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St Thomas  
**Aquinas**

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## **St Thomas Aquinas**

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VIVIAN BOLAND OP

Bloomsbury Library of Educational Thought  
Series Editor: Richard Bailey

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## Series Editor's Preface

Education is sometimes presented as an essentially practical activity. It is, it seems, about teaching and learning, curriculum and what goes on in schools. It is about achieving certain ends, using certain methods; and these ends and methods are often prescribed for teachers, whose duty it is to deliver them with vigour and fidelity. With such a clear purpose, what is the value of theory?

Recent years have seen politicians and policy makers in different countries explicitly denying *any* value or need for educational theory. A clue to why this might be is offered by a remarkable comment by a British Secretary of State for Education in the 1990s: 'Having any ideas about how children learn, or develop, or feel, should be seen as subversive activity.' This pithy phrase captures the 'problem' with theory: it subverts, challenges, and undermines the very assumptions on which the practice of education is based.

Educational theorists, then, are trouble-makers in the realm of ideas. They pose a threat to the status quo and lead us to question the common sense presumptions of educational practices. But this is precisely what they should do because the seemingly simple language of schools and schooling hides numerous contestable concepts that in their different usages reflect fundamental disagreements about the aims, values, and activities of education.

Implicit within the *Bloomsbury Library of Educational Thought* is an assertion that theories and theorizing are vitally important for education. By gathering together the ideas of some of the most influential, important, and interesting educational thinkers, from the Ancient Greeks to contemporary scholars, the series has the ambitious task of providing an accessible yet authoritative resource for a generation of students and practitioners. Volumes within the series are written by acknowledged leaders in the field, selected both for their scholarship

and their ability to make often complex ideas accessible to a diverse audience.

It will always be possible to debate the list of key thinkers that are represented in this series. Some may question the inclusion of certain thinkers; some may disagree with the exclusion of others. That is inevitably going to be the case. There is no suggestion that the list of thinkers represented within the *Bloomsbury Library of Educational Thought* is in any way definitive. What is incontestable, however, is that these thinkers have fascinating ideas about education, and that taken together, the *Library* can act as a powerful source of information and inspiration for those committed to the study of education.

Richard Bailey  
Roehampton University, London

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## Foreword

As Vivian Boland points out in his Introduction, a recent companion to educational philosophy deals with no medieval thinkers between St Augustine and the Renaissance. Indeed, Nel Noddings, in her textbook *Philosophy of Education* (Westview Press, 2005, second edition) jumps from Aristotle to Rousseau, and then devotes a whole chapter to John Dewey (no one else getting that honour), as though nothing of significance had been written for 2000 years. The importance of Vivian Boland's book, therefore, lies not only in its detailed and scholarly exposition of Thomas Aquinas as a philosopher of education, but also in its demonstration of the foolishness of this historical gap. Aquinas's philosophical exploration was systematic and included much about the aims of education, the nature of teaching, and the structure and content of the curriculum, from which we might learn. Indeed, Aquinas achieved this with a thoroughness and an analytic clarity which few, before or after, could equal. The recent and growing interest in Aquinas as a philosopher has not been paralleled by a specific interest in him as a philosopher of education. Thanks to Vivian Boland, that can no longer be the case.

Aquinas saw himself as a teacher first and foremost. Therefore, throughout his many philosophical and theological works, as Boland shows, he constantly returned to questions of teaching – to pedagogy, to what should be taught, and to the overall aims of teaching this knowledge and these virtues in this particular way.

First, with regard to pedagogy, Boland points to the importance attached to method and to the care which medieval philosophers gave to thinking about the most suitable approach to teaching: the *lectio* (careful reading of a significant text), followed by the *disputatio* (identification of issues about which there is not common agreement and which need to be systematically analysed and argued over),

followed finally by the *repetitio* (articulation of the conclusion reached). This approach required a detailed and unambiguous statement of one's 'thesis' or position, the clarification of key terms, the balanced assessment of opposing views, the logical development of the argument through major and minor premises, the clear statement of conclusion, and, finally, the setting out of the corollaries or the consequences of the conclusion reached. It is characteristic of much educational thinking, and indeed of the philosophical reflections upon it, that it lacks precisely this clarity of exposition, this balanced account of competing positions, and this ruthlessly logical deduction of consequences.

Second, with regard to what should be taught, Boland points to the intrinsic connection, developed in Aquinas, between educating someone and introducing him or her not only to the different kinds of knowledge, but also to the virtues or dispositions which constitute the good life and human flourishing. It is by no means rare for philosophers of education to see the aims of education to lie in the initiation into different forms of knowledge, but without a subtle analysis of these different forms or of their logical hierarchy. Nor is it rare for such philosophers to posit the acquisition of knowledge as the aim of education to the exclusion of the pursuit of virtue. For Aquinas, the acquisition of knowledge or the pursuit of virtue must be understood within a deeper ethical framework which analyses what is distinctively human development and flourishing. Even if the readers do not accept all the theological background to such an ethical framework, they should be persuaded of the importance of the questions themselves and of the need to see how the pursuit of knowledge and the formation of virtue are to be integrated in the education of all young people. As Boland so aptly shows, Aquinas demonstrates that you cannot get very far in teaching without raising the most fundamental questions in philosophy – concerning the ultimate values worth pursuing, the nature of knowledge and truth, the basis in experience of one's thinking and in the natural inclinations to make sense of that experience, and the relation of individual learning both to the traditions inherited and to future societal well-being.

Professor Richard Pring  
University of Oxford

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## Introduction

Blackwell's *Companion to the Philosophy of Education* (Curren, 2003) jumps from Augustine of Hippo to the Renaissance and discusses no thinker of the medieval period. This particular thousand-year leap, from Augustine's death in 428 to the first decades of the fifteenth century, is encountered in other areas of thought too. Until recently in many places, this was a standard leap to make in the history of philosophy, as if no wisdom of enduring importance is to be found in those thousand years. Lately, however, there has been a revival of interest in medieval philosophy, even in places where one would not have expected it (McGrade, 2003: 1–9).

It is true that Augustine remained the great teacher of the West all through the Middle Ages. Yet it seems odd that Blackwell's *Companion* should omit treatment of Thomas Aquinas at least, as well as of developments in the contexts and methods of learning and teaching which characterized the monastic culture, and then the scholastic culture, of the centuries between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. There is no doubt, for example, that the Middle Ages made important and enduring contributions to pedagogical method. The 'disputed question' that emerged in the late twelfth century as a key teaching method was used in the universities of Europe, across many disciplines, for hundreds of years (Lawn, 1993). The work of translating familiar and unknown texts from the ancient world gathered speed from the end of the eleventh century to become a major factor in stimulating scholarship in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Most importantly for contemporary debates about education, the university is a medieval institution, growing out of the monastic and other religious communities that flourished, in the Carolingian Empire in particular, but in all parts of Europe wherever the civilizing effects of the Rule of St Benedict were experienced (Dales,

1995a; Drijvers and MacDonald, 1995; Leclercq, 1978). Nor should the Islamic contribution to the origins of Western education be overlooked (Nakosteen, 1964). Medieval Islamic thinkers, as we shall see, were alongside their Christian and Jewish counterparts in the questions about teaching and learning that they faced and in the solutions that they proposed.

To judge from the number of books and articles being published about his thought, Thomas Aquinas remains a significant voice in contemporary discussions of a wide range of philosophical, psychological, ethical, and theological issues. Anthony Kenny comments as follows about philosophy after Wittgenstein:

One side effect of Wittgenstein's liberation of philosophy from Cartesian prejudices is that it enables those who accept it to give a more sympathetic welcome to the writings of pre-Cartesian philosophers, and in particular to medieval scholastics.

(Kenny, 1984: xi)

Besides Aquinas, the work of, for example, Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Abelard continues to engage philosophers directly in thinking about language, for instance, or faith and reason, or intention in moral reasoning. Thinkers such as William of Conches in the twelfth century and Robert Grosseteste in the thirteenth century are early practitioners of methods of research and analysis that were to develop into modern scientific practice.

Discontent with some aspects of what is called 'modernity' has opened the door for fresh appropriations of the work of thinkers from cultures and periods that until recently would have been considered 'of purely historical interest'. Although self-doubt is not universal in modernity, and post-modernity is notoriously difficult to define, a lot of work is currently underway on the premise that non-modern or pre-modern ways of thinking need to be revisited. Fundamentally, the need is for fresh illumination about knowledge, truth, and meaning, and the relevance of this trend to thinking about education is immediately obvious. So, for example, the 'Thomism' of Alasdair MacIntyre is a recognized participant in contemporary discussions of education, particularly in North America.

There are good reasons, then, for looking again at Thomas Aquinas from the perspective of his understanding of learning and teaching. He spent his life as a student and teacher, and he explicitly raised the question of what is involved in teaching. In fact, with a characteristic penchant for asking the most radical question immediately, he wonders whether it is even right to say that one person can teach another. He is interested not only in the psychological and epistemological considerations that might be offered in response to this question, but also, and primarily, in the metaphysical and theological depth that an adequate answer ought to contain.

The argument of this book is in four parts. Part 1 tells the story of Aquinas's life and work by discussing where he learned and where he taught, how he learned, and how he taught. The most significant choices he made were to join the Dominicans and to collaborate with Albert the Great in rethinking Christian theology using the philosophy of Aristotle, and these choices are evaluated.

Part 2 presents a critical exposition of Aquinas's thought about teaching and learning. It begins by noting the contexts in which he talks about teaching and then examines the texts in which he does so. (Recent accounts of the texts on teaching tend to ignore their context: see for example Davies, 2002a and Quinn, 2001.) A number of key issues arise from this examination that need to be explored in greater detail. So, his understanding of knowledge and truth, and of reason and faith, are considered. A further way in which we learn about his approach to education is from the pedagogical concern that persists through the course of his writing career. The roots of this concern are identified in his scholasticism, his Aristotelianism, and his Christianity. He learns about education from the academic and scholastic world to which he belongs, from newly available texts of Aristotle, and from what the Christian tradition, in particular the Bible, has to say about teaching. Not surprisingly, he regards Jesus of Nazareth as 'the most excellent of teachers'.

In exploring what Aquinas has to say about the theory and practice of learning and teaching, we will begin to appreciate the theological and philosophical foundations of that theory and practice. Before attending to those foundations at greater length (in Part 4), Part 3 considers the reception and influence of his work. This is a vast topic



and all that can be offered here is a sketch of the history of Thomism. Because his works have been received and his doctrine interpreted and applied according to the needs and concerns of many times and places, this sketch is inevitably brisk and superficial. Emphasis is given to the importance of his thought for twentieth-century theology and to the work of two Thomists, Sertillanges and Maritain, who sought to apply his ideas about education to modern conditions. Before proceeding to the final part, some difficulties associated with contemporary interpretations and uses of Aquinas's thought are discussed.

Part 4 returns to his thought about education, this time examining more radically the philosophical and theological bases for what has already been presented and reviewed in Part 2. Central to the argument here is that Aquinas's approach is rooted in theological convictions and is philosophically coherent. Three themes in his thought are considered in view of their importance for grounding his understanding of teaching and learning as well as their prominence in contemporary engagement with his thought, whether among philosophers or theologians. His account of teaching cannot be understood without some appreciation of what he says about creation, and specifically of what he says about the human creature.

His preference for a virtue-centered approach in moral philosophy and moral theology will be seen to follow from what he says about creation and anthropology, and this is the third theme considered in Part 4. The notion of virtue itself, as he understands it, is pedagogical and educational, implying a developmental and social understanding of the human being. All virtue is relevant in some way to learning and teaching, and there are particular virtues specifically concerned with those activities. Aquinas believes natural virtue is given a new finality by the Christian reality, the search for fulfillment being directed towards the goal of knowing and loving God. This faith illuminates everything he says about learning and teaching. His deepest thought about these activities can then be summarized in a statement of which the significance will hopefully become clear as the argument unfolds: if creation means teaching, redemption means learning.

I wish to thank the School of Theology, Philosophy and History at St Mary's University College, Twickenham, for granting me a

sabbatical semester in which to work on this book. My confrères at Blackfriars, Oxford also helped by rearranging my teaching responsibilities there. Irim Sarwar, teacher and librarian, made many constructive observations on the text, in its overall structure and in its details. Her incisive comments obliged me to sharpen the argument and to tell the story more clearly. Cecilia Hatt identified other ambiguities, posed further pertinent questions, and relieved me of the task of preparing the index. I am grateful also to other friends, family members, colleagues, and confrères whose interest and encouragement helped in the completion of this work.



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## Part 1

# An Intellectual Biography of Thomas Aquinas

Knowledge of the life and writings of Aquinas is available in a number of standard works. For much of the latter part of the twentieth century, students approaching his thought for the first time could rely on a book by the French Dominican Marie-Dominique Chenu (Chenu, 1950). Since then, the Cambridge medievalist and Renaissance scholar Kenelm Foster edited a translation of early biographies and other contemporary sources (Foster, 1959). James A. Weisheipl produced a major biography to mark the seventh centenary of Aquinas's death in 1974 (Weisheipl, 1974 and 1983). In a translation of some works by Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, Simon Tugwell gave a full account of the chronology of Aquinas's life and writings (Tugwell, 1988: 199–351).

A new point of departure is noticeable lately, clearly indebted to those already mentioned, but likely to remain the best place to begin for the foreseeable future. This is the work of Jean-Pierre Torrell (Torrell, 2002; Royal, 2005), which sets the chronology and content of Aquinas's writings within their historical and cultural background, recovering a stronger sense of Aquinas as, first and foremost, a Christian theologian, and highlighting the distinctive options that gave shape to his thought. Torrell also corrects a tendency to focus on Aquinas's best-known work, the *Summa theologiae*, to the neglect of other parts of his corpus, particularly his commentaries on scripture and on Neoplatonist texts.

Thomas Aquinas was born in 1224 or 1225 and died in 1274. He had become renowned in his lifetime as one of Europe's leading scholars and died on his way to the Council of Lyons to which Pope Gregory X had summoned him. Three biographies of Aquinas appeared soon after his death, by Peter Calo, Bernard Gui, and William of Tocco. The canonization process at Naples gathered first-hand testimonies about his life and character from many friends and acquaintances. According to Simon Tugwell, the most important sources for Aquinas's life are the biography by William of Tocco and the records of the canonization process at Naples (Tugwell, 1988: 291, note 1). Tugwell is not as negative about the reliability of the other two early lives as Torrell seems to be. The strength of William's life is that his two main sources of information were Thomas of San Severino, a nephew of Thomas Aquinas, and Catherine of Morra, a niece who knew her grandmother Theodora, Thomas's mother. The summary chronology followed here is drawn from Torrell (2002: 479–82) and Weisheipl (1974: 351–53), while keeping an eye on Tugwell (1988).

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## Chapter 1

# Learning: Monte Cassino, Naples, Paris, and Cologne

Aquinas was a pupil and student at four different institutions. The first was Monte Cassino, the great Benedictine abbey near where he was born. The Aquino family lands of Roccasecca and Montesangiovanni belonged to the abbey, a fact that is still recorded on the walls of the cloister. Thomas was born in the family castle at Roccasecca, just north of Naples, in 1224 or 1225 (although Tugwell argues for 1226 [1988: 291–92, note 3]). His father was Landulf of Aquino, head of a minor branch of an important land-owning family, and his mother was Theodora Rossi of the Neapolitan Caracciolo family. The ruins of the Aquino castle in which Thomas was born can still be visited at Roccasecca.

From the age of six or so, Thomas went to school at Monte Cassino. As well as being taught how to read and write, he would have followed the established medieval curriculum of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric (the *trivium*), followed by arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (the *quadrivium*). This gave him direct contact with the Benedictine monastic tradition which had been a major force in preserving the learning of the ancient world and consolidating the teaching of the seven liberal arts that together made up the ‘threefold way’ and the ‘fourfold way’ that prepared the mind for philosophy and theology. The story that Thomas was an oblate at the monastery seems sufficiently well supported, intended by his family to become a monk there and even, some day perhaps, the Abbot.

This plan was frustrated by developments in politics and in Thomas’s sense of where his vocation lay. The strategic position of Monte Cassino means it has always been a very desirable location to secure in military campaigns. An ongoing struggle between

the papacy and Emperor Frederick II affected this part of Italy in Thomas's lifetime and his family became caught between the opposing forces. In the spring or summer of 1239, when Thomas was about fourteen, he was removed from the Abbey school and kept at home for some time.

When his schooling began again some months later, it was in Naples, in the 'secularizing' *studium generale* established there by Frederick II. At Monte Cassino, Thomas had been taught by a man called Erasmus who had moved to Naples before him (Torrell, 2002: 22, note 76). There was a lively intellectual atmosphere in Frederick's kingdom in southern Italy of which the budding university in Naples was the centerpiece (Torrell, 2002: 8–9, 10–11; Tugwell, 1988: 203). Here Thomas continued his studies of natural philosophy and was introduced for the first time to the serious study of Aristotle's philosophical writings at the hands of teachers like Master Martin who taught him grammar and logic, and Peter of Ireland who taught him natural philosophy and logic.<sup>1</sup>

In Naples, Thomas came to know more about Aristotle, and he also encountered the Dominicans there. Founded by Dominic Guzman, they were one of the new orders of friars and were approved by the Pope in 1216, the same year in which Francis of Assisi received confirmation for his friars. The Dominicans were known as the 'friars preachers' because their work was to preach and teach, while the Franciscans became known as the 'friars minor' because of their emphasis on poverty and humility.

Thomas's family was not impressed with his desire to join the Dominicans – this band of peripatetic, mendicant friars who wandered from town to town, earning their living by questing for alms in return for preaching and teaching. Rather than living off the cultivated lands and other revenues of the great monastery, Thomas wanted to throw in his lot with what was, effectively, a group of intellectual beggars whose position in the Church was still controversial. In April 1244 (although Tugwell, 1988, argues for a year or two earlier), at the age of nineteen or twenty, Thomas joined them. Shortly afterwards, Thomas's family kidnapped him and subjected him to a year of virtual house arrest in the family castles of Montesangiovanni and Roccasecca. We are told that Thomas spent this time praying,

reading the whole of the Bible, and studying the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (Torrell, 2002: 15).

For reasons that remain unclear, but which must have involved more than mere persistence on Thomas's part, the family relented and he was allowed to return to the Dominicans. Perhaps fearing further changes of mind, the Dominicans acted quickly, and immediately sent him to Paris to continue his studies. It may be that changes in the political fortunes of the Aquino family also encouraged the Dominicans to get Thomas away sooner rather than later.

The Council of Lyons had excommunicated and deposed Frederick II on 17 July 1245 and it appears that the Aquino family may have then switched allegiance to the Pope. Certainly Reginald, the second son of Landulf, and Thomas's older brother, not only changed allegiance, but conspired against Frederick. Reginald was arrested by Frederick's forces, sentenced to death for his betrayal, and executed on Frederick's orders in 1246 (Tugwell, 1988: 208, 303, note 101).

Torrell describes Thomas's decision to join the Dominicans rather than the Benedictines as his most significant involvement in the politics of his time. His choice was not just against his parents' wishes but was also anti-Frederick (Torrell, 2002: 11–15, 21–23; Tugwell, 1988: 298, note 60, 299, note 65).

Thomas was born into a Lombard family that had moved south some decades earlier and whose land lay across the borders of papal- and imperial-controlled Italy. Part of the wider dispute between the papacy and Frederick II – 'Antichrist' as far as Pope Innocent IV was concerned – was the tussle for control of Monte Cassino. Thomas's father was initially an ally of Frederick II so that the family's fortunes were linked with the shifting fortunes of the Emperor. Thomas's time at Monte Cassino was cut short in 1239 because of such a shift in fortune (Torrell, 2002: vii, 2–5). More significantly, this background might help to explain the initial reaction of Thomas's family to his decision to join the Dominicans, who were solidly supportive of the papacy in its struggle with the Emperor. The irony in this is that Frederick's humanism led to the establishment of the *studium generale* in Naples, in which Thomas was introduced to the study of the humanities and philosophy. Perhaps it was a more general shift of allegiance within the family along with Frederick's excommunication



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