

## Chapter 2

### Thomas Aquinas and the Meaning of Life

I met Thomas Aquinas while working on a book that was to be titled The Socratic Question. I was obsessed at that time with the question of how to live my life; I thought constantly about the best possible way to live. I read what other philosophers wrote on the topic and came upon Socrates. As you may guess from the first chapter, one thing led to another, and I found Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas, unfortunately, was not a diarist. He was a theologian. Worse yet, he was a medieval theologian. But if you have to be a medieval theologian, you should be an important medieval theologian, and Aquinas ranks behind only Paul and Augustine. His writings have shaped Christian doctrine for eight centuries; he brought Aristotle to the forefront of Western philosophy; and he defined dogmas that sustained the Medieval, Roman, and Spanish Inquisitions. His works are expansive, thorough, penetrating, and synthetic; in fact, they are still read in serious academic environments for perspectives on truth, as well as for historical insight into medieval thought. He was, quite probably, one of the most brilliant people ever. While few people know his work today, the American and Western European legal systems owe much to interpretations of and reactions to the ramifications of his theology.

Thomas was born into wealth and power. His family was related to Red Barbarossa, to Frederick the Second, and to the Emperor of the Roman Empire. His family planned for him a powerful life in court, which he rejected in favor of a life of poverty as a Dominican friar. Members of the powerful Aquino family did not want

their son to join "The Begging Friars". When they refused to allow him to do so, a battle of wills ensued.

Thomas ran off to join the Dominicans, and his family had him kidnapped and imprisoned in a tower to give him time to come to his senses. Thomas refused to relent. The family sought the Pope's intervention, which he gladly offered, tempting Thomas with the Abbotship of Benedictine Abbey. Thomas refused. He declared that he would be a lowly friar, and that he would live a life of poverty. In desperation, his family sent a beautiful young woman to Thomas' cell with instructions to seduce him, hoping that he would surrender to lust and make himself unworthy to continue as a friar. Thomas drove the woman off with a hot iron.

Aquinas was a man of uncommon will. Once he fixed his mind on an object—whether it was entrance into the order of the Begging Friars, or silencing the heretical Manichees—nothing could remove him from that task. One senses from his writings and from stories about his life that he was unshakeable: his faith in God was adamant, his force of will was inexhaustible, and his desire for truth was unquenchable.

Beyond his incomparable will, two things impressed me about Aquinas' life: his unrelenting, forceful, warlike pursuit of truth, and his quiet, dispassionate routine.

To gain a taste of the first, let me relate a story about him. Aquinas was dining with the King of France, surrounded by fine food and revelry. The King directed him a question, to which he did not respond. Suddenly, Aquinas slammed his enormous fist on the table (Aquinas was a physically huge person), and

shouted, "THAT will silence the Manichees!" He had been lost in thought, it seems, about an argument that would refute a heretical sect known as the "Manichees", which thought so consumed his mind as to make him oblivious to the King's questions and the court's revelry.

Regarding his routine, we have only suggestive but intriguing evidence about how he lived on a daily basis. He arose every morning at precisely the same time, as would have been the custom among Dominicans. He followed the routine that everyone else did, saying prayers, and participating in Mass. Once the meal and obligatory prayers ended, Aquinas went to work. Sources indicate that Aquinas dictated while scribes wrote, but not in a common way. Contemporaries say that twelve scribes wrote down what he said, each one responsible for the next word, so that the first scribe would write down the first, the thirteenth, the twenty-fifth words, etc. The scribes would assemble at the end of the day and piece together into one document a fluid text. Aquinas would listen to the text at the beginning of each day, and make corrections from memory. Biographers claim that the scribes had difficulty keeping pace with him.

Because I liked the ideas of truth and a dogged routine, I read on. I was looking for his ideas on how to live one's life, which I found in the 182<sup>nd</sup> question of his magnum opus, the Summa Theologica. He suggests two possible answers to the question, "What is the best way for a man to live?": an "active life" and a "contemplative life". The first includes a life of nobility (service to state, etc.) and a life devoted to active Christian charity, i.e., doing good continually to your fellow man. The second includes a the pursuit of truth. He use to the example of Martha and Mary in which Martha attends to the temporal needs of those gathered to hear

Jesus speak, while Mary sits and listens to Jesus to make his point. Thomas cites Luke, who offers Jesus' words: "But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Aquinas used the passage as Jesus' definitive evaluation concerning activity versus contemplation: Mary chose the contemplative life, which Jesus stated clearly was the superior choice. Aquinas' argument, of course, is much more complex than this. He elaborates with careful reasoning and citations that show a keen and complete awareness of the issues and the traditional answers to the question.

From this example and from what I know about Aquinas' writings more generally, I see evidence of a strong disposition toward the pursuit of metaphysical truth—what he calls "the contemplative life". Aquinas believed, with the same force of will that drove him to be a humble friar, that the greatest thing that he could do with his life was to pursue, expound, and elucidate metaphysical truth.

The pursuit of metaphysical truth was both man's highest end and his happiness. In an article in the Summa titled "Of Those Things in Which Man's Happiness Consists," Aquinas rejects: wealth, honor, fame, glory, power, bodily good, pleasure, good of the soul, and any created good. He concludes that the only happiness is contemplation of God and the workings of the intellect in its pursuit of truth.

Before proceeding, it is important to understand the logical corollary of believing that the pursuit and apprehension of theological truth is the greatest happiness in life, man's most important endeavor, and the thing most pleasing to God. Because truth is so important to God, error must be as offensive to God as truth is important. Western civilization has abandoned the practice of killing people

who resist believing the same doctrines as the people in the communities in which they live. Such persecution was, however, an important part of Western society and culture into the eighteenth century. While we do not prosecute people for their beliefs, society demanded such prosecutions throughout most of Christianity for two centuries after the Reformation. I mention this because when I write about Aquinas' position on incorrect belief, we should realize that his extreme views were reflected in society at large.

Aquinas' writings about heresy are long and complex. I spent much time reading them, thinking about them, reading what others had to say about them, boring my friends about them, and trying to get at their essence. While I have never read the complete Summa Contra Gentiles, I think I get the idea.

Aquinas argues that dissent is an act of unbelief, that unbelief is an act of the intellect, that the intellect is subordinate to the will, and therefore dissent is a willful act. After some tedious arguments, Aquinas concludes: "the sin of unbelief is greater than any sin that occurs in the perversion of morals." He clarifies that certain kinds of unbelief are worse than others, but that "the unbelief of heretics is the worst." Since mankind's aim in life is the soul's salvation, and this depends upon correct knowledge of the truth, all beliefs that lead people away from correct belief endanger the purpose of life. What, then, should be done with those people who hold incorrect beliefs and will not surrender them? "They deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death. For it is a much graver matter to corrupt the faith that quickens the soul, than to forge money.... Therefore if forgers of money and evil-doers are condemned to death at once by the secular authority, much more reason is there

for heretics, as soon as they are convicted of heresy, to be not only excommunicated but even put to death.”

When I first read this passage, I was enthralled. The logic was perfect, the meaning was clear, and yet I could not believe that he concluded what he did in the way that he did. I remember sitting at my white desk in my study, underlining in red nearly everything in the text, feeling like I was discovering something that no one else had ever read (even though I knew that thousands of people had read this same treatise). My mind raced as I read the passages and thought, “He really means this. This is why he is writing the Summa, because he believes that truth is so important that you deserve to die if you refuse to accept it, and your soul is lost if you don’t learn it.” This was the passage that gave meaning to Aquinas’s life. This is when I discovered how serious Aquinas was about the relationship between correct beliefs, the pursuit of truth, the salvation of the soul, and the meaning of life.

This meant that Aquinas thought that the greatest thing that a person could do in life was pursue, clarify, expound, and discover metaphysical truth. In other words, he believed that he was doing precisely what was the single noblest thing that any person could do with his time on earth. He answered the Socratic Question, and he lived the answer.

The Summa Theologica is the result of this single-minded, extraordinary devotion to truth. It was to be the ultimate reference and compendium of all truth, answering all questions, anticipating every objection, and providing the guidelines necessary for salvation for all mankind. This is why he dedicated every available moment of his life to its production.

His dedication made me take notice. I reasoned that if he were willing to spend his life on this endeavor, it must be important, or he must be deluded. While I did not agree with most of the conclusions that Aquinas drew, I was nonetheless compelled by his single-mindedness and his conviction. What I learned next shocked me.

On December 6, 1273 Thomas Aquinas stopped work on the Summa Theologica and never returned to it. He continued his daily routines, with the exception of dictation to the scribes who assisted him in writing down the Summa. The limited contemporary account that we have does not suggest any physical inability to continue work, although several biographers have assumed such to explain why he stopped work.

Before continuing the story, I want to pause to emphasize something crucial: Thomas dedicated his entire adult life to a single theological treatise, and he suddenly stopped work on that treatise, knew that he had stopped work on it, told others that he had stopped work on it, and never showed any signs of an inability to continue. These facts bear the imprimatur of a conscious decision made by a person of whole mental capacity. Given the extraordinary devotion with which Aquinas approached his task, his "adamantine obstinacy" (as Chesterton said), his remarkable mental capacity, and his deep conviction of the importance of his project, I asked, what could have made him change his mind so suddenly?

The answer, which most biographers ignore, comes directly and clearly from Thomas' most trusted aide, Reginald. In his life of Thomas, Reginald says that he pressed Aquinas for an answer repeatedly in the days following his decision to discontinue work on the Summa. Thomas refused to answer until Reginald's own

obstinacy broke down Thomas' resistance. Finally, Thomas relented and said, "Promise me, by the living God Almighty and by your loyalty to the Order and by the love you bear me, that you will never reveal, as long as I live, what I shall tell you. All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me."

Aquinas, it seems, had a vision.

Historians, theologians, and biographers have debated the connection between the vision and Thomas' decision to stop working on the Summa. That connection seems obvious to me, especially when we consider that Thomas himself mentions the connection. He states clearly that he had a vision, and that the content of the vision made his work seem worthless by comparison.

The content and the cause of the vision are unimportant to me; whether it was a hallucination, the result of a stroke, or genuinely beatific does not matter. What matters is that Thomas' entire life's work seemed to him completely meaningless when cast in a perspective that he had never before considered.

I have been thinking about this story for the past seventeen years of my life, and every time that I do, its message seems as clear to me as the first time that I read it: life has no single, highest purpose. There is no best way to live. When I first read this, the conclusion shocked me: there is no answer to the Socratic Question. There went my idea for the book, which remains sitting on a shelf with no hope of ever being finished.

This provided me with an even more difficult question: If life has no highest purpose, does it have any purpose at all? If it had one purpose for one person and one for another, one of those purposes had to be better than the other, or else

every purpose would be equal and they would fade into an egalitarian circus of meaninglessness. In other words, without the ability to identify one purpose as being superior to another, all purposes, whether self-identified or not, were simply subjective assignments of purpose without any real value. From a philosophical perspective, one might say that the two statements:

- Playing baseball is the meaning and highest purpose of life, and
- Categorizing species of cacti is the meaning and highest purpose of life

are equally true. Since they make the same claim, and yet do not claim the same thing, it becomes logically impossible to accept that they are both true. The end result is, "Whether you play baseball or categorize cacti, it's all the same."

Relativism wins out and Socrates was wrong to have even asked the question.

With this conclusion, I had a problem: how to live my own life if there was no single best way to live it. I was not the first philosopher to understand that ethical relativism opposed moral absolutism, and that the first implied that no action mattered in the absolute sense if there was no absolute. Many have tried to rescue the dignity of certain human actions. They have done so, in my mind, unconvincingly, although many beautiful rhetorical efforts make me feel that there is, indeed, something noble about the pursuit of truth, the sacrifice of one's life for country, or the pursuit of a morally consistent life (as opposed to a life of hedonism and profligacy). No matter how many times I thought it through, though, I could not convince myself that a virtuous life, a scholarly life, or a life of public devotion was in any way superior to a life of indiscretion, a life of physical indulgence, or a

life of crime. It is obvious that within society a devoted teacher is worth more to that society than a criminal, but it is not obvious that the absolute value of either exceeds the absolute value of the other.

This thinking brought me to an impasse. I was stuck. I needed, as Pirsig says, to get unstuck.

A friend of mine committed suicide at age 13 over being rejected by a girl. Since he was exceptionally bright and mathematically inclined, what would have happened if he had seen a "vision" of the computer revolution of the 1990's? Then all that he felt for this particular girl may have faded into unimportance in comparison with the exciting future of technology of which he could have been a part. Larry Bird's father committed suicide because he couldn't pay his bills—before Bird became an NBA superstar and multimillionaire. People jumped out of windows during the Great Crash rather than face financial ruin. How could they know that just more than a decade would pass before a world war would turn the United States into an international industrial powerhouse with unlimited financial opportunities? People work 35 years at jobs in order to secure a steady income during their final years of life—what Thoreau called "*spending the best years of their lives preparing for the worst years.*" They look back and they can't believe that they spent their lives answering phones, selling replacement parts for diesel trucks, or building a marriage that would be abandoned after thirty years. Cast in the light of current experiences or future knowledge, our efforts often seem worthless.

We sit precariously on a psychological precipice, unknowingly awaiting that moment when what we do is cast in a light that forces us to reevaluate the passive

vehemence with which we cling to our quotidian routines. Understanding Aquinas' vision forced me to ask: "What do I do now that I realize that life has no meaning?"

The first answer to my question came from Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's mind, Christian mythology was no longer useful. It created, he thought, a mentality of weakness. We needed, he claimed, a mentality of strength. He was too smart to suggest an alternate truth—knowing full well that there was no absolute truth. He suggested, therefore, an alternate lie. This lie took the form of a myth. Imagine, he says, that an "angel" comes to you at your most despairing moment and tells you that you must live your life over and over and over exactly as it was. What, he asks, would be your reaction? Would you throw yourself on the ground and wail? Or would you praise the angel for bringing the truth? Imagine, he says, that this is "true", that is, that you *really* have to live over and over and over. How would it change the way that you act? He says that it would make you realize that every moment is valuable and that you ought to create an existence that is fulfilling because you must repeat it. What room would there be for sadness, for guilt, for self-immolation, for cruelty, for sloth? This myth, he says, has the ability to make everyone seek out his own greatest good, his own highest potential no matter what that may be. After all, if you have to do it over and over and over, you hardly want to be miserable doing it.

The disadvantage of Nietzsche's myth is that we are aware that it is a psychological game, the atheist's version of the Christian game of "What would Jesus do?" They both ask you to place your actions within the context of eternity (one endless, and one endlessly repetitive). They are clever, and incite those who use them to behave in certain ways, but neither accounts for death. Frankly,

Nietzsche did me little good. He provided brilliant insight into a difficult problem without giving me something that I could use to solve the problem of how to live my life.

The problem with the Socratic Question is that its answer shifts depending upon the perspective from which one attempts to answer it. It is phrased in absolute terms, but it is answerable only in relative terms. When we consider the fact that the Sun will someday expand and consume our solar system, all actions become completely meaningless because none will last. Even if we acknowledge the finality of death and argue for the importance of our actions at a societal level (certainly Shakespeare and the Buddha made a difference), placed within a perspective of billions of years—when all of Shakespeare's writings and all of Buddha's followers are disbursed into the cosmos in the form of disintegrated atoms—nothing matters.

Obviously both Nietzsche and Christianity sought a way around the truth that a finite life in an infinite universe cannot have any absolute meaning. If they did not recognize this fact, they would not have invented an eternal continuity to life. (The difference is that Christianity takes the continuity seriously, while Nietzsche admits that it is a helpful myth). Therefore, when I rejected both of these answers, I was left with the same difficult question of how to live my life.

I pondered this question for seventeen years without an answer. I returned thousands of times to the same point: while being nice to people at work may be important at work, or being a teacher may be better for society and my psyche than being a murderer, from a perspective of the finality of my consciousness and our world, there was no good reason to be nice or to be a teacher. After the nice

people and the mean people are gone, who is going to be left to label them “nice” or “mean”?

Some ethicists worry that the lack of moral purpose implied by the inescapable finality of our world implies that moral anarchy will reign. The reasoning seems to be that once people are freed of guilt and the prospect of punishment, they will abandon themselves to reckless profligacy. There are some interesting instances of this, such as times in which the Black Plague struck Italy and the wealthy fled to the countryside and, convinced of their pending death, indulged in every sensual pleasure available. When the Plague passed, they returned to their cities and their former (more moderate) lifestyles. This behavior, however, has not been the rule. In fact, the vast majority of people who have faced death in Western Europe in the last 20 centuries have turned to religion for solace. Facing death has the psychological effect of making things matter more.

Which things matter more? That is the crux of the Socratic Question. When Socrates asked what was the highest way to live one’s life, he was really asking, “What things matter more?” His line of reasoning was clear: if some things matter more than others, then some one thing must matter more than all. Aquinas answered the question through some keen syllogisms about truth and salvation. My insistent perspective of the finality of life would not allow me to accept their answers, or any answer that sounded like theirs.

I found the answer after seventeen years of thinking. In the end, it came when I wasn’t thinking about it.

I was sitting on the balcony of the fifth floor of a hotel in Viña del Mar, Chile, perhaps 100 feet from the Pacific Ocean, eating a chocolate covered ice cream bar

and watching the most beautiful sunset that I had ever seen. I was thinking that only a very small percentage of the world's population had ever had the fortune to experience the pleasures that I was then enjoying. It seemed incomprehensible to me that one person could enjoy so much, so intensely. My mind flowed easily from the flavor of the deep, rich chocolate melting in my mouth to the effortless sound of the waves caressing me, to the breathtaking beauty of the Sun slipping out from behind the needle-shaped clouds and then behind the horizon, to the perfect calm of the breeze on my face, and the wonder of being completely without cares.

Suddenly, a torrent of emotion rushed over my entire body, starting from the level of my eyes, descending down through my hands, and ending near my calves. I felt without words, "This is all going to end. The day will come when all this pleasure, and all this comfort, and all this beauty will end. You will not be here to see this, you will not be able to remember it, you will not enjoy it." I sat staring at the Pacific, continually aware of the sound of the waves. I felt a tear on my cheek. I wiped it away and continued looking at the Pacific. It, too, would be gone.

I have been aware since that day of the shortness of life, of the value of every moment. I have come to realize that when we truly realize what life is we will take pleasure even in a prolonged sense of dying. I find myself reveling, luxuriating, immersing myself in the simplicity of every moment. Food tastes like a privilege to me. A phone call from a friend excites me like a child on Christmas morning. I wash dishes with joy. I smile when my legs hurt after basketball. Books seem like gifts from the gods. The warmth and comfort of my bed defies reason. I am awestruck by the privilege of being alive. It is miraculous.

I recognize that all of this sounds a bit like St. Francis of Assisi. Yes, nature is wonderful, and life is grand, etc., etc., etc. From the position of privilege and wealth that I enjoy (in comparison with most of this planet's inhabitants), these platitudes may seem empty. It is, after all, easy to enjoy life when you don't have a care in the world.

But my seventeen-year search has not ended in trite rhetoric. I'm not trying to convince myself of anything. But I have found an answer. Aquinas saw a vision and his work was as straw and he awaited death. I have had my own vision of sorts, and because of it I choose to pass life between my lips and savor its juices and texture; I choose to let it wash over my body while I luxuriate in every drop; I choose to turn my head to the sounds and let them play in my mind and let them move my body; I choose to see the translucent green leaves shift from light to shadows as the sun sets; I choose to imagine moments of ecstasy and calm, of vigor and poverty, of genius and simplicity; I choose to run my hands over life and feel the rough and the smooth; I choose opulent sensuality and Spartan reserve with equal relish; I choose to read Keats and love letters of lost loves; I choose to love when indifference is easy. I understand, at last, what Thoreau meant about the marrow of life.