**Why we shouldn’t study Aquinas**

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4. Why we *should* study Aquinas.

1. **Introduction**

I should begin by admitting that in the title of this lecture I have exaggerated a little, for rhetorical purposes.

But only a little.

I do not think that all study of Thomas Aquinas should cease entirely and for ever. But I would be very happy if, in order to right the exaggerated pre-eminence that he has been given, all specialized work and courses focused on Aquinas were suspended and redirected to other medieval thinkers for a period of say twenty or thirty years. In the meanwhile, Aquinas could take his place in surveys, thematic discussions and academic curricula among the many remarkable medieval philosophers, as an equal among equals. To give an example. For the last few years I have been running a course in Cambridge called ‘Philosophy in the Long Middle Ages’, based around changing set texts. Of the 24 that have been set so far, one is by Aquinas – that seems to me about the right proportion.

But why, you ask, this apparent hostility to Aquinas, whom I, like almost everyone, recognize as a wide-ranging, innovative, powerful and important thinker? A phrase I have just used indicates what I see as the difficulty: exaggerated pre-eminence. I shall call this exaggerated pre-eminence of Aquinas’s ‘Aquinocentrism’.

If you work in, or are interested in medieval philosophy, Aquinocentrism is evident almost everywhere. When I am explaining my interests to a stranger, ‘Aquinas’ is the only name of a thinker from the period I can be fairly sure my interlocutors will recognize, and that is the case even if they are professional philosophers. The same must have happened to many of you. Aquinas is not simply better known, more studied, more widely translated, more easily findable on the web than other medieval thinkers; he is *vastly* better known and available than any of the others. In both public and scholarly attention, he dominates a millennium of philosophy, so that, at best, all the remaining philosophers of the time receive only the same amount of attention as he does alone.

Let me give a couple of illustrations from my own experience. There are three other occasions on which, as tonight, I have been asked to give named, annual lectures on medieval philosophy; twice I was free to choose any medieval topic, twice (including this time), the medieval philosophy has been named the ‘Aquinas lecture’, and I have been requested to speak about Aquinas. A few years ago I was asked by Oxford University Press to edit an *Oxford Handbook of Medieval Philosophy.* At the same time, the same publishers had asked a different editor to produce an *Oxford Handbook of Thomas Aquinas.* It is hardly necessary to add that there are no Oxford Handbooks devoted to any other individual medieval philosopher.

This is admittedly anecdotal evidence. Here, then, are some statistics – they are, of course, rough one, but indicative, none the less. If you put ‘Aquinas’ into Cambridge University Library’s wonderful new catalogue of books and articles (‘Idiscover’), choosing 1970 as the start date, there are just under 55,000 entries; for ‘medieval philosophy’ over the same period, there are just over 102,000, and one must bear in mind that almost all the Aquinas entries will also be picked up under ‘medieval philosophy’, so it seems that roughly half of all the medieval philosophical material is devoted to Aquinas or has him as a main subject. Google is a blunter instrument, but a search there suggests a 2 to 3 division between Aquinas and the rest of medieval philosophy.

For a single philosopher to be rather more famous than the others of his century is common: think of Descartes in the seventeenth, or Kant in the eighteenth century. But the only case like that of Aquinocentrism applies to two philosophers, rather than a single one –Plato and Aristotle; and, as I shall explain in a few minutes, there is in their case a justification lacking in Aquinas’s.

There is an obvious lack of equilibirum in Aquinocentrism, a concentration on one person and body of material at the expense of many others. But many would defend the *status quo*. They would argue – or implicitly accept arguments along these lines, even if they have not themselves thought them out – that there are special circumstances that make this exaggerated prominence of a single thinker acceptable or even a better state of affairs than a more balanced approach to medieval philosophy. In the first part of the lecture, I shall consider the responses that can be given to my general objection to Aquinocentrism, that it lacks balance, and how they can be answered. In the second part, I shall put forward two more particular objections to Aquinocentrism, again responding to objections which might be made against them. I shall finish by saying a few words about Aquinas himself.

Before I began, an explanatory note. I am talking about Aquinas from the perspective of the history of philosophy. He might also be studied within the history of theology. The arguments I am going to make might or might not be applicable there – I leave that for its own specialists to decide.

**2. The General Objection to Aquinocentrism as showing lack of balance.**

2.1 The most straightforward defence which historians of philosophy can make of the *status quo* is that of justification. Aquinas is vastly better known and more studied than any other medieval philosopher because he deserves to be. His prominence is not, therefore, as I have contended, exaggerated. There are three versions of this defence.

(2.11) The simplest version of this defence is the Argument from Quality. Aquinas is so much better a philosopher than any other one in the Middle Ages, that his pre-eminence is justified. Given the extent of this pre-eminence, the assertion must be that he is *vastly* better. But, in so far as it makes sense at all to compare philosophers at this high level, it doesn’t even seem to be true that Aquinas is obviously better than his medieval peers. Are his arguments finer, more original and more coherent than those of Scotus, Anselm or Gersonides? Is he a greater innovator than Avicenna or Scotus. Or more comprehensive as a philosopher than Avicenna and Buridan, who, unlike Aquinas, were also great and innovative logicians?

(2.12) The justification argument might, though, be put in a different way, as an Argument from Influence. The historian of philosophy might try to justify Aquinocentrism through something which, unlike elusive and uncertain judgements about absolute quality, can be displayed and measured: his influence and celebrity. The problem is that it was only after what most people think of as the Middle Ages that Aquinas became the best-known and most influential of medieval philosophers. Aquinocentrism can be dated back to the late nineteenth century scholastic revival or at the earliest to the adoption of Thomist ideas at the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century. Aquinas was, indeed, an influential thinker in his own lifetime and immediately afterwards, and he remained a fundamental authority for Dominicans. His canonization in 1323 implied a general recognition of his importance, but by that time Aquinas was a somewhat antiquated figure on the philosophical landscape – a bit like Russell or Wittgenstein today. In the fifteenth century, university thinkers began to look back to the great figures of the past and Aquinas enjoyed a revival as a hero of the *via antiqua*, but in the company of his teacher, Albert, and of Duns Scotus. In terms of influence on medieval philosophy, Aquinas cannot compete with Augustine, and neither of them with Avicenna, who replaced Aristotle as the main ancient authority in mainstream Islamic philosophy, was absorbed by Latin thinkers (including Aquinas himself) and was also read in the Jewish tradition. And, in their turn, neither of these figures can compete for influence with Aristotle or, less directly, Plato – a story of influence so vast, and running back so far – that the Argument from Influence might be used with some success to defend ancient philosophers against the charge of Plato-and-Aristotle-centrism.

(2.131) A more subtle justificatory strategy is the Argument from Canonicity. We study the history of philosophy through a small canon of outstanding philosophers and their works. Those who become engaged with philosophy in a particular period will, of course, look at all sorts of authors outside the canon, but for the purposes of presenting the history of philosophy to students and the wider public, attention should be focused on the canon, with what lies outside it reduced to the status of background, and this will mean special – but necessary, rather than exaggerated – pre-eminence for the canonical authors. For medieval philosophy, the argument continues, there is just one slot, and Aquinas is best suited to fill it.

Why is Aquinas best suited? The arguer might appeal to the Argument from Quality, pointing out that it is sufficient, now, just to show that Aquinas is better than any other medieval philosopher, not that he is vastly better, perhaps also alluding to his considerable influence. Most probably an Argument from Convenience would also be used. We must start, it will be said, from the circumstances as they are now, even if we might have wished that they were otherwise. For all sorts of reasons, many of which would seem strange to philosophers today, Aquinas is far better known than other medieval thinkers. As a result, there are more translations, studies and introductions to his work available, and more philosophers who are at least a little familiar with his thought and able to teach it. We can, therefore, agree that Aquinas is just one of, say, ten great medieval philosophers, but still be completely justified in choosing him to fill the medieval slot in the canon.

(2.132) Although – or perhaps because – the Argument from Canonicity, thus reinforced with an Argument from Convenience, is the most plausible version of the Argument from Justification, and probably represents the sort of thinking that underlies the tacit acceptance by most historians of philosophy of the *status quo*, it is the one against which I want to object most strongly, for three different reasons.

(2.1321) First, the Argument from Canonicity supports Aquinocentrism only if we accept that there should be just one medieval slot in the canon. What could be more unreasonable? Medieval philosophy stretches for at least millennium, according to accepted views. If there is to be one slot for the years 500 to 1500, then there should be just one slot for Ancient Philosophy, from 500 BC to 500 AD, and half a slot for modern and contemporary philosophy, from 1500 until now. Or, to put it the other way round, if we are willing to acknowledge 10 philosophers after 1500 as canonical, then we should be looking, unless there is good reason to think otherwise, for 20 canonical philosophers from the Middle Ages.

Medievalists who defend the *status quo* may object that I have set up a straw man. *They* do not think that the medieval canon should be confined to a single member. But that is exactly what is implied by their accepting the *status quo.* Better that Aquinas alone is studied, they reply, than that – as is so often, even still perhaps more often than not, the case –the history of philosophy is made to jump from Aristotle to Descartes. I disagree. The view given by Aquinocentrism is so narrow and distorted, as I shall try to explain in the second part of this lecture, that those who learn about what is supposed to be medieval philosophy through this lens end up worse off intellectually than they began, having acquired in place of ignorance a set of false beliefs.

(2.1322) In any case, although history of philosophy is usually taught and studied according to a canon, I reject this procedure as bad historical method. I accept that there are criteria for tentatively judging some philosophers as outstanding, others as second-rate or third-rate, and that it is right, as whole, to give more attention to the outstanding philosophers. But certainly not to let them *monopolize* our interest. Not only can the outstanding philosophers be properly understood except within an intellectual context that includes their less talented colleagues. Also, there is much of interest for the history of philosophy in these also-runs. Indeed, in my view, the proper subject for historians of philosophy is the whole philosophical culture of an epoch, and an unoriginal, intellectually mediocre text that was widely read may well, from this point of view, deserve more attention than a little-read masterpiece.

(2.1323) I would also like to object to the use of an Argument from Convenience to back up the Argument from Canonicity. Arguments from Convenience are inappropriate where one’s main aim or activity is in question. Suppose I am trying to finish this paper – I have been writing all day and I am hungry. It would be perfectly reasonable for me, for the sake of convenience, to go to the supermarket next door and buy a sandwich. But if I have invited some gastronomic friends round to enjoy a good dinner, then it would be shameful to present them with ready-prepared sandwiches, pleading convenience as my excuse. If we are talking about people who are working professionally, for all or some of their time, as historians of medieval philosophy, then they should not vitiate their central aim, the increase and disseminations of knowledge in that field, out of considerations of convenience. If the necessary translations do not exist, they should make them (but also stir their students into learning the languages); if the studies are lacking, they should undertake them.

(2.2) I come now to the second main defence that can be made to the general objection about the obvious imbalance in Aquinocentrism. The first defence, which I have tried to show is inadequate, that of justification, is one which, as I have said, I envisage as made by historians of philosophy. Philosophers themselves are able to mount a different, and in some ways stronger, defence: that of irrelevance.

(2.21) From our point of view, they can say, the imbalance in Aquinocentrism may or may not be justified, but it – and indeed any question of balance with regard to philosophy in the past – is irrelevant. For us, past philosophers are useful just in so far as they provide us with ideas and arguments for our own philosophizing. Where the texts come from – from how many authors, which original languages, which centuries – does not concern us.

(2.211) One way of rejecting this defence is complex and controversial, but I should mention it, since it raises important issues, which I shall also be touching on later. The approach to the philosophy of the past I have just described, a simplification perhaps but not a misrepresentation of that followed by many of my colleagues in Cambridge and other strongly analytical departments, is completely misguided. On the one hand, whilst reading historical philosophers might, in some subtle way, be a stimulus to philosophical thinking – in the same way as listening to music, reading novels or (think of Wittgenstein) detective stories, there are very few cases where arguments found in past texts add something to a contemporary debate that could not have been found more easily elsewhere. Many contemporary philosophers are, indeed, fond of referring briefly to past philosophers (though not usually medieval one, even Aquinas), but this is because these historical texts provide convenient points of reference rather than real sources for their discussions. On the other hand, today’s philosophers can gain from studying philosophy of the past, not because it gives them individual arguments or positions, but because it is the only way to understand the nature of their discipline. To achieve this end, however, they need to study the philosophical past in a genuinely historical way.

(2.212) The other way of rejecting the philosophers’ Irrelevance Defence is much simpler. We can say to the contemporary philosophers: ‘If you are trying to find useful material for your own purposes in texts from the past – suppose we accept that as a sensible aim – then you should care a great deal if there is an exaggerated emphasis on the work of one figure at the expense of other philosophers from his era, since you are most likely to benefit from exposure to a wide range of different arguments and views.’

(2.22) The philosophers can, however, bolster the Irrelevance Defence against this objection by using an Argument from Convenience. Such an argument is appropriate for them in this context, because their main activity and aim is not to study medieval philosophy: they hope to use it, incidentally, for their own purposes, and so considerations of convenience are proper. They can, therefore, meet our reply in this way: ‘We should be delighted if there were a wider range of medieval material translated and studied than at present. But we need to get on with our own work, and so we shall use what is easily available to us. We must reserve our mental energy for solving pressing philosophical problems, rather than use it up worrying about, what do you call it? – Aquinocentrism.’

(2.23) I have to concede this point. I have no reply to philosophers if they argue in this way. But why, as historians of philosophy, should we be concerned? In analytic departments, at least, the criteria used to judge professional excellence and the facts of institutional power tend to make historians of philosophy consider themselves as ancillaries to the real philosophers, and to see their function as serving them. Yet their subject and that of the so-called real philosophers stand side by side. They are each academic disciplines, no more, no less. Each can, and indeed needs to, help the other. But each needs to establish its methods and priorities in relation to its own aims. Even if the philosophers can successfully make the Irrelevance Defence for Aquinocentrism, their view of matters is itself all but irrelevant.

**3. Particular Objections to Aquinocentrism**

I come now to the second part of my talk. I have contended so far that there is a general objection to Aquinocentrism, and that none of the defences made to it succeeds. I call the objection general because it is made simply on grounds of imbalance, and applies wherever a philosopher is given exaggerated prominence. As I have indicated already, the accusation of Plato-and-Aristotle-centrism might be made about the way Ancient Philosophy is usually studied and presented. If so, it is open to the same general objection as that to Aquinocentrism, although, as mentioned, the Argument from Influence works as a better defence in this case.

By contrast, I now want to consider the particular objections to Aquinocentrism, that is to say, the particular sorts of harm done by it to the particular, though very large, area of medieval philosophy. The first objection concerns narrowness, the second religion and the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. I shall consider them in turn.

(3.1) From the label I have given it, you might suspect that the Narrowness Objection is a replay of the general objection from lack of balance. But it isn’t. Medieval philosophy is wide in a variety of ways only partly shared by other periods of philosophy. There is time here only to point you to these types of width, but if you would like a fuller guide, and you are not insulted by my referring you to a popularizing book, then look at my recent *Medieval Philosophy. A very short introduction*, which should have been subtitled ‘the width of medieval philosophy’.

(3.11) The width of medieval philosophy, then, is first of all geographical and cultural. There are four main branches of it: Greek philosophy, written by Christians in the Eastern Roman Empire, called usually Byzantium; Latin philosophy (and some work in Germanic and Romance vernaculars) written by Christians throughout western Europe; Arabic philosophy, written by Moslems and some Christians, in the lands of Islam which stretched to Spain in the West and to present-day Uzbekistan in the East; and Jewish philosophy, belonging to geographically, linguistically and intellectually to the Arabic world until 1200, and after then written in Hebrew in Southern Europe. They are all traditions of Western philosophy, going back to Plato and Aristotle indirectly, and directly to the Greek schools of later antiquity. They are connected, not just in their origins but in their development, through translation movements from Greek into Latin; Arabic into Latin and Hebrew; Latin into Greek and Hebrew.

The width of medieval philosophy is, secondly, chronological. I argue for a Long Middle Ages in philosophy, beginning c. 200 and ending c. 1700, but, even if we follow the accepted understanding, as I have been doing here, it is – as I have already emphasized – an era of 1000 years.

Thirdly, even in the Latin tradition alone, philosophy was done in different types of institutions (courts, schools, monasteries, universities), and within the universities in faculties of arts, medicine, even law, as well as theology.

Fourthly, philosophy was done in almost every sort of possible genre. There were the special inventions of the period, such as the Avicennian encyclopaedia, the scholastic *quaestio* and the sophism; there were also many varieties of commentary; treatises, dialogues, invectives, philosophical novels, epics and allegories.

(3.12) Aquinocentrism hides that width and so obscures the special character of medieval philosophy – indeed, it makes it seem as if had the very opposite character. On its own, however, Aquinocentrism, as I have so far described, could have had this effect only to a limited extent. Roughly half of the activity in medieval philosophy, I have suggested, is directed towards Aquinas. Suppose that the other half were spread evenly over the whole width of medieval philosophy, in the four aspects just mentioned. In that case, although there would certainly be an imbalance in the presentation as a whole, medieval philosophy would not be deprived of its especial width. The damage is done because Aquinocentrism is combined with what might be called ‘the Aquinocentric perspective’. The rest of medieval philosophy is seen in relation to Aquinas, with the thinkers closest to him in time, place, language, religion and professional environment in the foreground, and those most distant out of the picture-frame. The focus, then, is primarily on the other Christian, Latin theologians in Aquinas’s lifetime and the fifty years afterwards: his teacher, Albert the Great; his Franciscan colleague and antagonist, Bonaventure; and, above all, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, and their contemporaries at Paris and Oxford; with a little room for predecessors such as Anselm and Abelard and a gaze back to Christian antiquity to look at Augustine and Boethius.

(3.13) True, historians of philosophy in the last two or three decades have been trying to escape from the Aquinocentric perspective. Karl Flasch, with his emphasis on the early and the late Latin Middle Ages and Alain de Libera, with his presentation of all four traditions of medieval philosophy, were the pioneers, and some Anglophone writers are now following them. But the Aquinocentric perspective, with its drastic narrowing of the range of medieval philosophy, is still dominant. The best illustration is provided by a couple of recent collective volumes, with contributions from most of the leading scholars in the field, where the editors deliberately and explicitly set out to cover the whole range of medieval philosophy – the *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy* (2009), edited by Robert Pasnau, and the *Oxford Handbook of Medieval Philosophy* (2012), which I edited myself. For the topic-based chapters, which make up almost all of the *Cambridge History* and two thirds of the *Oxford Handbook,* contributors were asked to range as widely chronologically and geographically as they could. Yet, a few authors (most of them Arabic specialists) apart, the topical chapters concentrate strongly Latin philosophy in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, with an emphasis on the theologians.

(3.14) But is Aquinocentrism to blame for what I am calling the Aquinocentric perspective? I agree that there are also other reasons for it. For example, Latin has, until recently, been much better known by European medievalists than Arabic, Hebrew or even Greek, and study of the thirteenth and fourteenth century mendicant theologians has been supported by the editorial work of their orders. But, looking at the various *Histories* of medieval philosophy written in the twentieth century and at the beginning of our own, it is clear how an arrangement which placed at the summit of medieval philosophy, and viewed other thinkers as his precursors, or as successors and instigators of a decline, became an arrangement where, although Aquinas is no longer envisaged teleologically in this way, the range and focus is the same. It is also striking that *Histories* of medieval philosophy written before the later nineteenth-century Aquinas revival tended to be far wider-ranging than those produced after it.

(3.141) Let me anticipate an obvious objection to my point about the Aquinocentric perspective. I say that Aquinocentrism has stopped the Arabic and Jewish traditions from receiving due attention. But, as everyone knows, Aquinas was an enthusiastic, respectful though often critical reader of the mass of material translated from Arabic by Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes, and Jewish ones, in particular Solomon ibn Gabirol (Avencebrol) and Maimonides. It is precisely because Aquinas used these thinkers that their names and some of their ideas have become known within the history of Western Philosophy. True.

(3.142) But the problem is that these traditions have been presented and studied just in so far as Aquinas especially and other Latin philosophers envisaged and used them, rather than being seen as different parallel traditions, to be studied in their own right and according to their own priorities. That is to say, the fate of Arabic and Jewish philosophy, so far from being an argument against the malign influence of the Aquinocentric perspective, is possibly the worst example of it. Until recently among specialists, and still among everyone but, Arabic philosophy has been thought to come to an end with Averroes, the latest of Aquinas’s Arabic sources, whereas in fact this tradition continues through to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond. Again, the Jewish philosophy being written in Hebrew in Aquinas’s own time and for over three centuries afterwards has been omitted from the mainstream history of medieval thought.

(3.2) I come, now, to my final objection, about religion and the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. Of all my points, it is the most likely to be misunderstood, and so I would like to begin by explaining an objection about religion which I do *not* wish to make. It goes as follows: -

(3.21) Any of you whose interests are in the same area as mine are probably familiar with a conversation that begins when someone asks you what you work on, and you reply ‘Medieval Philosophy’, and your interlocutor responds: ‘How interesting’ – in a rather unconvinced tone, and then goes on: ‘I didn’t realize that there was any medieval *philosophy.* I thought that then it was all religion.’ (With philosopher colleagues, the language of such encounters is more sophisticated, but the gist is much the same). There is some reason to blame Aquinocentrism and the Aquinocentric perspective for this popular perception. Aquinas was in every sense a religious figure: a theologian, a priest, someone who had vowed himself to the Dominican religious life, not to mention that for nearly seven centuries he has been recognized as a saint. Suppose that, in place of the list with Aquinas at its head, and Anselm, Scotus and Ockham following on, in a radical break with Aquinocentrism the main medieval philosophers taught and studied were Boethius, al-Farabi, Abelard, Averroes, Siger of Brabant and Buridan, medieval philosophy would be much less closely associated with religion in the public perception.

This is, I stress, *not* a point I want to make. Clumsy though people’s way of expressing it may be, the association of medieval philosophy with religion is correct. Christianity was indeed central for philosophers who were Christians, Islam for those who were Muslims, Judaism for the ones who were Jewish. And religion, I should add, was no less important for the philosophers on my alternative to those on the Aquinocentric one. Where the popular understanding is incorrect is in making the connection with religion a distinguishing feature of medieval philosophy. Most philosophy, in almost every period and place, has been intimately tied to religion. The philosophers today who pursue their subject without connection – not even the connection of opposition – with religion are exceptional within the story of their discipline, and it is by no means clear that this exception will be an enduring one.

(3.22) The point I *do* want to make is not about the religion and medieval philosophy, but about the religion of those who study it. The special stimulus for Aquinocentrism was came, as I have already mentioned, in the later nineteenth century, with Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni patris* of 1879. It is a call from the Pope to Catholics to revive and pursue a type of philosophy which will support the teaching of the Church rather than, as much philosophy of the time tended to do, go against it. This association between Aquinas and philosophers who are Catholics, which because of Aquinocentrism is transferred to the whole of medieval philosophy, is one of the two main lasting effects of *Aeterni patris.* So much is evident as soon as one looks at the religious affiliations, or at least upbringing, of most specialists in the field, or one makes the same enquiry about the students who have chosen to work on it.

But what is wrong with this close association between Catholic faith and studying medieval philosophy a bad thing? First, because at least in appearance, it goes against the ideal of academic neutrality: that scholars’ search for truth should be uninfluenced, not only in their results, but even in their direction, by their particular non-academic beliefs and values. Second, it is one of the main causes of the low esteem of medieval philosophy, especially among other philosophers. Looking at its practitioners, they conclude that it is a sectarian pursuit. If I am not a Catholic, they say, it’s not for me.

I put these last two points rather tentatively, however, because they are about appearances, rather than reality. A specialist in medieval philosophy can be a devout Catholic, a priest and/or a religious, and completely fulfil what I have described as the academic ideal. Medieval philosophy *should* be equally fascinating to anyone who is intellectually curious, of whatever religious affiliation or none.

(3.23) It is the in second of the two lasting effects of *Aeterni patris* that its real poison lies. Pope Leo is not concerned to commend Aquinas to be studied as a great figure in the history of philosophy, to be studied for the sake of historical knowledge, but as the originator of a type of philosophy which, he believes, should be resurrected and used in his own time, to engage with contemporary debates. Although the neoscholasticism inspired by Leo’s encyclical is all but forgotten, the view of the relation between philosophy and its history sanctioned by *Aeterni patris* pervades both studies of Aquinas and, partly as a result of the Aquinocentric perspective, of other medieval philosophers, and it has a direct descendant in the form of Analytic Thomism, by which is meant, not the attempt to use analytic insights the better to understand the thinking of Aquinas and his contemporaries, but to try to find insights into contemporary philosophical problems by reading Aquinas through analytic lenses. In analytic Thomism, and similar approaches to Aquinas and to other medieval philosophers, there is an unholy alliance between papal endorsement, the (understandable but, in my view, deeply culpable) wish of some academics to make their research actively support their faith, and their desire to win their analytical colleagues’ esteem by accepting rather than challenging their distaste for the history of philosophy, and ignorance of it.

(3.231) The result is bad as philosophy. There may well be some continuity in philosophical problems over the ages, but the form and context of those problems changes – in especial, the scientific context has been transformed since the Middle Ages. A philosopher of the past, such as Aquinas, might indeed provide inspiration, and perhaps the occasional appropriate argument (although, as I have said, I think that this rarely happens). But to decide to speak through the voice of a figure long dead, supposedly interpreting his thoughts in a contemporary idiom, is a sure way to stay on the sidelines of today’s philosophical debates.

(3.232) The result is even worse as history. In their efforts to say something relevant to the contemporary debate, such specialists drift from charitably interpreting what, for instance, Aquinas has written, to explaining what he *should* have written, but didn’t, to speculations which have nothing whatever to do with him.

From such studies, we cannot learn any history. Worse, this approach betrays history of philosophy as an autonomous discipline. It suggests that the lavish banquet of philosophy as it has been pursued over the centuries is valuable only for the few crumbs the historians of philosophy can forage from it and bring to the table of today’s practitioners of philosophy.

**4. Why we *should* study Aquinas**

I have spent nearly an hour talking about Aquinocentrism and the Aquinocentric perspective. I want to finish with a few words about Aquinas himself – because it is he who would be the greatest beneficiary of the demise of Aquinocentrism, even if the cost were for him to be put temporarily in purdah. For only once we start to see him, not as the face of medieval philosophy, but as a thinker in a precise, exciting and dangerous historical situation shall we start properly to understand and appreciate him. Aquinas worked at the moment when a mass of pagan Aristotelian material first became fully available. So far from trying to neutralize its threat, as is often said, by synthesizing it with Christian doctrine, he went to extraordinary lengths to embrace it, producing a set of ideas that, so far from being the solid philosophy Pope Leo sought, underwritten by and itself underwriting revelation, came within an ace of condemnation shortly after Aquinas’s death and, on examination, is riven through with tension, uncertainty and unresolved contradictions – like any great philosophy. If we can learn to read Aquinas in this way, in the future I look forward <to>, or even, if it is possible, now, then we certainly *should* be studying him.