



AQUINAS' COSMOLOGICAL VISION

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

[SUMMER 2020]

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DESCRIPTION

Read the news, turn on the television, scroll social media, and everywhere you will encounter—by every medium—a singular message: the message that we ought to make the world, the universe, and especially ourselves in our own image. To be sure, there are countless variations of this message; but its essence is the same. The roots lie centuries deep in Western soil—no later than Francis Bacon (1561–1626)—but today, the message is less often questioned, less frequently challenged, and rarely even noticed. Rather, it is taken for granted.

It is a message that views the cosmos and all within it, perhaps most especially ourselves, as raw matter to be shaped and changed according to the dictates of our fantasies and desires. It is a message provenated by minds given over to a **background cosmological nihilism**: a nihilism not of the here and now—not of despairing about purpose in one’s own life—but of the belief that there *is* purpose independent of our own volitional determination. In other words, the cosmological nihilist disbelieves that the order of the universe has any relevance for his or her life, and how it ought to be lived. This nihilism has become the unquestioned rule of the day.



In contrast is the **cosmological vision** of Thomas Aquinas: a vision which sees in the fundamental principles of the universe an ordered whole, giving governance to all its parts, and perfect in itself. In this seminar, we will examine key texts of Aquinas which illustrate this truth.

METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion sessions each week. Each discussion session is structured around a reading from Thomas Aquinas. Participants are expected to have

read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. While this may not always be feasible in a given week, I *strongly* urge everyone to read as much as they can, as closely as they can. Additionally, conversations relevant to the reading and lecture will be had by text throughout the week; participation in these conversations benefits everyone, so this too is strongly encouraged.

READING

The primary texts for this seminar are *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book II, and the *Summa theologiae*, *Prima Pars* (both available online for free, but recommended Latin-English facing texts are also available from the Aquinas Institute [via Amazon](#)). We will be reading selections from each during the eight weeks. Supplemental readings will be suggested and provided via Teams.

LECTURE

Each week there will also be a 20-40 minute audio lecture, posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics, or may use the reading as a launching point for addressing some related issue (perhaps one more general, or perhaps one more specific). The primary (but not sole) purpose of these lectures is to help clarify some of the more difficult concepts and arguments contained within the reading, as well as to raise specific questions that should help structure and guide our discussion sessions.

There *may* be accompanying visual aids (not necessarily) in order to provide some clarity as to textual points, but one *should* be able, in most cases, to simply listen to the lecture (and perhaps consult the visual aids later). This should allow more flexibility: making the lectures suitable accompaniment for a commute, while doing chores, etc.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays at 1:30-2:30pm ET**): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

CONTRIBUTION

It is hoped and expected that each participant in the seminar will provide a contribution: a piece of writing, recorded presentation, or something else, within one month of the seminar's conclusion, as a way of coalescing what has been learned in a demonstrative manner. Topics are suggested, and the instructor is available for discussions and assistance in composing your contribution.

SESSION SCHEDULE

August 1	<p>Governance of the Universe</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 1: Humility in the Pursuit of Wisdom</p> <p>Reading – <i>Expositio in Symbolorum Apostolorum</i>, preface & c.1.</p>
August 8	<p>Vision of Creation</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 2: Aquinas contra Nihilism</p> <p>Reading – <i>Summa contra Gentiles</i> Book II (<i>SCG.II</i>), c.15-24.</p>
August 15	<p>Necessity in Creation</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 3: The Proportionality of Creation</p> <p>Reading – <i>SCG.II</i>, c.25-31.</p>
August 22	<p>Limits of Reason</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 4: The Eternal and the Temporal</p> <p>Reading – <i>SCG.II</i>, c.32-38.</p>
August 29	<p>Distinction of Beings</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 5: Diversity of Beings</p> <p>Reading – <i>SCG.II</i>, c.39-45.</p>
September 5	<p>Intellect in the Cosmos</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 6: The Audience of Creation</p> <p>Reading – <i>SCG.II</i>, c.46-55.</p>
September 12	<p>Goodness and Perfection</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 7: The Constitution of Goodness</p> <p>Reading – <i>ST Ia</i>, q.4-5.</p>
September 19	<p>Perfection and its Relations</p> <p>Recording – Lecture 8: Threefold Relativity of Perfection</p> <p>Reading – <i>ST Ia</i>, q.6, a.3-4 and q.45, a.7-8.</p>