

VEXILLUM

the undergraduate journal of
classical and medieval studies

Issue 4

2014

Thomas Aquinas and the Grammarians

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When Etienne Tempier issued his Condemnation of 1277, among those he denounced as heretics was the man who is now arguably considered the Catholic Church's greatest theologian and philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas. Yet perhaps even more surprising than how the Condemnation portrays Thomas as a subversive heretic is how it condemns him for teaching the same heresies as two of his most prominent philosophical opponents, Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia. As Thomas had argued against these men for years about these very subjects, that he would be condemned alongside them for supporting the same heresies seems nonsensical. However, if one examines the intellectual roots of the philosophical schools embroiled in the Aristotelian controversies of the thirteenth century, an explanation emerges. By contrasting the differing educational backgrounds of those involved in the Aristotelian controversies of the thirteenth century, the conflicting starting points of Aquinas and his critics can be elucidated. An investigation into Aquinas's style and the manner in which he used philosophical source material can further distinguish him from his contemporaries. His radically different, innovative, and ultimately syncretic philosophical method thereby becomes the cause of his inclusion in the Condemnation of 1277.

In the year 1277, the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, formally condemned 219 philosophical propositions. They consisted of specific philosophical notions drawn from various aspects of Aristotelian thought. Ideas such as determinism; the possibility of an accident existing without inhering in a substance; the eternity of the material universe; the impossibility of a vacuum; that celestial bodies have eternity of substance but not eternity of motion; and that the logically impossible cannot be done by God were included in the proscription.¹ This condemnation singled out strains of thought present in the works of Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia, and Thomas Aquinas.

This is a strange list of names. Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia were fierce philosophical opponents of Thomas Aquinas. Why, then, is Thomas Aquinas posthumously classified as a heretic alongside two men with whom he had vigorously debated for years? Moreover, this nearly contemporary view of Aquinas bears little resemblance to familiar historical depictions of the saint. He is

¹ Edward Grant, *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 48-50.

neither the Renaissance's representative of stodgy, unimaginative Aristotelianism nor the supremely Catholic philosopher depicted by modernity. Rather, this depiction of Thomas Aquinas is that of a dangerous and subversive heretic.

It has been common for scholars to explain the Condemnation of 1277 and the list of philosophers it affected either within the context of the debates over the "struggle between faith and reason" or by attributing it to resistance to Aristotle by some scholastic theologians. While such an explanatory model justifiably makes reference to key issues in thirteenth-century scholasticism, it fails to adequately explain the joint condemnation of both Thomas and his opponents in a single proclamation. The relationship between religion and philosophy was debated throughout the medieval period, and it could be invoked as a possible explanation for any philosophical dispute occurring between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries. Thus, it fails to provide any real insight into what prompted Tempier to issue the Condemnation of 1277. Furthermore, the opposition to Aristotle was, in fact, opposition to a particular strain of Aristotelianism—Latin Averroism, a loosely related school of thought that relied heavily upon the Muslim commentator Averroes's interpretation of Aristotle. It was this very version of Aristotelianism that Thomas so resolutely resisted. Consequently, attributing the Condemnation to an institutional opposition to Aristotle oversimplifies matters, failing not only to explain why Thomas's positions were condemned, but also why those of other Aristotelians, such as his teacher, Albert the Great, were not.

Why, then, did the Condemnation contain this odd list of names? For that matter, why was the philosophy of the now canonized Thomas Aquinas considered heretical in the first place? The answers to these questions can help us better appreciate the nuances of Aquinas's immediate intellectual context, how he broke with the prevailing trends of his time, and why his philosophical innovations remain pillars of both Christian and broader European thought. To do so, this paper will examine the relationship between Thomism and developments in medieval logic, the influence of twelfth-century Platonic

theology on Aquinas's work, and Aquinas's approach to both classical and medieval non-Christian sources. In light of such analysis, we can elucidate the seemingly unlikely connections between Thomas and the Latin Averroists. From this, the uniqueness of Thomas Aquinas and his place in the history of European thought can be better understood. Furthermore, it can provide a glimpse into the ongoing dialogue between European and non-European thinkers in the formation of Western identity.

Prior to the Greco-Arabic translations of Aristotle that began appearing in Europe during the late twelfth century, scholastic philosophers had undertaken a project that resulted in strikingly original developments in the field of logic. The new system of logic that they devised was a marked contrast to the Aristotelian system that preceded it. Partly inspired by Stoic sources, scholastic logicians of the early twelfth century began crafting what would become known as formal logic. The goal of formal logic was not to structure the empirical data obtained about extra-mental reality, but "to order the world of concepts and to verify conclusions intra-mentally."² In other words, formal logic had no necessary connection to objective reality; logic was not something that was inherently relatable to questions arising about some aspect of the natural world. Its primary concern was establishing the veracity and coherence of the logical statements themselves, accomplishing this task by clarifying the relationships between concepts and the propositions in which people used them.

Contemporaneously, formal logic was known then as the *logica modernorum* and has since been referred to as terminism. It proved attractive to many thinkers for a variety of reasons. When understood within this framework, logic has a clearly defined scope and is established more firmly as a discipline in its own right. It is no longer merely a means to an end. Scholastics now possessed an intellectual tool that could clarify many of the debates of previous centuries through the use of semantic analysis of the propositions involved.

² Marcia L. Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 27.

This emphasis on assessing the internal coherence of propositions and the relationships between concepts influenced the priorities of twelfth-century education. It was quickly realized that one must possess a thorough knowledge of grammar to sort out the linguistic distinctions that embodied the concerns of the *logica modernorum*. Therefore, the teaching of grammar became paramount in primary education. When Bernard of Chartres was teaching in the years around 1130, the “evening exercise... was so stuffed with grammar that if anyone took it for a full year...he could not remain ignorant.”³ Later in this account, its author, John of Salisbury, laments the decline in grammatical education by the time of his writing, claiming that it is the “peculiar prerogative” of grammatical study to make men learned.⁴

This emphasis on grammar had several effects on the intellectual outlook of twelfth-century scholars. Since the foundation of twelfth-century scholastic education was a rigorous course in proper grammar, the key texts for basic education were the writings of classical authors. There quickly emerged a distinct corpus of ancient authors whose works were considered canonical curriculum. Peter of Blois, writing around 1160, provides a list of authors for the introductory grammar student, consisting of “Donatus, Servius, Priscian, Isidore, Bede and Cassiodorus,” as well as a list of authors for more advanced students, including such literary luminaries as “Josephus, Suetonius, Egesippus, Quintus Curtius, Cornelius Tacitus, [and] Titus Livius.”⁵ Thirty years before Peter’s writing, Bernard of Chartres had already begun to demarcate the limits of this *corpus antiquae*. John of Salisbury writes that Bernard believed “that the writings of illustrious authors were sufficient.”⁶

Since the use of ancient texts possessing good grammar was vital, schoolmasters focused on finding authors who maintained a consistent level of literary elegance. Thus, when selecting texts for use in their teaching, they became concerned with style over content. Once a prevailing grammatical style

³ Lynn Thorndike, ed., *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 8.

⁴ Thorndike, 10.

⁵ Thorndike, 16, 17.

⁶ Thorndike, 8.

was identified in an author's writings, there arose stigmas concerning authors whose grammar was deemed inferior, while cults of personality developed around other authors considered exemplars of excellent grammar. It is for this reason that Bernard of Chartres admonishes his students that to "busy oneself with what any worthless man has ever written is "too wretched a task... and wastes ability."⁷

Early scholastics consequently developed a distinctive conception of their inheritance from the intellectual tradition of classical antiquity. They saw the classical intellectual tradition as consisting of a group of men who possessed certain grammatical styles that were useful preparation for dealing with the linguistic intricacies of terministic logic. Consequently, the ideas of the classical intellectual tradition received less emphasis than the style in which classical authors presented those ideas. This emphasis would prove influential for some of the early reception of Aristotle, whose surviving writings consisted of unpolished lecture notes. The rough style of most of his works would have greatly offended the sensibilities of a medieval grammarian or schoolmaster. Indeed, John of Salisbury, reminiscing about his school days, comments on his mentor, a certain Adam, as being "a man of keenest wit, despite whatever others may think...who applied himself to Aristotle more than the rest."⁸

There were, nevertheless, actual philosophical differences between Aristotelian logic and the *logica modernorum*. In contrast to the intra-mental, linguistic focus of terminism, Aristotelian logic, which developed into a school of thought known as modism, saw logic as the schema by which our extra-mental reality is structured. The function of language is to signify real beings; thought and language thus become "isomorphic with the world outside the mind."⁹ The terminist logicians, including Etienne Tempier, viewed modism as an overly rigid system. It seemed incapable of handling various aspects of language that had no relation to objective reality, but which could nevertheless be expressed

⁷ Thorndike, 8-9.

⁸ Thorndike, 13.

⁹ Colish, 290.

in speech.¹⁰ On the other hand, certain scholastics, especially those among the rapidly growing mendicant orders, saw modism as the philosophical tool needed to bring logic into connection with real experience. Modist logic could allow one to understand and structure a world made up of fixed, knowable essences, the characteristics of which could be conceptualized on the basis of empirical data. Abstractions could thus be built upon the basis of real beings encountered in the world. Nevertheless, despite these advantages, many terminists still viewed Aristotelian logic as a step backward in matters of precision and intellectual flexibility.

The tendency to concentrate on the grammatical style of ancient authors did not, however, lead to a total neglect of the content of classical writings. Rather, it merely determined the perspective from which twelfth-century philosophers and theologians considered these writers' ideas. Due to their status as exemplary stylists, certain classical authors had reached the status of intellectual authorities. Their reputations were such that it was paramount for their writings to be compatible with Christianity.

Chief among these authoritative classical authors was Plato. Throughout the twelfth century, various theologians and philosophers produced works aimed at reconciling Platonic philosophy and cosmology with Christian theology. To accomplish this task, scholastic theologians most commonly employed allegory and metaphor.¹¹ The theologians of the cathedral school at Chartres produced influential glosses and commentaries on Plato's works, particularly his cosmological work *Timaeus*. Some commentators, such as Bernard Silvestris, went so far as to allegorize pagan deities when combining Platonic and Christian cosmology. Peter Abelard and William of Conches, two men known primarily for their contributions to the *logica modernorum*, also felt it necessary to allegorize Plato's

¹⁰ Colish, 291.

¹¹ David Luscombe, "Thought and Learning," in David Luscombe and Jonathan Riley-Smith, eds., *c. 1204 - c. 1198*, vol. 4 of *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), accessed April 3, 2013, <http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/histories/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781139054034>, 473.

work so as to reconcile it with Christian doctrine.¹² The common concern of these philosophers, even those specializing in very divergent fields, was to ensure that pagan philosophy and Christian doctrine were fully compatible. Each allegorical reading went to great lengths to reconcile all aspects of whatever Platonic work was being glossed. Their primary education had ingrained in them the need to maintain amicable relations between Christian doctrine and these intellectual giants. It was an all-or-nothing proposition for these theologians—either the entirety of Platonic philosophy was reconcilable with Christian doctrine, or none of it was. Their approach to philosophical source material differed greatly from that of Aquinas; this difference in method would cause much misunderstanding with the reintroduction of Aristotle’s writings to European scholars.

Translations of Aristotle had been present in Western Europe since around the 1160s, although the number of manuscripts was so small that he remained largely unread until the first decades of the thirteenth century. By this time, scholastics were receiving Aristotle’s writings from three different sources. The continuing *Reconquista* in Spain made available increasing numbers of translations of Aristotle from Greco-Arabic translations, as well as the works of two highly influential Aristotelian commentators, the Muslim Averroes and the Jewish rabbi, Moses Maimonides. Crusading ventures in Palestine had provided further editions of Aristotle as well as the work of the other great Muslim commentator, Avicenna. The most direct source of Aristotelian works, however, were the translations received directly from Greek through contacts with scholars in the Byzantine Empire after the Fourth Crusade.

Aristotle’s entry into scholastic thought was bitterly contested. Natural philosophers at Oxford eagerly adopted Aristotelianism by the time that Robert Grosseteste left Oxford in 1235.¹³ Nevertheless, it was condemned at Paris in 1210 and again at 1215, although open lectures on Aristotelian philosophy

¹² Luscombe, 473. They read the *Timaeus* from a perspective that asserted that its true meaning was often wrapped in an “envelope” (*integumentum, involucreum*) that could be unwrapped to reveal the underlying similarities between the pagan and Christian philosophies.

¹³ James McEvoy, *The Philosophy of Robert Grosseteste*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 149-50.

seem to have continued with increasing frequency until the university finally placed his writings on the required reading for master's candidates in 1255.¹⁴ The Italian universities at Bologna and Padua would not fully accept Aristotle into the curriculum until the 1270s. Resistance to Aristotle came naturally from the grammarians and champions of the *logica modernorum*. This piecemeal process of assimilation also resulted from the lack of unity among proponents of Aristotelianism. Thus, differing interpretations were prominent in different universities, provoking differing reactions. The interpreters were divided into two main camps: the Latin Averroists and the mendicant interpreters.

The Latin Averroists took their name from Aristotle's Andalusian commentator, Averroes. As the name suggests, they read Aristotle primarily through the lens of his Muslim interpreter. This perspective led them to accept certain Averroist doctrines, such as the eternity of the material universe, the denial of the immortality of the individual soul, and the existence of a world mind-soul that resembled a form of pantheism. These doctrines led to widespread condemnation of Averroism in particular and Aristotelianism in general. Primary proponents of this school were Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia. Their easy acceptance of Averroist doctrines largely resulted from the period in which it began to develop, when translations of Averroes represented the best editions of Aristotle available to scholars.

The mendicant Aristotelians were found among the ranks of the new religious orders, the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans) and especially the Order of Preachers (Dominicans). The initial champion of this branch of Aristotelianism was the German Dominican St. Albert the Great, who taught at the Dominican priories in Paris and Cologne. Albert had a distinctly different reading of both Aristotle and of the Aristotelian controversy as a whole. Rather than believing that the resistance to Aristotle was the result of the philosopher's doctrines themselves, he contended that it arose due to poor translations of the philosopher's works and distortions of his ideas put forth by his chief commentators. This view stemmed from Albert's knowledge of Greek, something that set him apart from other European scholars

¹⁴ Colish, 289.

of the thirteenth century. He had set out, along with another Dominican, William of Moerbeke, to provide accurate translations of Aristotle for his students.¹⁵ These translations, as well as Albert's general views on the Aristotelian controversy, were passed on to his star pupil—a quiet, plump Italian novice named Tommaso d'Aquino.

The shy friar thus stepped into the debates of thirteenth-century philosophy with a fundamentally different perspective compared to other figures on both sides of the debate. Albert had been convinced that Aristotle's ideas were directly applicable to the key issues of thirteenth-century philosophy. Both Albert and Aquinas thus sought to recover the original Aristotle from beneath the layers of annotations made by Muslim and Jewish commentators that had shrouded his actual views. It was to this task that Thomas dedicated himself from his earliest days as a bachelor's candidate at the University of Paris. To this end, he began to read the classical authors in a way profoundly different from the reading methods followed by previous scholastics. In so doing, he helped introduce a new conception of the intellectual patrimony of European thought. These methods and conceptions, however, stood out among the prevailing intellectual tendencies of the time. Consequently, he became as controversial in his own time as his contemporary opponents, the Latin Averroists, and was even more misunderstood.

In his effort to recover the original Aristotle, Thomas was without the knowledge of Greek necessary to undertake a philological investigation. Having only Albert's translations of Aristotle into Latin and the writings of the Jewish and Muslim commentators, he had no choice but to concentrate on isolating what were distinctly Aristotelian ideas. Furthermore, because he was educated outside of the grammar school system that produced the great twelfth-century philosophers and theologians, Thomas did not have the same notions about the *corpus antiquae* that had informed their reading of classical philosophers. Consequently, he was not focused on the quality of Aristotle's style, nor did he treat

¹⁵ Colish, 295.

Aristotle as an intellectual who could not be rejected no matter the cost. This is not to say that Aristotle was not Thomas's primary philosophical influence and his writings not Thomas's principle source material. Nevertheless, Thomas's use of Aristotle in his own writings was highly flexible.

This flexibility is first noticeable in the way Thomas cites Aristotle. Rather than citing Aristotle as an authority whose name alone carries great weight, Thomas cites him in a manner more similar to the way modern scholars use citations—in order to give credit to a source. This tendency is evident throughout his writings by the common sequence of his citations. Thomas mentions each philosopher separately from the concept being invoked, frequently placing each in entirely different syntactical clauses. Thus, the idea can be understood completely apart from its originator's identity. For example, in one of his Disputations, Aquinas mentions Aristotle almost in passing, asserting, "For, as Aristotle says, you don't mention existence in definitions because..."¹⁶ Elsewhere, he does not even bother with Aristotle's name, such as in a section of his treatise on the *Essence of Law*, merely asserting that "[a]s one man is a part of the household, so a household is part of the state: and the state is a perfect community, as *Politics* I.1 says."¹⁷ In each case, Thomas gives the idea precedence over the reputation of its originator.

Thomas is also willing to blend Aristotle's ideas with those of others. His disputations demonstrate his ability to weave together strands from various thinkers and in so doing create unique presentations of well-worn concepts. For example, his consideration of whether or not the love of God is a virtue combines elements from the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Pauline theology, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Augustine.¹⁸ During the disputation, Thomas considers a key Christian doctrine—the love

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia* 7.2.4, in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. Timothy McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 204.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II.2.90:4, in Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Law*, Part II of *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1915), 7.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio Disputata de Caritate*, Article 2, in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 421-25.

of God—within the quintessential Aristotelian ethical framework of the virtues. His use of the virtues, however, does not result merely in an Aristotelian approach to Christian doctrine. Neither, however, does it produce a Christian appropriation of Aristotelian doctrine. Over and above these more simplistic philosophical approaches, Aquinas skillfully combines Aristotle’s concept of virtue with the Augustinian notion of the will, and fleshes out his philosophical description with concepts drawn from Paul’s theology of Christian adoption and Bernard of Clairvaux’s mystical theology.

In a particularly sophisticated section of the disputation, Aquinas draws parallels between Aristotle’s concept of social virtue and the mystical Christian notion of theological virtue embodied by divine love. Thomas invokes the mystical theologians to define charity as “a kind of friendship between God and man,” but then critiques this definition by noting that friendship is not considered a social virtue.¹⁹ In his conclusion, Thomas further nuances our understanding of the question by introducing concepts from the Pauline theology of grace and the Johannine corpus’s treatment of divine love, which are employed congruently with the Aristotelian and mystical concepts.²⁰ This treatment is not merely a synthesis of two seemingly opposed ideas, which is how Thomas Aquinas’s method has so often been characterized. Rather, Thomas’s method, as demonstrated by his presentation of this disputed question, is syncretic.

Thomas’s emphasis on the content of arguments is further borne out by his unique literary style. Stretching back through Saint Anselm of Canterbury to Saint Augustine of Hippo, presentations of theology either took the form of a prayer or were intermingled with prayer. In Thomas Aquinas’s own time it was still common for theologians to use effusive language intended to convey the theologian’s own religious experience and emotions, as evidenced by the writings of Alexander of Hales and St.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio Disputata de Caritate* 2.8, in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 422.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio Disputata de Caritate* 2.15.2, in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 425.

Bonaventure. Thomas, however, deliberately adopts neutral language that avoids rhetorical and symbolic devices so as to not distract from the ideas being presented.

The discourse on the Trinity in Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* is a prime example of effusive language in early theological texts. Written entirely in verse, amongst its arguments are scattered such devotional exclamations as, "Who would not be lifted up in admiration at the sight of such marvels?"²¹ Moreover, the discourse itself is structured as if the student and teacher were two cherubim on either side of God's throne. When discussing the Trinity in his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas does not leap into verse, retaining his characteristically sober prose. Nor does he include devotional exclamations or literary techniques, as does Bonaventure. Instead, he presents his teachings in his preferred syllogistic format, with several series of objections and replies revolving around a central question. Even when discussing the central mystery of the Christian faith, Aquinas does not let his philosophy spill into emotive rhetoric. Since he proved himself fully capable of writing spiritual verse when necessary, this commitment to objective language would have been a conscious stylistic choice by him. The same man that wrote the Eucharistic hymn "Tantum Ergo" also penned the words: "Christ's body is not in this sacrament in the same way as a body is in a place, which by its dimension is commensurate with the place; but in a special manner which is proper to this sacrament."²²

This content-based approach was not restricted to Thomas's reading of Aristotle. Rather, it was applied to every thinker he engaged, be they ancient or contemporary, pagan, Christian, or Muslim. Earlier scholastic thinkers sought to contextualize authoritative thinkers from previous eras rhetorically or historically, so as to understand how they might be fully reconciled with Christian doctrine. Thomas, on the other hand, evaluates their arguments in terms of what he finds in them to be correct.

²¹ Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 106.

²² *Summa Theologiae* III.75.1, in Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Sacraments, Part II of The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1915), 265.

Since Aquinas's focus in reading other thinkers is from the outset centered on their ideas and not on their historical reputation, it is not necessary for him to reconcile all the ideas of any one thinker with Christian doctrine. Some twelfth-century thinkers, such as Abelard, found it necessary to claim that Plato had been given a private revelation to account for his importance as a theological source.²³ Aquinas reverts to no such explanation to account for Aristotle's brilliance. For him, nothing seemed inherently peculiar about a pagan being so intelligent. Thomas was able to search through the thoughts of non-Christian authors for the ideas and arguments that were relevant to the questions at hand. Such an approach allowed for the presentation of Thomistic thought as its own system. Thomas established this principle in his earliest work of theology, his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, stating that "since the end of philosophy...is below that of theology, and ordered to it, theology ought to...use what is valuable in the other sciences."²⁴

This principle of applying other scientific ideas in theology is embodied in the noticeably eclectic nature of Thomas's sources. While Aristotle is copiously cited throughout his works, Thomas does not limit his readings to Aristotelian writings alone. On the contrary, one finds references to a broad range of Christian authors, including St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Pseudo-Dionysius, St. John of Damascus, Boethius, Origen, St. Hilary of Poitiers, and St. Isidore of Seville. Such treatment also extends to his contemporary theological colleagues, even the Platonic theologians Hugh and Richard of St. Victor.²⁵ For example, in the opening of his *Cantena Aurea* on John's gospel, Aquinas effortlessly combines quotations from John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Basil of Caesarea. He even combines Augustine's sermon comment on colloquial language, "Words, by their daily use...have become common things,"

²³ Colish, 278-79.

²⁴ *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* I.1:1, in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Ralph McNerny, (London: Penguin, 1998), 56.

²⁵ For examples, see *Commentary on the Sentences*- I.1:1, 3:6; II.17:1-2; *On the Divine Names*; *Summa Theologiae* I.54, 58:1-2; *Exposition of Boethius' De Trinitate* I.2:3; *Disputed Questions* I.1.4; *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.13; *Disputed Question on Truth* XVII.1.8; *Exposition of Boethius' De Trinitate* I.4:7; and *Commentary on the Sentences* I.4:2.

with his own thoughts on language, “[F]or a word is a thought formed from a thing which we know.”²⁶

The theory of language to which Aquinas ascribes is actually quite different from Augustine’s own.

Nevertheless, Thomas need not disregard its content entirely; he is equally capable of taking and reading.

Aquinas’s use of pagan authors is equally broad in scope, incorporating not only the opinions of Aristotle, but also those of Plato, Theophrastus, Themistius, Cicero, Ammonius Hermiae, and Anaxagoras.²⁷ Thomas is also willing to use valuable insights in the work of the Islamic Aristotelian commentators, Avicenna and Averroes, in addition to drawing from the work of the Jewish Aristotelian Moses Maimonides.²⁸ He uses some of these authors’ ideas despite disagreeing with some of the key tenets of their interpretive schemes. For example, when discussing the meanings of “being” and “essence,” two crucial philosophical concepts, Aquinas is willing to invoke Averroes with favor, incorporating part of Averroes’s definition of being into his own.²⁹

Thomas’s more inclusive approach to source material would also explain why his theology was identified with that of his intellectual opponents. Etienne Tempier and other opponents of Aristotelian logic misinterpreted Thomas’s use of certain Averroist principles in his own work as tending toward the heretical notions held by Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia. Ironically, in this instance it was the traditionally educated grammarians and terminist logicians who focused upon the minute details of Thomas’s work, who would himself later be mocked for his hair-splitting logic. By focusing on those minor propositions shared by Thomas and the Averroists, they could not see the forest for the trees, as they failed to understand how Thomas incorporated these singular propositions into his eclectic

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels*, trans. John Henry Newman, ed. Paul A. Boer, Sr. (Lexington, KY: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), 4:9.

²⁷ See *Exposition of De Interpretatione* IV.16; *Summa Theologiae* II.1.55.2; and *Commentary on the Sentences* I.2.1, II.2, d. 12.4.

²⁸ See *Exposition of Boethius’ De Trinitate* I.2, 3.3; *On Being and Essence* I.3; *On the Power of God* VII.4-5; *On the Principles of Nature* 3; and *Commentary on the Sentences* II, d. 17.1.1.

²⁹ *On Being and Essence*, Chapter 1, in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 31.

synthesis of ideas. This interpretation of the Condemnation of 1277 makes further sense if one considers the educational background of Tempier and that of Thomas's other opponents. Their mindset derived from the grammar school system of the twelfth century and its author-centered view of intellectual inquiry, which saw philosophers' work as either wholly compatible or wholly incompatible with Christian doctrine. Since Averroes held some positions that could not be reconciled with Christian doctrine, they decided he had to be rejected wholesale.

Thomas's willingness to include in his work the thought of not merely pagans of revered antiquity, but also thinkers such as Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides, caused concern among some. These writers were thinkers who belonged to other cultures and religions that had not passed away with the coming of Christianity, but which had arisen after and often in opposition to it. Moreover, Thomas went so far as to combine Christian writers with both classical pagan and medieval Islamic writers' views on the same subject in his own analysis. For example, in his treatment of virtue in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas cites Cicero, Aristotle, Augustine, and Averroes in a single article.³⁰ Such seeming disregard for cultural differences provided Aquinas's critics with evidence for the charge that he was too comfortable with infidels. Thus, the condemnation, when listing the errors of the philosophers, chastises them for believing that there could be "truth in the statements of damned gentiles."³¹

When viewed from this perspective, the position of Thomas Aquinas within European thought can be better understood. His outlook presented Europe with a distinctive way of considering its intellectual patrimony. Rather than conceiving of it as a collection of thinkers with separate, well-defined systems of thought, he proposed a new way of understanding that same intellectual tradition. This mindset saw its intellectual patrimony as a sea of ideas from which one could draw. Concepts and

³⁰ *Summa Theologiae* II.1:55.2, in Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Virtue*, Part II of *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 7-9.

³¹ Grant, 47.

arguments that were useful for issues at hand could be retrieved without having to accept the entirety of any one system of thought.

This viewpoint not only distinguishes Thomas from the scholastics that came before him, but also explains the negative reaction that his ideas received from many early Italian humanists. Often, these humanists had been educated in a manner similar to that of the twelfth-century scholastic primary schools, being drilled in grammar and rhetoric by the Italian *dictatores*. This approach fostered a reverence for classical authors, and consequently the graduates of this educational system would have been deeply offended by Thomas picking through the writings of beloved classical authors to search only for concepts that he considered useful. Even for the most mild-mannered Petrarchan humanist, taking a philosophical scalpel to Cicero was surely an unforgivable crime. On the other hand, this reading of Aquinas actually places him in closer communion with some later syncretic humanists, such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

The philosophy that Thomas Aquinas formulated has survived into the present day with remarkable adaptability. It has remained applicable to a surprising number of historical circumstances, ranging from the formulation of the first principles of international law in the sixteenth century to providing ammunition for counter-reformation apologists at the Council of Trent, and even inspiring Alasdair MacIntyre's revival of virtue ethics in the twentieth century. Perhaps the reason for this endurance has been the inclusive mindset of its founder, who was willing to draw from whatever source necessary to adequately address issues at hand. Thomas himself stated as much at the very beginning of his philosophical career, writing that, "that which acquires perfect goodness by many aids and activities is the more noble."³²

³² *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* I.1:2, in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 57.

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