

THOMAS AQUINAS
c. 1224/7-1274
Nick Campion

Introduction

Thomas Aquinas was the major Catholic theologian of the thirteenth century. A keen Aristotelian and supporter of the concept that the study of nature was a legitimate means of acquiring knowledge of God's creation, he believed that Aristotle's theory of celestial influence was a valid rationale for astrology which he then set out to explain and defend, relying on such authorities as Augustine, Aristotle and Ptolemy. This was the essence of his work.

1. He agreed with Augustine that astrology as divination should be condemned.
2. It is self-evident, though, that humans are subject to celestial influence.
3. However, the stars and planets cannot influence the soul, which is responsible only to God.

The following notes summarise Aquinas' statements on astrology.

Note that his *Summa Theologia* is on-line but his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, which contains his discussion of Providence (and astrology) is not.

Life

Aristocratic Italian - born in the castle of Roccasecca in the Kingdom of Naples, into the family of the counts of Aquino. He was actually brought up in the famous Benedictine monastery at Monte Casino. At the age of fourteen he enrolled at the university of Naples, a progressive institution and one of the few universities of the time where a full range of Aristotelian studies were on the curriculum. He joined the Dominicans as a friar, probably when he was twenty, studied in Paris, then in Cologne under Albertus Magnus and returned to Paris in 1251/2. He also taught and debated the new Aristotelian physics in some of the greatest centres of European culture - Orvieto, Rome, Viterbo and Naples - and became the most important evangelists for the revolutionary new world view.

Aged 20 (?) became Dominican Friar

1245 became student of Albertus Magnus

Summa Contra Gentiles (= *Against the Errors of the Infidels*): 45 volume study of existing knowledge in the light of the impact of Aristotelianism and in order to reach an accommodation between it and Christianity. It was intended as a text book for missionaries.

It was particularly important to answer Abu Ma'shar, who argued that the stars influenced the intellect. This threatened the Christian view that salvation depended on the individual's ability to make free moral choices.

Reconciled Averroes' separation of Nature/Soul and Reason/Faith with Augustinian Platonism by making Nature/Reason subordinate to Faith/Soul. Reason operated according to its own laws yet within the context provided by Faith.

The importance of Reason was justified by the proposition that the mystery of God is incarnate in everything, including language.

All people have Active Intellect but only a few people develop it through Christian worlds and study (SCG 85).

Promoted study of nature and naturalist philosophy.

Summa Theologiae

Begun in 1266

Followed optimistic theology (e.g. St Francis) which sees material world as positive part of God's creation, reflecting God's perfection., rather than result of the Fall.

'The crowning achievement of medieval systematic theology' (Simon Blackburn, Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (Oxford 1994) p. 22.

His major concern was to defend a 'naturalistic', Aristotelian Christianity in opposition both to sceptics and to the Neoplatonic Christianity derived from Augustine and recently given a boost by the translation of Avicenna's work from Arabic.

In particular he had a problem with the Neoplatonic doctrine of 'occasionalism', which developed in the Islamic Neoplatonists. Essentially this stated that humanity is reduced to the role of spectator in the Platonic *machina-mundi*. All causality is essentially an expression of God's will, which is perfectly acceptable if one is the sort of Christian who inclines to predestination but not if the ability to make moral choices is at the heart of what it is to be human.

Like Aristotle Aquinas believed that it was vital to preserve the notion of humanity's responsibility for its own actions. He rejected the implicitly Platonic notion that the soul and body were separate, with the former somehow trapped in the latter at birth. Instead, he pointed out, in line with the Hermetic doctrine of sympathies, that 'the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one' (Aristotle *De Anima* 412 b 6).

He also argued that, being corporeal beings we must understand ourselves partly through sense experience and that knowing ourselves is an achievement, not a given. Faith may therefore be a valid route to knowledge if one is discussing the Trinity or the Incarnation, but otherwise reason is essential.). There are limits to knowledge though. For example, what God reveals of himself is not himself - therefore can only be known by analogy.

Aquinas' work was condemned at Paris in 1277 but in 1278 the Dominican General Chapter officially imposed his teachings upon the order. His moral cosmology remained an influential component within Catholic thinking on astronomy until the seventeenth century and provided a rationale for astrology which was unavailable within more conservative wings of the Church alternative, which remained loyal to

Augustine. It also provided the main philosophical underpinnings of the Catholic church until the modern period.

Canonised in 1323. Although he had performed no miracles, Pope John XXII said that every answer he gave was a miracle.

Astrology and the Soul

- Attitude to astrology largely taken from Albertus, though independently argued.
- Concedes that mundane predictions often correct, individual ones less so.
- Denied that the stars influenced the intellect, though conceded that this was possible via the body.

Aquinas' solution, set out in *Summa contra Gentiles* chapters 83-88, allowed the stars, as secondary causes in an Aristotelian sense, to rule the physical world, while retaining the Augustinian doctrine that the human will, and hence the chance of salvation, was responsible to God alone. Thus any form of astrology which dealt with the consequences of natural disorder or physical passion was permissible. Medical astrology was acceptable, as was the prediction of war and peace. The election of auspicious astronomical moments to inaugurate new enterprises was deemed unacceptable because it impinged on God's providential right to dictate the outcome of events, as was the use of interrogations, the casting of horoscopes to answer precise questions about the future. Genetheliacal astrology, which dealt with individual lives, was acceptable inasmuch as it dealt with physical existence but not if it denied moral choice.

II. 87.1. God alone brings the human soul into existence.

III.84.10 denies Stoics belief in fatal necessity. (NB says Stoics think human being is like a mirror or a page in a book, passively receiving celestial impressions. See Boethius *Consolation*, BV 5)

III.84.11 Plato said cause of our knowledge to Ideal Forms, Aristotle to 'agent intellect', i.e., body to intangible things.

As the soul is separate to the body, they both agree (he cites Aristotle, *De Anima* III.ix, 432b*) therefore, that influence of celestial bodies can not be the cause of 'our act of understanding'.

* Aristotle argues that the active intellect is separate to the body, but that the rest of soul is tied to body.

III.85.3. 'Every choice and act of will is caused immediately in us by an intelligible apprehension'. Citing Aristotle *De Anima* III, so apparently referring to active intellect. If the celestial bodies do not cause understanding, neither can they cause choice. (see also II.60.1 'man derives his specific nature not from the passive but from the possible intellect.'

SGC.III.85.14.

Quotes Augustine City of God V.6: 'it is not utterly absurd to say that certain influences of the stars are able to produce differences in body only'.

Also quoted St. John of Dasmascus (St. John Damascene) c.675-749.

Very influential Greek theologian from wealthy Christian family in Damascus. He succeeded his father as the chief representative of the Christians to the Caliph. Withdrew from this office c.716 and went to live in a monastery near Jerusalem.

Fount of Wisdom, in three parts. Third part, 'De Fide Orthodoxa' is comprehensive presentation of Patristic teachings on main items of theology.

De fide II, 7 (PG 94, col, 893) was quoted by Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.84: 'different planets establish in us diverse temperaments, habits and dispositions'.

'So, the celestial bodies work indirectly on the good condition of understanding. Thus, just as physicians may judge the goodness of an intellect from the condition of its body, as from a proximate disposition, so also may an astronomer judge from the celestial motions as the remote cause of such dispositions. In this way, then, it is possible that there is some truth in what Ptolemy says in his *Centiloquium*: 'When, at the time of a man's birth, Mercury is in conjunction with Saturn and is itself in a strong condition, it gives inwardly to things the goodness of understanding'.¹

III.84.14

See also Ficino:

If someone were to accuse Saturn and Mars of being harmful by nature, I would not believe it, for they, too, are to be used sometimes, the way doctors must sometimes use poisons, as Ptolemy in his *Centiloquio* says. When the power of Saturn is cautiously taken, it is useful, just as the things doctors use are useful for binding up and holding together. After all, they even use things to stupefy, like opium and mandrake. The same goes for Mars, with euphorbia and hellebore. The Pythagorean maguses seem to have been extremely cautious in this matter, when they would become frightened that their constant philosophizing was the tyranny of Saturn, so they would dress up in white garments, and each day sing songs and make music with Jovial and Apollonian things, and in this way they lived a long time under Saturn.²

However, he consistently argued that the stars do not influence the intellect.

III. 85.2: Indeed the will belongs in the intellectual part of the soul, as is evident from the Philosopher in Book III of *On the Soul*.* So, if celestial bodies cannot directly make an impression on our intellect, as we showed, then neither will they be able to make an impression on the will.

**De Anima* III.9 (432b 6)

¹ *Centiloquium* 38.

² Ficino, *The Book of Life*, trans. Boer, p. 93.

III.85.4: If choices were influenced by the stars they would
 a. be part of the natural world,
 b. be natural
 c. make humans no different to animals.

III.85.9. 'Moreover, celestial bodies make no direct impression, except on bodies'.

III.86. Celestial bodies are not the necessary cause of corporeal effects.

III.86.2: lower things (between stars and humanity) fluctuate

III.86.3: stars are remote causes. The 'proximate' causes of corporeal effects are contingent, not necessary.

III.86.4: celestial bodies follow ordered, predictable motions with little variation but events on earth are infinitely variable, not repetitive.

III.86.6: celestial bodies must act on other bodies, therefore influence fails if there is not an intermediate body to act on.

III.86.7: Albumazar writes in his Introduction that even though celestial bodies don't always apparently act on lower bodies, this is not because of a failure in the system but because the possible action does not always create a cause. Aquinas disagrees.

III.91. Human events traced to higher causes.

III.91.2:

Of course acts of choice and movements of the will are controlled by God. And human intellectual knowledge is ordered by God through the mediation of the angels. Whereas matters pertinent to bodily things, whether they are internal or external, when they come within the use of man, are governed by God by means of the angels and the celestial bodies.

III.92.2: 'man is ordered in regard to his body under the celestial bodies, in regard to his intellect under the angels, and in regard to his will under God

God alone directly works on choices made by man
 Angels can persuade by working on the intellect.
 Celestial bodies can dispose by working on the body.

III.92.3: Celestial bodies leave an 'impression' on us...'cause natural dispositions of our bodies within us'. Can lead to being favoured or ill-favoured by nature

'Whether divination by the stars is unlawful?'

Extracts from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2.95.5

<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/309505.htm>

5 May 2003

Aquinas first considers the arguments that divination by the stars is not unlawful, then attacks them.

Objection 1. It would seem that divination by the stars is not unlawful. It is lawful to foretell effects by observing their causes: thus a physician foretells death from the disposition of the disease. Now the heavenly bodies are the cause of what takes place in the world, according to Dionysius (Div. Nom. iv). Therefore divination by the stars is not unlawful.

Objection 2. Further, human science originates from experiments, according to the [Philosopher](#) (Metaph. i, 1). Now it has been discovered through many experiments that the observation of the stars is a means whereby some future events may be known beforehand. Therefore it would seem not unlawful to make use of this kind of divination.

Objection 3. Further, divination is declared to be unlawful in so far as it is based on a compact made with the demons. But divination by the stars contains nothing of the kind, but merely an observation of God's creatures. Therefore it would seem that this species of divination is not unlawful.

On the contrary, Augustine says (Confess. iv, 3): "Those astrologers whom they call mathematicians, I consulted without scruple; because they seemed to use no sacrifice, nor to pray to any spirit for their divinations which art, however, Christian and true piety rejects and condemns."

I answer that, As stated above (1 and 2), the operation of the demon thrusts itself into those divinations which are based on false and vain opinions, in order that man's mind may become entangled in vanity and falsehood. Now one makes use of a vain and false opinion if, by observing the stars, one desires to foreknow the future that cannot be forecast by their means. Wherefore we must consider what things can be foreknown by observing the stars: and it is evident that those things which happen of necessity can be foreknown by this mean,; even so astrologers forecast a future eclipse.

However, with regard to the foreknowledge of future events acquired by observing the stars there have been various opinions. For some have stated that the stars signify rather than cause the things foretold by means of their observation. **But this is an unreasonable statement: since every corporeal sign is either the effect of that for which it stands** (thus smoke signifies fire whereby it is caused), **or it proceeds from the same cause**, so that by signifying the cause, in consequence it signifies the effect (thus a rainbow is sometimes a sign of fair weather, in so far as its cause is the cause of fair weather). Now it cannot be said that the dispositions and movements of the heavenly bodies are the effect of future events; nor again can they be ascribed to some common higher cause of a corporeal nature, although they are referable to a common higher cause, which is divine providence. on the contrary the appointment of the movements and positions of the heavenly bodies by divine providence is on a different principle from the appointment of the occurrence of future contingencies, because the former are appointed on a principle of necessity, so that they always occur in the same way, whereas

the latter are appointed on a principle of contingency, so that the manner of their occurrence is variable. Consequently it is impossible to acquire foreknowledge of the future from an observation of the stars, except in so far as effects can be foreknown from their causes.

Now two kinds of effects escape the causality of heavenly bodies. On the first place all effects that occur accidentally, whether in human affairs or in the natural order, since, as it is proved in *Metaph. vi* [Ed. Did. v, 3, an accidental being has no cause, least of all a natural cause, such as is the power of a heavenly body, because what occurs accidentally, neither is a "being" properly speaking, nor is "one"--for instance, that an earthquake occur when a stone falls, or that a treasure be discovered when a man digs a grave--for these and like occurrences are not one thing, but are simply several things. Whereas the operation of nature has always some one thing for its term, just as it proceeds from some one principle, which is the form of a natural thing.

In the second place, acts of the free-will, which is the faculty of will and reason, escape the causality of heavenly bodies. For the intellect or reason is not a body, nor the act of a bodily organ, and consequently neither is the will, since it is in the reason, as the [Philosopher](#) shows (*De Anima* iii, 4,9). Now no body can make an impression on an incorporeal body. Wherefore it is impossible for heavenly bodies to make a direct impression on the intellect and will: for this would be to deny the difference between intellect and sense, with which position [Aristotle](#) reproaches (*De Anima* iii, 3) those who held that "such is the will of man, as is the day which the father of men and of gods," i.e. the sun or the heavens, "brings on" [*Odyssey* xviii, 135.

Hence the heavenly bodies cannot be the direct cause of the free-will's operations. Nevertheless they can be a dispositive cause of an inclination to those operations, in so far as they make an impression on the human body, and consequently on the sensitive powers which are acts of bodily organs having an inclination for human acts. Since, however, the sensitive powers obey reason, as the [Philosopher](#) shows (*De Anima* iii, 11; *Ethic. i*, 13), this does not impose any necessity on the free-will, and man is able, by his reason, to act counter to the inclination of the heavenly bodies.

Accordingly if anyone take observation of the stars in order to foreknow casual or fortuitous future events, or to know with certitude future human actions, his conduct is based on a false and vain opinion; and so the operation of the demon introduces itself therein, wherefore it will be a superstitious and unlawful divination. On the other hand if one were to apply the observation of the stars in order to foreknow those future things that are caused by heavenly bodies, for instance, drought or rain and so forth, it will be neither an unlawful nor a superstitious divination.

Wherefore the Reply to the First Objection is evident.

Reply to Objection 2. That astrologers not unfrequently forecast the truth by observing the stars may be explained in two ways. First, because a great number of men follow their bodily passions, so that their actions are for the

most part disposed in accordance with the inclination of the heavenly bodies: while there are few, namely, the wise alone, who moderate these inclinations by their reason. The result is that astrologers in many cases foretell the truth, especially in public occurrences which depend on the multitude. Secondly, because of the interference of the demons. Hence Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. ii, 17): "When astrologers tell the truth, it must be allowed that this is due to an instinct that, unknown to man, lies hidden in his mind. And since this happens through the action of unclean and lying spirits who desire to deceive man for they are permitted to know certain things about temporal affairs." Wherefore he concludes: "Thus a good Christian should beware of astrologers, and of all impious diviners, especially of those who tell the truth, lest his soul become the dupe of the demons and by making a compact of partnership with them enmesh itself in their fellowship."

This suffices for the Reply to the Third Objection.

References

Encyclopaedia Britannica

Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4 Vols., London: Burns, Oates & Co., 1924.

Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4 Vols., trans. Vernon J. Bourke, New York: Image Books 1956.

Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4 Vols., trans. Anton C. Regis, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1975.