

Thomas Aquinas

Biography / Overview

Thomas Aquinas (around 1225–1274 CE) was a Dominican friar and one of the most influential thinkers of the Middle Ages. Born into a noble family near Aquino in Italy, he surprised everyone by choosing a simple, devoted life with the Dominicans, despite his family's objections.

He studied in major centers of learning like Naples, Cologne, and Paris, where he was mentored by the famous Albert the Great. Aquinas became famous for blending Aristotle's philosophy with Christian beliefs, creating a thoughtful and lasting framework that shaped how theology was understood for centuries. His *Summa Theologiae* is a massive work that breaks down complex religious ideas in a clear and logical way.

Among his many contributions, Aquinas is best known for the "Five Ways"—his clever arguments for proving God's existence—and for developing natural law theory, which explores how human reason relates to moral principles. He was canonized as a saint in 1323 and later honored as a Doctor of the Church in 1567. Today, his ideas still inspire debates in theology, ethics, philosophy, and even politics.

Sources:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Thomas-Aquinas>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/>

<https://iep.utm.edu/aquinas/>

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Major Writings:

Summa Theologiae (Summary of Theology): A comprehensive theological treatise structured around key doctrines—God, creation, human nature, morality, Christ, and sacraments.

Summa Contra Gentiles: A rational exposition of Christian belief intended for use in interreligious and philosophical dialogue.

Commentaries on Aristotle: In-depth analyses of works such as *Metaphysics*, *Ethics*, and *Politics*, integrating them with the Christian worldview.

De Ente et Essentia (On Being and Essence): A foundational work in metaphysics exploring the relationship between essence and existence.

Additional texts include numerous sermons, Scripture commentaries, and scholastic disputations.

Manuscript Tradition:

Aquinas's writings were widely copied, studied, and disseminated throughout medieval Europe. The *Summa Theologiae* became the cornerstone of Catholic theological education, and it continues to shape both religious and philosophical discourse today.

Birth Date / Death Date

Born: Circa 1225 CE, at Roccasecca (near Aquino), in the Kingdom of Sicily

Died: March 7, 1274 CE, at the Cistercian Abbey of Fossanova, Italy

Sources:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Thomas-Aquinas>

<https://iep.utm.edu/aquinas/>

Notable / Best-Known For

Thomas Aquinas is best known for authoring the *Summa Theologiae*, one of the most influential texts in Christian theology. He proposed the Five Ways—philosophical arguments for God’s existence drawn from reason and nature—and developed a robust theory of natural law, which continues to influence ethics and legal philosophy.

He integrated Aristotelian philosophy into Christian theology, solidifying the Scholastic method, and was honored as both a Doctor of the Church and the Angelic Doctor for his theological clarity and depth.

Famous Quotes

“To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible.” — *Commentary on the Sentences*

“The things that we love tell us what we are.” — *Summa Theologiae*

“Faith concerns things not seen, and hope concerns things not yet possessed.” — *Summa Theologiae*

“Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.” — *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*

Major Works / Textual Contents

Summa Theologiae

Divided into three main parts:

I. The existence and nature of God, angels, and creation

II. Human ethics, law (including natural and divine), grace, and virtue

III. The person and work of Christ, the sacraments, and eschatology

Employs a dialectical method: question, objections, authoritative response, and reasoned reply.

Summa Contra Gentiles

Crafted for dialogue with non-Christians, using reason to demonstrate theological truths.

Prioritizes philosophical clarity over scriptural appeal.

De Ente et Essentia

Investigates metaphysical principles such as the distinction between what a thing is (essence) and

that it is (existence).

Lays the groundwork for understanding God as the only necessary being—“subsistent being itself.”

Influences / Intellectual Context

Aquinas was deeply shaped by the thought of Aristotle, whose works had only recently become widely available in Latin. He also engaged the writings of Augustine, Boethius, Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides.

He worked within the context of the Scholastic tradition and the burgeoning medieval university system, especially in Paris and Naples. His methodology emphasized dialectical reasoning—faith and reason, Scripture and philosophy working in harmony.

Legacy and Modern Significance

Aquinas remains central to Catholic thought, especially in moral theology, metaphysics, and political theory. His teachings on natural law still shape modern debates on ethics and constitutional law.

Named the patron of Catholic schools and universities by Pope Leo XIII, his thought was revived in the modern era through Neo-Thomism. His works are regularly cited in papal documents, including *Aeterni Patris* (1879) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998), which affirm the unity of faith and reason.

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

Philosophy

Thomistic metaphysics and ethics continue to influence contemporary discussions in analytic philosophy, particularly in philosophy of religion and moral realism.

Law and Ethics

Natural law theory, rooted in Aquinas, is frequently referenced in legal systems that ground moral rights and justice in human nature.

Theology and Ecumenism

Aquinas’s work is central in Catholic seminaries and is also engaged by Protestant and Orthodox scholars in ecumenical dialogue.

Digital Humanities

His entire corpus is accessible online, and scholars actively engage his writings in modern formats, including podcasts, videos, and scholarly databases.

Suggested Reading and Resources

Secondary Sources

Copleston, Frederick. *Aquinas*. Penguin Books, 1955

Kenny, Anthony. *Aquinas on Being*. Oxford University Press, 2002

McInerny, Ralph. *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas*. Sophia Institute Press, 1990

Gilson, Étienne. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Random House, 1956

Archival and Online Resources

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://iep.utm.edu/aquinas/>

Corpus Thomisticum: <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org>

Thomistic Institute: <https://thomisticinstitute.org>

Aquinas 101 Video Series: <https://aquinas101.thomisticinstitute.org>