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# Thomas Aquinas, "Thomas Aquinas's Quodlibetal Questions." Trans. Turner Nevitt and Brian Davies

Christopher Bobier

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**Thomas Aquinas**, *Thomas Aquinas's Quodlibetal Questions*. Trans. Turner Nevitt and Brian Davies. Oxford University Press 2020. 592 pp. \$160.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190069520); \$53.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780190069537).

Just as undergraduate survey courses in ancient philosophy include the works of Aristotle and Plato, so undergraduate survey courses in medieval philosophy include the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor. Students may read Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God, his account of analogy, his understanding of human happiness and the virtues, or his account of human freedom. Despite writing a voluminous amount, students likely only read passages from Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* or his unfinished *Summa Theologiae*. While medievalists discuss Aquinas's disputed questions and commentaries on the Bible, Lombard's *Sentences*, and Aristotle, they are apt to devote more attention to the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*. For example, Robert Pasnau's masterful book, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge University Press 2001), and Robert Miner's wonderful book, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 22–48* (Cambridge University Press 2012), focus primarily on the *Summa Theologiae*. Although Aquinas's disputed questions are discussed in scholarly places, comparatively little scholarly work substantively engages Aquinas's *Quodlibetal Questions* (*Questiones de quodlibet I–XII*). For example, there are only a few footnote references to it in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge University Press 1993) and there is no reference to it in the index of the *Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* (Oxford University Press 2012).

But our present-day interests may not reflect Aquinas's and the comparative neglect of Aquinas's *Quodlibetal Questions* need not indicate a lack of importance. As Turner Nevitt and Brian Davis explain in their introduction, disputations were part and parcel of university life in the 13th century. As a master of theology, Aquinas presided over numerous disputations, many of which involved him raising a question to students, letting students offer arguments for a position, and then commenting on the question and student arguments himself. Aquinas's writings reflect this practice, for not only did he write disputations on a variety of topics, the *Summa Theologiae* is organized into mini-disputations. There were also non-ordinary disputations (quodlibetal disputations), in which Aquinas himself would be posed questions from the audience—students and other scholars—and, after possibly allowing a student to respond, would make a determination on the questions. To do this, he had to synthesize what was said and make a determination in as little as one or two days. Aquinas's *Quodlibetal Questions* is his editorialized account of the 12 quodlibetal disputations he participated in during his time as a master of theology in Paris between 1256–1259 and 1269–1272.

Turner Nevitt and Brian Davis's *Thomas Aquinas's Quodlibetal Questions*, the first and only complete English translation, is a most welcome addition to Aquinas scholarship. The book offers readers plenty of help when approaching the text. Nevitt and Davis begin with a table of contents that offers a title for each question and the question of each article. After a comment on their translation style, they provide a forty-page introduction to the text. The introduction is helpful for students and scholars alike. They begin by explaining the variety of quodlibetal disputations in 13th century Paris and offer a brief overview of Aquinas's life and writings. The benefit of these sections is that readers are introduced to the practice of quodlibetal disputation, as well as to scholarly uncertainty about how to understand the written artifact in relation to the actual event. This is followed by a systematic overview of the contents of Aquinas's *Quodlibetal Questions*.

Nevitt and Davis group the main topics as follows: ‘(1) divine nature, (2) God as triune and incarnate, (3) angels, (4) blessedness, (5) damnation, (6) grace, (7) sin, (8) human nature, (9) matters concerning clerics and members of religious orders, (10) pastoral concerns, and (11) motley questions which cannot be easily listed under a general heading’ (xxxvii). They offer ‘readers an introductory and selective account’ of each topic with plenty of textual support. At the end of the book, after the last article, readers are provided a set of parallel passages to other texts for each article, a helpful glossary of terms, and list of authors and works cited. This all helps readers, novice and scholars alike, approach an otherwise obscure work.

Each quodlibet has a clear structure. They are composed of a series of questions, each of which contains one or more articles. Aquinas begins each article with a brief introduction to the topic in the form of a question. This is usually, though not always, followed by arguments for the position Aquinas opposes, a ‘to the contrary’ statement, a resolution of the question, and, in many cases, a response to the opposing arguments. Readers familiar with the *Summa Theologiae* will feel right at home. The translation is superb. Nevitt and Davies explain that their goal is to ‘offer a translation of Thomas Aquinas’s *Quodlibetal Questions* that is faithful to his Latin while also being readily intelligible to contemporary readers of English’ (xxi). It is fair to say that they succeed. Archaic scholastic terms (e.g., quiddity, suppositum) are generally avoided, though readers will encounter terms (e.g., form, accidental nature) that are foreign to present-day ears. The translated prose is easier to read than a more literal translation would be. For example, they translate ‘*Dicendum, quod scientia Dei comparatur ad res creatas sicut ars ad artificiatas*’ as ‘God’s knowledge relates to created things like artistry relates to works of art’ (*Quodl. V, q. 1, a2*). A more literal translation of the passage would be, ‘It must be said that the knowledge of God is compared to created things as art to artificial things.’ The latter translation is clunky and obscure; the former is clear and easier to read. Some translation quibbles remain, to be sure, and scholars will be able to take issue on certain translation choices. To take one example, Nevitt and Davies sometimes translate *liberum arbitrium* (or *arbitrii libertatem*) as ‘free choice’ (*Quodl. XI, q. 3*) and sometimes as ‘free will’ (*Quodl. I, q. 4, a2*), and it is not always clear why one is preferred in different contexts.

The significance of this text is that it, perhaps more so than any other of Aquinas’s texts, offers insight into what really interested 13th century Parisians. Today, as evidenced by the kinds of articles and books being published, scholars are interested in Aquinas’s natural law theory, virtue ethics, account of human nature, and arguments for God’s existence, to name a few. While some of the quodlibetals engage these topics, readers soon discover that the focus is often elsewhere: angels, the damned, grace, sin, Scripture, Christ, and religious life. Moreover, questions and articles that appear to deal with topics that are of interest to present-day readers are often focused on more practical matters. For example, the topic of Quodlibet IV, Question 9 is human acts related to the intellect (*de actibus pertinentibus ad vim intellectivam*). The first article does not deal with the nature of knowledge *per se*, as we might expect, but with the more arcane question of whether a person can desire to know magic without sinning. Other audience-specific practical questions addressed include: Is it a sin to want to be a superior? Is it permissible for a man to seek his own license to teach theology? When people hear different masters of theology with contrary opinions, are they excused from sin if they follow the false opinions of their masters? This text reminds us that Aquinas, *qua* Dominican friar, preacher, and master of theology, was regularly engaged in pastoral matters.

Another benefit of the text is that it raises questions of consistency or development in Aquinas’s thought. In many cases, Aquinas remains admirably consistent with his other writings:

Angels are not composed of matter and form; lying is always a sin; non-culpable ignorance renders ensuing action involuntary; conscience is always binding; and so on. Yet, as Nevitt and Davies note, there are a couple of places where questions of consistency or development can be raised. Did Aquinas's argument that God can annihilate something and then recreate it from nothing such that it remains numerically the same indicate a new position for Aquinas? Does Aquinas's claim that angelic nature and subject differ in *Quodlibet* II, q.2, a.2 conflict with his claim in the *Summa Theologiae* that there is no distinction between subject and nature in immaterial things? These and similar questions are now more easily pursued thanks to this complete translation.

Nevitt and Davies have done a wonderful service for medieval philosophy and theology. This translation, with all of its useful features, will make a fine addition to the bookshelves of students and scholars alike. I expect there will be more research on this comparatively under-researched text on account of this wonderful translation.

**Christopher Bobier**, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota