Pedagogical Techniques in *Summa Theologiae*

Pingxiu Lin

Department of English, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, 201620, China

2285354722@qq.com

Abstract. The prior purpose of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* is to teach the discipline about God. Based on this pedagogical principle, he replaced the traditional method of instruction which adheres strictly to the Scriptures with a more pragmatic one. Instead of interpreting line-by-line, Thomas devised a novel arrangement of the content and a new approach to the theological questions. This new road is logical, systematic, brief, and clear, displaying rationality between the lines. This work will analyze in what way did Aquinas achieve this pedagogical effect, and what are the particular characteristics of *Summa Theologiae*.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas; *Summa Theologiae*; pedagogy

1   Introduction

It is necessary to look into Thomas' personal life as well as his historical background before the investigation of the writing of *Summa Theologiae*. Born in 1225 in the Aquino castle of Roccasecca, Thomas Aquinas was the youngest son delivered by Donna Theodora, the second wife of his father Landulf. He was sent to the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino as an oblate and received rudimentary monastic training at the age of five. Then he entered the *studium generale* in Naples to study liberal arts and philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, whose teaching was prevailing in Emperor Frederick's court.

During his stay in Naples, Thomas became acquainted with the Dominican Friars and received their habits at about eighteen years old. Under the Order's plan, Thomas traveled north and accompanied Albert the Great to Cologne in 1248. His talent soon was recognized by Albert, who asked Thomas to serve as an apprentice. Thomas must have performed well so that in 1252, Albert recommends him to be sent to Paris to prepare for the mastership in theology. He then spent four years lecturing on *Sentences*, responding to the objections as a bachelor, and working for a master above him.

In 1255-56, Thomas proceeds to the degree of master's in theology when the antimendicant sentiment was the highest. When he was thirty-one, Thomas incepted the regentship, but it was not until 1257 that he was admitted into the consortium of Paris masters. As a regent master, Thomas had to hold public disputations several times throughout the academic year.

Thomas returned to his province of Rome in 1259. He met Urban IV and Thomas

developed greatly in theology while he was glossing continuously on the four Gospels at Urban's request as a friend. The idea of writing a *Summa Theologiae* emerged when he was teaching in Rome at age 40. Thomas was assigned to Rome to open a studium for the province in 1265, and his task was to teach young Dominican's theology. During his teaching, he found that the revised version of his commentary on the *Sentences* is unsuitable for teaching beginners. He found that none of the current works of theology is suitable, because they are too verbose, detailed, unsystematic, and repetitious due to their lack of system. To be fair to these authors, such paucity of the system is partly due to the deficiency of logical order in the Scriptures.

To remedy these defects, Thomas followed 'a strictly logical and scientific order', which is inherited from Aristotle's Posterior Analytics [1]. Additionally, *Summa Theologiae* follows the outline order of the Sentences broadly as well. It took Thomas seven years to work on this masterpiece before his sudden halt in 1273, which occupies a significant position in Catholic theology. The organization of the first part of the work took form on the foundation of De potentia, the work was written between *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*.

Thomas finished the first part of *Summa Theologiae* in 1268. After that, he was called back to Paris 'to confront the controversy variously called Latin Averroism and Heterodox Aristotelianism' [2]. In 1274, Thomas received an order from the Pope, asking him to go to the Second Council of Lyons. It was during this journey that Thomas fell ill and died in the Cistercian abbey at Fossanova.

Thomas lived in a historically crucial time in many aspects. According to Thomas Franklin O'Meara, the time was at the juncture when things are 'moving from the feudal castle-towns of the lesser nobility to the expanding cities...from the monastic centers of trades and schools to the new universities, from theology as Platonic-Christian spiritual reading to technology as faith seeking new understanding through Aristotelian science' [3].

When he was born in 1225, it was only about five years after the death of St. Dominic, and about a year before that of Francis of Assisi. Chronologically, the growth of these friar orders coincided with the growth of Thomas, which explains the possibility of their enlarging influence on young Thomas. Dominican Order, which Thomas joined later, is a group of traveling mendicants, with a particular emphasis on learning and preaching. To perform their missions such as giving sermons, they needed 'an ecclesial militia' that was intellectual and sociable and was able to tackle both celestial and secular matters [3]. That was the reason why the Dominican Order mainly recruited from the educated 'urban middle class' [3].

If observed on a more macroscopic scale, the thirteenth century Europe in which Thomas grew up saw economic growth and social development as well. Cities were emerging and wealth was accumulating. Compared to the fourteenth century when the Black Death were looming, the climate was relatively agreeable, and the booming population made the reclaiming of new land necessary. Business was improved by the transaction with money. Agriculture was facilitated by the progress of planting skills. A middle class composed of upstart merchants was flourishing, and the students from these middle families were no longer satisfied by 'the earlier social fabric of clerical benefices' [3]. The calling for a new type of school which combined sacred and pro-

fane elements later took shape in the form of the University of Naples, which is 'an institution owning a rigor and freedom' with wide-ranged faculties [3]. By the year 1240 when Thomas entered the school, the Neapolitan university already reflected the trend in Frederick's court. where 'Latin, Muslim, and Jewish scholars exchanged ideas' and where Aristotelian and Averroism texts were debated and translated into Latin [3]. Generally, it became a place where controversial ideas were introduced.

As for Aristotle's work, from which Thomas offered 3,500 quotations in his *Summa Theologiae* later on, it was under fierce attack by many Christian scholars due to its heretic Arabian interpretation and the doubt that it would overthrow the theological system built by St. Augustine [3]. The conflict about Aristotle was in full swing at the University of Paris in 1268. The Franciscan John Peckham, for instance, defended the old Augustinian doctrine against the words of Aristotle by saying 'I do disapprove of irreverent innovations in language, introduced...to the detriment of the Fathers...[This is] a doctrine which fills the entire world with wordy quarrels, weakening and destroying...what Augustine teaches' [3]. However, according to Thomas O'Meara, the prevalent Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century 'was not simply a debate over logic or metaphysics but marked a turning point in the history of Christianity and Western civilization' [3]. It not only introduced a new cognitive method of realism and criticism to Faith but also established and enhanced the academic tradition based on logic and reason in the western world.

Apart from Aristotelian tradition, another thing that concerns the cultural background of Thomas's writing is medieval scholasticism. Scholasticism comes from Schola, the Latin word for 'school'. In the context of Medieval, the school is particularly referring to the one that teaches philosophy and theology [4]. Judging from the name, scholasticism is generally a philosophical system that attempts to approach questions logically and reasonably. Its emphasis is on dialectical reasoning to obtain truth and knowledge by deduction and to resolve contradictions. Under this fundamental rule, when addressing a question, 'one launches a thesis or a so-called quaestio, which is often divided into various articles, each representing specific aspects of the central question' [5]. Then 'the tension is resolved in a reply (responsio), and the whole discussion ends with 'a set of detailed answers corresponding both in number and in content to the opening set of argument' [5]. Basically, this is the exact structure used by Thomas in his *Summa Theologiae*, in which several objections precede a contrary opinion, and are followed by a conclusion made by the author.

There is still one more related cultural phenomenon to be introduced. That is the tradition of creating 'order' in one's work. Just as Thomas O'Meara pointed out, to the medieval artist, lawyers, scholars, and architects, Ordo is a desirable masterful arrangement that draws 'a diversity of motifs and media into a harmonious whole' [3]. An organizational spirit emerged from this age, calling for a combination of diversity and unity. The idea 'summa' is not a creation of Thomas alone, but a cultural ideal chased after by generations of people. To narrow down, the 'summa' in works like *Summa Theologiae* 'designates a literary work undertaken with a threefold purpose' [3]. First 'to expound...the whole of a given field of knowledge', then 'to organize...in a synthetic way', and finally 'to realize this aim so that the product be for teaching student' [3]. Such a multiple and comprehensive arrangement not only pro-

vides a clear and general overview for the learner but also opens our understanding of an entire epoch.

2   General features of the *Summa Theologiae*

2.1   Order and system.

To make a clear explanation of such a vast discipline, it is necessary to construct a logical teaching order lest the disciples should lose their way in the massive theological documents. Therefore, instead of expounding while reading the Holy Scriptures from beginning to end, Thomas divided his 'textbook' into two parts: *exitus*, 'the flow of all things from God', and *reditus*, 'the return of all things to God' [1]. That means that everything is 'to be placed, known, and judged according to that supreme causality', i.e., God [6].

Under such an arrangement, he constructs an order which draws diverse topics under a unity, which is God. This universal order is 'where diverse natures...will have a place...which carries intelligibility to the common root of every nature' [6]. Then, Aquinas compiled and rearranged the excerpts from the Holy Scriptures, befitting the segments of these texts into his argumentation. Consequently, this masterpiece builds up its argumentative structure with a clear classification of theological questions which follows 'the order of learning', viz., the sequence of human natural comprehension [7].

In the first three questions of *Summa Theologiae*, for instance, Aquinas starts the journey from God. Firstly, he explains the definition, the subject, and some of the features of the discipline of sacred doctrine. This step is quite reasonable since it is our instinct to understand what a field of study is before we enter into that realm. Secondly, he discusses the existence of God, since to study something, we have to prove its existence first or the study would be in vain. Thirdly, the author deals with the attributes of God. This follows the natural order of inquiry as well, for just as Aquinas himself said, 'once we have ascertained that a given thing exists, we then have to inquire into its mode of being to come to know its real definition' [8].

As has been shown above, such an organization organized the obscure discipline into a logical framework to make it more acceptable to our intelligence. Thomas Aquinas followed the footsteps of his forefather such as Abelard, who completely abandoned 'the historical order' and reduce 'all the elements and events of the structure of salvation to "scientific" categories in order to classify them properly' [6]. Generally, it is a gorgeous attempt to unify massive topics in the field of theology.

2.2   Rational and speculative discussions

While reading *Summa Theologiae*, one could not help but realize how rational it is. For the medieval people who are religious, the function of such rationality is not to overthrow God, but to serve Him. Since the universe is believed to be created by a rational God, the world is a rational product. Therefore, people could utilize their rationality to acquire knowledge of the universe, including that of God.

Apart from its rationality, the discussion has the feature of being speculative. As St. Thomas himself has mentioned, the sacred doctrine is 'more speculative than practical' [8]. In addition, when proposing theological questions, Thomas lays more emphasis on the metaphysical features of the subject, such as its essence and nature. For instance, when demonstrating God's existence, St. Thomas introduces the concept of 'first mover' and 'first cause', suggesting that the universe should be like a machine that needs a prior force to move it [8]. Another example is that the author shows great interest in exploring the *esse*, essence, nature, and substance of God, trying hard to draw an abstract conception of the spiritual subject. Generally speaking, the author assiduously directs the discussion to ascertain the metaphysical features of the subject, viz, God, in a speculative way.

3   Methodology of argumentation and demonstration

3.1   Empirical cognitive pattern

The basic pedagogical methodology of *Summa Theologiae* strictly adheres to the rule of cognition. When something is explained, it is usually expounded in a way that is suitable for ordinary pupils' comprehensive ability. Just as Aquinas himself has stated, 'Sacred Scripture is proposed generally to everyone', so this *Summa* must be designed so that 'even those who are so untutored' can grasp the meaning of the subject [8]. Consequently, since human 'cognition takes its origin from the senses', the demonstration makes use of various empirical phenomena to illustrate the transcendental theory concerning God and spirits [8].

For example, in the renowned testimony of whether God exists, Aquinas utilized the natural element of fire and wood to attest to the principle of movement. He argues that what is hot in actuality — i.e., fire — makes what is hot in potentiality — i.e., a piece of wood — to be hot in actuality. Given that one thing cannot be simultaneously in the state of potentiality as well as in that of actuality (the fire cannot be both in actuality hot and cold), the mover and the moved should be two separate individuals, for one thing in potentiality needs another in actuality to trigger its potentiality into actuality. It can thus be concluded that 'everything that is moved must be moved by another' [8]. That is how the author extracts the conclusion from the perceptible facts of our empirical senses, rendering it suitable for his teaching purpose.

3.2   Classifications and binary

Another convenient method used by Aquinas to develop his argument is by building up a structure of binary classification. Although not all classification in the *Summa Theologiae* is binary, many fall into the pattern of it. The groups of concepts such as 'good' and 'evil', 'potentiality' and 'actuality', 'parts' and 'whole', as well as 'substance' and 'accident' are significant examples of this binary structure [8]. Constructing binary as well as other types of classification is an efficient method to clarify notions and theories.

For instance, as has been mentioned above, Aquinas draws a clear line between

what is in potentiality and what is in actuality. According to this binary classification, potentiality and actuality are not compatible. Hence, the readers comprehend the simple theory that something is either actual or potential. As a result, they could swiftly tell the difference between the two concepts and make a quick distinction. Another example indicates that binary classification could facilitate the determination of the property of the subject. In Question 3, rather than ascertaining the definition of God which is beyond our reach, the author goes through another way to examine what God's mode of being is not. By excluding from God 'certain things that do not befit him', we could gain a faint knowledge of what his mode of being is. In this way, the binary classification system works even to prove what is not known to our reason directly [8].

4   Authority and Greek philosophers

In *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas mainly refers to two types of authorities. The first kind is the Sacred Scriptures, such as *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiasticus*. The second kind is the words of wisdom from the writing of Christian scholars and ancient philosophers, especially from Aristotle's works such as *Metaphysics.* The first type is canonical, and its usage of them is incontrovertible for the Catholic Church. The second type, however, is severely questioned by Christians in Thomas' age.

As has been mentioned, St. Thomas' borrowing from Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, is not welcomed by many scholars in his time. Nevertheless, those borrowings do facilitate the demonstration to a great extent. One of the most significant examples should be the introduction of syllogism. When explaining why God does not have a genus, the author introduces the logical tool of 'middle term' to help the reader how the argument works [8].

Apart from this, *Summa Theologiae* defends itself from the frequent citation from that 'heretical' philosopher, viz, Aristotle. St. Thomas explains in Question 1 Article 8 that these words of wisdom from Aristotle, as well as other philosophers, are obtained through human reason, just like much other knowledge about faith. Since 'natural reason must serve the Faith', and 'the philosophers have been able to discern the truth through natural reason', it is not improper to utilize their words of wisdom for a lofty purpose [8]. However, Aquinas also makes it clear that when arguing from necessity, the citation should only be selected 'from the canonical Scriptures' [8]. For, the Faith of the believers is 'based on the revelation made to the Apostles and Prophets who wrote the canonical books' [8].

5   Conclusion

Summa Theologiae serves a pedagogical purpose. To achieve this purpose, St. Thomas follows the tradition of scholasticism and organized the content logically and systematically. Besides, the author deliberately supports the argumentation with empirical phenomena and set up binary classifications to clarify various concepts, which is in line with the rule of cognition. Most of the theological questions are speculative

and are developed rationally. When seeking authority, St. Thomas refers to the canonical Scriptures as well as the works of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, taking advantage of the words of wisdom both from Christians and non-Christians. In sum, with all its innovation in methodology and organization, *Summa Theologiae* is a milestone in the history of the Catholic church as well as the whole western academic tradition.

References

1. Weisheipl, J.A. (1974) Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Work. Garden City, New York.
2. McInerny, Ralph and John O'Callaghan. (2018) Saint Thomas Aquinas. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Theologiae, 1-26. Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/
3. O'Meara, T. F. (1997) Thomas Aquinas, Theologian. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.
4. Monahan, J. J. (1946) Scholasticism and Order. Christian Education 29, no. 4: 268–73.
5. Otten, W. (2001) Medieval Scholasticism: Past, Present, and Future. Nederlands Archief Voor Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History 81, no. 3: 275–89.
6. Chenu, M. D. and Bremner, E. (1952) The Plan of St. Thomas' Summa Theologiae. CrossCurrents 2, no. 2: 67–79.
7. Stevens, Clifford. (2011) The Summa Theologica: Evolution of a Masterpiece. Angelicum 88, no. 1: 39–49.
8. Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Theologiae, 1-26.