

Gerald W. Schlabach

GeraldSchlabach.Net

Tips on reading Thomas Aquinas

As a medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote in a style rather different than we are used to. To understand that style, it helps to think for a moment about what an argument should include to be convincing:

1. It should define the problem.
2. It should note the most important positions that other people have taken on the problem and not hide from their best counter-arguments.
3. If there is precedent for the author's position in others, it should note that.
4. It should however provide its own case and not just lean on the authority of others.
5. It should answer the objections of the counter-arguments.

That, in a nutshell, is what every "article" in Aquinas's Summa Theologica does:

1. The title, in the form of a question, defines the problem.
2. There is a list of the best standard objections against the position that Aquinas will take.
3. There is a very brief rebuttal ("on the contrary" or "but against this") drawn from some previous authoritative figure.
4. There is Aquinas's own argument ("I answer that" or "response:").
5. There are replies to the objections listed in #2 unless Aquinas's main argument has already dealt with them.

The problem for those of us who haven't studied lots of medieval debates is that the list of "objections" often cites people and positions that we have never heard of. It is easy to get bogged down in these and worry that you're

missing something you need, and never get to the heart of the matter. So I pass on a tip that my own professor of Aquinas gave me when I was discouraged. Read Aquinas this way:

1. Read the title and the first sentence of the first objection. That sentence will almost always tell you the exact opposite of Aquinas's position.
2. Then read the "on the contrary" (or "but against") paragraph. This will complement Aquinas's position.
3. Now read Aquinas's main answer (or "response").
4. Also read the replies to see if Aquinas adds anything important. Sometimes his most interesting comments are actually here. But if not don't get bogged down here.
5. If you get interested in one of these replies, look back at the original objection to which it corresponds. It might make more sense now, and provide you with clues and background.