Heilewif’s Tale Teacher’s Guide SE

“Thomas Aquinas and Scholasticism”
by Mary Waite
The Rise of the Universities

Heilewif’s Tale is set during the “High Middle Ages” a period roughly from about 1050-1400 AD. By this time, feudalism was well established. People had begun to feel more secure. They also were producing more food due to innovations such as the three crop rotation system (discussed in the novel). In this environment, trade in surplus foodstuffs, as well as other materials, had begun to grow. Political power also slowly began to become centralized, as the more powerful lords increased their revenue from trade and were slowly gaining greater dominance over their vassals.

The Catholic Church was also reaching the height of its power. Church leaders began to build churches or cathedrals that would illustrate the power of the Catholic faith in the western world. They also increased their missionary efforts to non-Christians. These factors created a demand for institutions that could educate the clergymen and the many bureaucrats needed in this expanding European civilization.

Cathedral schools were created alongside many of the churches that dominated every town. As the cathedral schools tried to fulfill the increased demand, they gradually grew into universities. The universities were modeled after the craft guilds that operated alongside them in the towns. In many cases, they received charters from the local bishop. As a result, the universities were free from most secular (non-religious) authority and were self-governing in most matters, either under the control of a number of master teachers (as at the University of Paris) or in some cases, under the control of the students themselves.

While they enjoyed a significant amount of independence from secular authorities, the universities remained closely tied to the Catholic Church. In fact, there was a great deal of competition between two newly established monastic orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, for control of the universities and the growth of academia. As a result, the universities provided intellectual justification for the Church’s authority and tended to support most church ideas rather than challenging them.

1. Why was the demand for education growing?
2. To what extent were the universities independent?

3. To what extent was academic freedom limited?

4. What seemed to be the role of universities with relationship to the teachings of the Catholic Church?
Expansion Of Knowledge

As trade began to expand, western Europeans came in contact with people and ideas formerly unknown to them. Ideas reappeared that had seemed “lost”, particularly the scholarship of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Medieval philosophers were inspired by the ideas of Aristotle and other ancient scholars who were reintroduced to Western Europeans through Latin translations made available by Arab and Jewish scholars.

The ideas of Aristotle were particularly exciting to Western Europeans. However, they were also viewed as somewhat dangerous. After all, Greek and Roman philosophers were pagans. They emphasized gaining knowledge through one’s own reason and observation of nature. The Church told people to accept its teachings based on faith and the authority of Church teachings as revealed in Scripture and through the presence of Jesus on Earth, the Saints and other direct acts of God on earth (through revealed grace). In many cases reason seemed to go against many ideas people accepted on faith.

Medieval philosophers were faced with a dilemma. Should they throw out the work of the classical philosophers as useless in the Christian world and even possibly dangerous, or somehow use reason to prove faith? Scholastics did the latter. Medieval philosophers spent much effort trying to make the work of Aristotle fit with accepted church teachings and bring together faith and reason. Their method became known as Scholasticism.

1. Why did Europeans begin to expand their knowledge during the “High” Middle Ages?

2. What is a pagan? Use a dictionary to help you define pagan.

3. Why do you think Medieval philosophers felt threatened by pagan ideas?
4. What problem did medieval philosophers try to solve?

5. Define: Scholasticism.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What is faith? What does it mean to have faith in something? Explain.

2. What if I said I had faith that my team would win the National Championships? What do I mean? Do I expect anything of my team in return for my faith?

3. What does it mean to have faith in God?
4. What is reason?

5. Why might reason pose a challenge to some ideas people accept on faith?

Scholasticism: St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle

St. Thomas Aquinas is one of the most famous Scholastics. As we've mentioned before, Aquinas was a Catholic priest and much of his thinking centered on his faith. He was also greatly influenced by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Aristotle lived before the Catholic faith even existed. However, Aquinas agreed with how Aristotle thought about things and in many cases even used part of Aristotle's ideas in his own thinking.

As a Catholic priest, Aquinas believed in God, the Trinity (three gods-in-one) and the many other mysteries of his faith. Aquinas knew that there were many questions about his religion that were difficult to answer. Aquinas wanted to provide proof to help support people's faith in God. He looked to Aristotle's writings for help.

Aristotle thought that all humans were animals and, like animals, learned about their world through their senses and instincts. However, for Aristotle, learning by sensing what is around you was the lowest level of understanding and simply the animal way of knowing. It was basic and simple.

Aristotle believed that mankind's ability to reason set humans apart from animals. Aristotle believed that animals just acted on instinct or past experience and weren't able to reason. If something was frightening, they ran. If it was hot, they moved away from it. People, however, could reason and through reason, could understand their world and find truth in the world. Only through using reason, to keep their instincts in check and to search for this truth, could people ever become good.

Aquinas agreed that we learned some information in the same way that animals do, by observing our natural world. However, the information that we gained through our senses was not to be trusted. The world around us was constantly changing, and therefore, Aquinas rationalized, how could we trust the information we received through our senses? Our senses also tempted us into animal-like behavior that was bad for us, eating too much for example. Like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that we couldn't trust our instincts or our own experiences, but instead had to rely on our reason to guide our thinking. Aquinas also believed that we needed the ability to reason to keep our senses in check, to filter out bad information provided us through nature and to help us find truth. Thus, both Aristotle and Aquinas shared the idea that man is a rational animal who must use reason to gain true knowledge.

1. **Define empiricism.** Feel free to use a dictionary to help you.

2. Would Aquinas and Aristotle feel that empiricism was a good or a bad means by which to gain knowledge? Explain.
3. What does it mean to trust your “gut instinct”? Have you ever done this? Try to think of an example and write about it. How did your decision work out in the end?

Would Aquinas agree with your decision? Explain.

3. Have you ever learned from a mistake? Try to think of an example and explain what you learned.

What would Aquinas think of using this kind of experience to guide your actions? Explain.

Read the following scenario, then, answer the following questions
Mark the Martian, is a Martian from Mars (who also happens to be a Christian). One day, he lands his spaceship on a beach somewhere on the east coast of the United States. He sees a group of people circled around something yellow and glowing. He has never seen such a thing before. Curious, Mark the Martian connects his voice box to an American-English translator. He then approaches the first person he sees to ask about the yellow, glowing object.

Mark the Martian, “Young Earthling, what is that great yellow glowing object?”

Random American Male, “It’s a fire!”

Mark the Martian, (plugging this into his memory banks), “Ah hah... fire...”

(looking confused) “What is fire? Wait!!! Let me decide how I can best figure out about this wondrous thing called fire!”

Now, what is the best way for Mark the Martian to learn more about fire?

1. He could ask the Random American Male more about fire. What are the advantages of this method? What are the disadvantages?

2. He could walk up to the fire himself and experience it, even touching it. What are the advantages and drawbacks of this method?
3. What else could he consult about fire? What are the “pros and cons” of this method?

Aquinas and The Key Ideas

Although Aquinas saw much merit in Aristotle’s philosophy, he believed that Aristotle’s ideas were incomplete because Aristotle was not a Christian. Aristotle’s greatest goal had been achieving truth for oneself, in this life. Aristotle believed a person could reach that goal by simply using reason. Aquinas, as a Catholic priest, believed that man had a greater goal, to achieve eternal salvation. Eternal salvation, Aquinas believed, could not be achieved by reason alone. Instead, it could only be achieved by revelation from God.

Aquinas realized that he could use reason to prove many things about God, that God exists, for example. However, there were some things that he could never prove through reason alone, events like Jesus’ resurrection. There were also times when the Bible was not clear. One example of this is slavery. At times, it seemed as though the Bible said slavery was acceptable. Other times, it seemed to say that slavery was wrong. When faced with these difficulties, Aquinas believed that man had to look to a higher truth than reason. The highest truth for Aquinas was that revealed by God, through the Scriptures and Church authority. Only through God’s help can man achieve true happiness, salvation with God.

To try to understand Aquinas’ teachings better, we can use a metaphor. Let’s pretend that knowledge is represented as a mountain. At the top of the mountain (the goal that all people are striving to reach) are Heaven and Eternal Salvation. Aquinas would believe that knowledge gained through the senses and instinct (animal (empirical) knowledge) was at the base of the mountain. To rise higher towards our goal, we must attain knowledge through reason (human (rational) knowledge). But it is only through suspending our reliance on reason and depending on faith and revelation through the Church and Scripture (Godly (revealed) knowledge) that we can attain our ultimate goal of reaching Heaven and eternal salvation.

Heaven and Eternal Salvation

Godly (Revealed) Knowledge

Human (Rational) Knowledge (Aristotle)

Animal (Empirical) Knowledge

Now, answer the following questions based on your understanding of the reading.
1. How much value does St. Thomas Aquinas put on empirical knowledge? Explain your answer.

2. Why is human (rational) knowledge limited?

3. Why did medieval people believe it was important to follow the Church?
Aquinas’ Method

To support his ideas, St. Thomas Aquinas used a form of deductive reasoning. Essentially deductive reasoning takes two premises (previously known statements) and from these statements guarantees that a third statement (conclusion) is true. Aquinas relied on deductive reasoning to find common ground between faith and reason.

This three part deductive method is called a syllogism. A syllogism consists of a major premise, a minor premise and then a conclusion. When answering a question, such as did God create Ben, St. Thomas Aquinas might follow this method:

Did God create Ben?

**Major premise**  God created man.

**Minor premise**  Ben is a man.

**Conclusion**  Therefore, God created Ben.

God is considered the major term; Ben is the minor term; and man is the middle (shared) term.

To understand Aquinas’ line of reasoning more clearly, practice by completing some syllogisms of your own.

1. Major premise- All dogs are good.
   Minor premise- Molly is a dog.
   Conclusion- Molly is ________.

2. Major premise- All foxes are sly.
   Minor premise- Pat is a fox.
   Conclusion- Pat is ____________.

3. Major premise- Little boys like to play ball.
   Minor premise- Lucas is a little boy.
   Conclusion- Lucas likes ________________.

Try now to write your own syllogism.

Major premise-

Minor premise-

Conclusion-
The syllogism is a fairly basic form of deductive reasoning. Aquinas believed that great questions such as, *did God create Ben*, could be answered by applying such techniques.

Of course, syllogisms would only provide correct conclusions if both the major premise and minor premise were true. This was the difficulty. If all dogs really aren’t good, then Molly won’t necessarily be good. If all foxes aren’t sly, then Pat might not be sly. And if God didn’t really create man, then God would not necessarily have created Ben. So how did Aquinas solve this problem? How did Aquinas know that his minor and major premises were true? For example, how would St. Thomas Aquinas determine that God created man or that Ben is a man?

To develop the major premise, *God created man*, Aquinas might start by using reason. In this case, Aquinas saw that there was a divine order to the world. There could only be such an order, Aquinas concluded, if there was a creator (God). Man is part of creation. Therefore, God must have created man.

**Here are the syllogisms:**

There is a divine order to the world.  
Only God can create order.  
Therefore God must have created the world.  
(*World* is the major term  
*God* is minor term  
*Order* is the shared term)

God created the world.  
Man is part of the world creation.  
Therefore, God must have created man.  
(This time *God* is the major term)  
(*Man* is the minor term)  
(*World creation* are the shared terms)

If logic failed, however, to prove that God created the world, Aquinas would simply look to revelation through the Scripture and Church teachings.

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, Aquinas would read,

*God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*  
*Genesis 1:27*

Thus, in developing the major premise, Aquinas used knowledge previously attained through reason or revelation not through observation.
The Minor Premise

But how would Aquinas conclude that Ben was a man? It is unlikely that the Church or revelation had anything to say about Ben’s manness. It is here that Aquinas did allow for observation of the natural world. In trying to conclude that Ben is a man, Aquinas might rely on inductive reasoning which uses many specific facts to form a general conclusion. Ben has many different characteristics of a man (size, weight, facial hair, he only wears pants, etc.). Ben might even vouch for his manness. So, through the power of observation and more importantly, reason, Aquinas could conclude that Ben was a man. Aquinas would likely accept these conclusions unless they conflicted with other information provided by the Church and respected authority (the pope said Ben was a horse - not likely, but just to prove the point).

The Conclusion

In this case, the application of the minor premise (Ben is a man) to the major premise (God created man) forms the conclusion (God created Ben). The minor premise (in this case based on natural observation and reason) is entirely dependent on the major premise (based on reason and external religious authority).

Major premise-God created man.
Minor premise-Ben is a man.
Conclusion-God created Ben.

The Conclusion is only as true as each of the premises. If God really didn’t create man or Ben really is a horse, then the conclusion, God created Ben, would be false. Aquinas’ method assumes that his premises, based largely on Church teachings and revelation, were absolute truth. He did not question the Church or its teachings. Instead, Aquinas created a rational format from which he could answer new questions about his world using the Church’s teachings as the base. His system for understanding the world naturally upheld the teachings of the Catholic Church. In a sense, Aquinas was proving already accepted answers through the use of reason. Conclusions that went counter to the teachings of the Church were automatically rejected.

Consider what you have read about Aquinas. Then, answer the following questions.

1. What is deductive reasoning?

2. What is a premise?
3. How did Aquinas form his premises?

4. What was Aquinas’ overall purpose? Explain, citing evidence to support your arguments.