, there was an assumption by the vast majority of people that the universe contained order, meaning, and purpose and that this was attributed to a sovereign Creator God. There is no such assumption of order in the twenty-first century, Poe observed, and this lack of assumption has serious implications regarding how apologists make their case. For instance, Aquinas’ argument “might be turned on its head” and argued in the

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
reverse. Instead of arguing that God must exist because order can be observed in the universe, the argument should be presented that the universe had order and meaning because a Creator God exists. This appears to be a shift to a preference toward a presuppositionalism.

   Chiding the reader, Poe disparaged those who long for the good old days “when faith and learning were one.” Those were the same days, the noted, that were full of superstition, debauchery, and corruption within the Church. He also chided C.S. Lewis for blaming Aquinas for “dividing things” because there has always been and always will be a truncation of truth in one way or the other.

   Another current analysis is offered by David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith. Their context is Christian higher education, in which they observe that there is a common perception that Christian college equals chapel services, strict moral rules, and plenteous prayer. Those areas are where faith resides, but other areas—such as classrooms and research labs—are neutral. They praised Mark Noll for challenging this dualism in his The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, which makes many of the same points that Nancey Pearcey makes in Total Truth. Both Noll and Pearcey question the dichotomy of faith and learning and the treatment of them as parallel rather than as fluid.

   Conclusion

   For Christian schools and universities that are seriously considering the role of faith and reason in their learning experience, serious conversations are occurring and many current worldview authors inform these discussions. Though the same issues argued by Aquinas are being debated today, most educators are little aware of the man, his teachings, or his tremendous

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46 Poe, Christianity in the Academy, 111-2.
influence in the realm of academia and learning theory. Though in acknowledgment of him or not, his ideas continue to be debated. His instructional methods, however, have mostly gone by the wayside as pragmatism, postmodernism, and constructivist learning theories prevail both in public and private schools. It is only in all pockets of educational traditionalism, such as traditional Catholic and Protestant classical schools where the instructional methods of Thomas Aquinas may be practiced.
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