Since time immemorial, eager people have asked the question, What is the good life? This question can be subdivided into three parts. First, what is the nature of the universe in which we live? Second, how should we live? Third, are our hopes limited to this life? These questions lead us, first into a world-view, second into ethics, and third into religion. After sketching an outline of the answers given by Thomas Aquinas on each of those three questions, I will comment briefly, in the fourth part of this essay, on the sort of a person he was, given the context in which he lived, prayed, loved, and thought.

Aquinas’ World-View

What is the nature of the universe in which we live? Since Galileo, this question has been answered in the West through the adoption of the picture of the world supplied by modern physics — a world characterized by the preponderance of uniformly gray, insipid matter. Thomas, by contrast, adopts the picture of the world supplied by Plato, Aristotle, the Neo-Platonists, in their conjectures — a world, cosmos, order, hierarchy in which grades of being can be distinguished from one another. Not Hobbes’ monotonous world of matter in motion, but a multi-dimensional world of coexistent, if unequal, beings, of inanimate objects, plants, animals, humans, angels, God. A world requiring that, not a mere physics, but a meta-physics, be brought to bear upon it.

What is the key to the gradation among beings? Beyond the reasonable expectation, derived from observation, that higher beings will display more activity than lower beings, there is self-knowledge. Among the lessons Thomas gained from Plato and Aristotle were that to understand something is to go beyond developing a mere sense perception of it, and that to judge something is more than to simply perceive and understand it. Indeed, human beings commit themselves
to the truths expressed in statements, only upon gaining insight into those truths and examining that insight as to its veracity. By means of these first and second intellectual operations of understanding and judging, human beings attain to a level of thinking far greater than mere animal knowing, that is, they attain to a certain spirituality of thought without, however, taking leave of their sensory faculties (the five senses, the imagination, etc.).

While there are similarities between us and angels, they differ from us in that they are purely spiritual beings. They do not have to examine sense data or to grope for meaning. Indeed, they do not cease to have insight, being continually engaged in acts of understanding and love. When I first came across what Thomas had written about angels, I felt humbled. Imagine, angels always enjoy the pleasure of understanding and loving! Angels were very important to Thomas, because they served as models of right thinking and perfect loving. They contemplate and adore God. They love God, one another, us. At the close of the twentieth century, angels became tremendously popular in West. A customer at a bookstore who had expressed his interest in books about the spiritual realm was told by an attendant: “Why don’t you try angels, they are huge!”

Intellectual self-knowledge is the key that allows us to open the door to a hierarchical universe comprising several degrees of beings. This is one of the ways in which Thomas brought faith together with reason. Thomas, the man of faith, wanted to understand that which he believed. He found in Plato and Aristotle a theory of knowledge that found the human soul to be nobler than the vegetative and animal souls. As much as they might be tied to the body, the human intellect and heart are not intrinsically conditioned by matter. We can know and love more than material things, which are particular. In particular things we discover intelligibilities that go beyond the datable and the localizable, that transcend time and space. Our activities are spiritual. Thomas frequently used the word mens to designate the human spirit, the mind in the broad sense, including the intelligence and will. Our mind asks questions: How does this make sense? Is this hypothesis correct? Is this form of behavior really worthwhile? Whenever we ask such questions we go beyond sense data as we spontaneously pursue meaning as such, truth for its own sake, and the unrestricted good that measures all our achievements.
In our ability to raise questions, Thomas detects a basic openness to the infinite, a natural desire to see God. This natural desire to understand everything is elevated by grace to a supernatural level. In his theology of faith, Thomas totally respects the capacity of human reason. Having a built-in sense of unlimited truth, our intelligence should naturally recognize its limitations and acknowledge that its very tendency to seek truth comes from an infinite Source. Among the several ways he discusses to a discernment of the existence of God, is the way that begins with the simple acknowledgement of the existence of a highest Perfection, a greatest Truth that is the cause of all finite truths. This way to God is a natural one, based on the knowledge that we have of ourselves. This sense of a First Truth is supernaturally raised to a higher level in and through one’s assent to God’s self-revelation, an assent made possible by the mind’s illumination by Jesus Christ who is Truth incarnate. Faith in that sense is an experience of meaning, light, and participation in the divine light. Far more than it is a religious opinion, a wager, or even an expression of trust in God, faith is the experience of being grounded in Jesus Christ — who not only is trust-worthy, but is faith-worthy, because he authoritatively gives meaning to our lives.

As a result of this intertwining of faith with reason, there is nothing purely philosophical in the works of Thomas. Of course, most of what he writes philosophically can stand on its own in light of the criteria provided by reason. What must be stressed here is the fact that he begins with faith. He experiences the light of faith as liberating reason, as freeing it from the many errors it is likely to fall into. For instance, the definition of God given in the Book of Exodus, “He Who Is,” makes Thomas spell out the distinction between essence and existence. When we consider a thing, we realize the difference between what it is, and the fact that it is. Indeed, we can think of many essences that do not exist, for example the concept of a huge mountain of gold. We understand what a mountain of gold could be, but we nevertheless correctly judge that no mountain of gold has been found on earth.

Again, this difference between understanding and judging underlies the approach to God proposed by Thomas. Prior to our death and resurrection, on the one hand, we shall never understand what God is; on the other hand, we can judge that God is. We can understand what created beings are, because they have a specific, limited nature, whose
properties we can grasp. All finite beings exist in a particular manner. Their existence is particularized and hence limited by that which they are, namely, their essence. Accordingly, there is a real distinction between essence and existence. But in God, the essence is the existence. For God, to be God (essence) is simply to be (existence).

The distinction between essence and existence corresponds to the Aristotelian distinction between potency and act. In many varied ways, the composition of potency and act characterizes every finite being. Potency is a principle of receptivity; it is the capacity to become different by receiving some perfection. Act is the completion of the movement and, hence, perfection. In acquiring definite perfections, called acts, a thing depends on a more perfect thing, on a cause, which brings that perfection about. In Thomas’ view, our universe is a complex organization of causes and effects, dynamically juxtaposed in keeping with a divine ordering. Therefore, unless reason reaches the level at which an ultimate Cause is called for, no movement, no change, no action is explained (first and second ways).

This is the context in which the “five ways” of the Summa Theologiae function. (We find other considerations relating to the existence of God in his writings.) In each case, one examines a certain kind of effect requiring a causal explanation. Reason remains dissatisfied until a First Cause is posited. But no picture-thinking could help us imagine how this First Cause operates. The First Cause remains unknown: we do not know what it is. Yet we know that it is. The fifth way, which considers the fact of purpose in our world, indicates that we may call “Providence” the overall cause of purpose. We can rightly state that Providence is rational and almighty, benevolent and beneficent, caring for both the universe as a whole and each individual in particular. Furthermore, as the creator of time, divine Providence is above time. Strictly speaking, Providence does not foresee, does not decide beforehand what will take place. In his eternity, God always knows and loves the creatures — especially the intelligent ones — to whom he grants the capacity to act freely. God’s causality does not operate on the same level as human action insofar as the former sets the latter in motion. Free human action must, as such, be permanently sustained by the Creator. Good parents similarly make it possible for their toddlers to learn to walk; they hold their toddlers’ hands, while the latter themselves do the walking.
Thomas’ Ethics

From the foregoing, we know that Thomas’ world-view was theological. His theology brought together two inescapably interpenetrating dimensions of the human person, the natural and the supernatural, which nevertheless needed be distinguished. Reason, which sets the philosophic quest in motion, is elevated by faith to become theological reason. Reason in both its speculative and practical functions is thereby “christianized.” Let us consider how this reason operates in Christian ethics. As a scholar who wrote a commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, Thomas adopts as much of Greek knowledge as possible. Thus, his ethics is an ethics of virtue, or excellence. Given the basic aptitude of the human mind, the skills called virtues can be acquired, either by learning in the case of the intellectual virtues, or by practice in the case of the moral virtues. However, for Aquinas, the intellectual and moral virtues are insufficient. He complements them with a third category of virtue, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Their role consists in placing each believer in a personal relationship to God and neighbor. As might as they might start out as pure gifts from God, the theological virtues nonetheless become ours. They serve as the principles of our activities.

In Thomas’s view, divine assistance ought not to be passively and childishly received. Contrary to what Nietzsche thought — and indeed to what Siger of Brabant, Thomas’ contemporary, also thought — the attitudes of the Sermon on the Mount are not the attitudes of fearful and immature people. On the other hand, in contrast to Nietzsche’s philosophy, the ethics propounded by Thomas is not for an elite. Although Aristotle’s ethics is more humane than Nietzsche’s, it is also an ideal for the very few, whereas the ethics of Thomas can work for the many, that is, for all who are willing to receive divine grace. In addition to virtue, the end is central. Virtues would be enfeebled if they were not acquired for the sake of happiness, which is our ultimate end. For Aristotle, happiness consists in virtuous activities, in the noble acts performed by reason, both speculative and practical. For the author of the Nicomachean Ethics, excellent people are happy when, in a community of friends, they engage in philosophy, in science, and in the exercise of their civic responsibilities.
On the other hand, you may also remember that in *The City of God*, Augustine takes a dim view of earthly happiness, which ever lies at the mercy of chance, sickness, betrayal, and moral weakness.

Confronted with the conflict between Aristotle's and Augustine's views on happiness, Aquinas the synthesizer reconciled them by subordinating the natural to the supernatural. He characterized as "imperfect happiness" the earthly one envisioned by Aristotle. He characterized as "perfect happiness" the heavenly one pointed out by Augustine. He boldly asserted that perfect happiness, promised by Christ, was nothing less than the vision of the divine essence — something unattainable on earth. Basing himself on the authority of the New Testament, Thomas believed we shall see God face to face. But he went a step further in forming the philosophical argument that, *given our unrestricted desire to know*, to understand everything that can be understood (notice again the appeal to intellectual self-knowledge), *we shall never be totally happy until we see the One who is complete truth*. Even our loving tendency will never be satisfied unless we contemplate the beauty of God, our Lover. For Thomas, love is not blind; there is no love except when one appreciates, that is, understands the beloved.

Another division of ethics considers the place of law. Aquinas situated law in the context of reason and wisdom. For most modern thinkers, law is a decree issued by someone who exercises power. It is not primarily an act of reason, but an act of the will, and therefore always likely to become arbitrary. Moreover, because people's instincts are seen as radically selfish, law is enacted for the sake of imposing and maintaining order in a society construed as a remedy to the chaotic state of nature. For Thomas, on the contrary, law derived from wisdom and aimed at providing human beings with incentives and aids to become more virtuous. Because he believed in the actuality of salvation, Thomas was hopeful that some citizens could become virtuous. He nonetheless conceded, for non-virtuous people, the necessity of coercion. In Thomas' view, natural law was what enabled human beings to assess positive laws. Unfortunately, to a certain extent natural law has been defaced by sin. Consequently revelation is required if humans are to retrieve natural law and interpret it correctly.
Thomas' Religion

It has been impossible to present the world-view and the ethics of Thomas Aquinas without already introducing religion. The theological reason for this is that, while religion is distinct from, it can never be separated from human knowledge and conduct. Religion makes a difference in human affairs. Thomas saw the human person as falling prey to intellectual errors and moral shortcomings. He recognized that, as a result of original sin, when sinners are faced with a decision to be made, most of the time they will not avoid grave sin. Without an interpersonal relationship of love with God, people are not sufficiently attracted to the Good. They are unwilling to sacrifice anything significant for the sake of love. Moreover, as Paul and Augustine dramatically held, sinners are radically incapable of replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36, 26).

Aquinas took two facts into account. First, we cannot attain our ultimate end by our own efforts. Second, we are endowed with free will and therefore with at least a theoretical possibility of obeying Christ's calling. In light of these two facts, Aquinas divides grace into operative grace and cooperative grace. Operative grace is God working; cooperative grace is God and persons cooperating — that is, working together. Operative grace consists in inserting into the human heart an inclination toward the supernatural end; cooperative grace enables the human agent to will and choose the means that lead to that end. There is no coercion of the human will involved here. Whereas the will of the sinner is frustrated because it cannot will the truly good, the will of those who have been redeemed recovers not only its natural tendency toward the good in general, but is also empowered to respond to divine love.

Grace is not something extrinsic, tacked on to our soul, so to speak. It is what makes humans accept a personal friendship with God. When he talks about charity, or divine love, Thomas draws from what Aristotle wrote on friendship. Whereas the Greek philosopher was of the opinion that no friendship could obtain between such unequal parties as God and man, the Christian theologian affirms that God does establish a certain equality and bestows his friendship. This friendship, called charity, makes the believer already possess and enjoy God's presence in this life. Another theological virtue, hope, makes the believer count on God and look forward to complete beatitude in
the resurrection. Both the virtues of charity and hope are given to the human heart, or the will (same word in Latin: voluntas). But faith is given to our intelligence, illuminating it and enabling it to begin thinking as Christ thinks, to see oneself, other people, society and the world in exactly the way God sees them.

Grace restores in human beings the likeness with God which sin removed. It makes them brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, sons and daughters of the Father, by illuminating their souls and enhancing their activities. Besides the three theological virtues, the Holy Spirit grants the seven gifts, which render people responsive to his particular promptings. Finally, the Law of Moses is perfected by the Sermon on the Mount. However, for the proficient, the external prescriptions lose some of their importance. What takes over is the law inscribed on their hearts, whereby they are directly taught by the Holy Spirit.

Thomas in his Setting

Thomas Aquinas lived from 1225 through 1274. This period was the apogee of the Middle Ages, that is, the one thousand years that stand between Antiquity and modern times. Born in Italy, in the region of Naples, which belonged to the Kingdom of Sicily, he was the youngest son in a family of lower nobility. As a layman, he studied at the University of Naples where he came across Dominican Friars (Order of Preachers) working at the University as preachers and teachers. St. Dominic had founded them in 1215 and wanted them to pray, study and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, Thomas’s family had taken for granted that he would be a Benedictine monk and abbot. He resisted the pressure put on him and joined the Order of Preachers. The Dominicans sent him off to Paris to make his novitiate. While on his way north, his brothers, with the approval of the Emperor, abducted him and took him to a castle where they hoped to be able to change his mind. Thomas was in an angry mood — in justified and appropriate anger, Aristotle would have remarked! In order to break his will, his brothers introduced a ravishing young woman, attractively dressed, into his bedroom, to seduce him. Indignant, Thomas picked up a burning stick from the fireplace and drove her out of his room.

Following that incident, his mother detained him at home for a full year. She tried to dissuade him from becoming one of those poor
friars, but to no avail. His sister also attempted to convince him to give up, but after several conversations, Thomas convinced her to become a nun! So beware of Aquinas. His objective arguments, if you consider them seriously, may very well convince you and make you take unfashionable stands regarding the meaning and the conduct of your life!

Thomas Aquinas was quite cosmopolitan. He studied in Italy, France and Germany. His apprenticeship in Cologne took place under the great scholar, St. Albert the Great, a fellow Dominican who, since he knew almost everything, was dubbed “the universal doctor.” Albert was the first to introduce young students to the thought of Aristotle. Albert and Thomas commented extensively on the newly translated *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as on many of Aristotle’s other works. There was a lot of excitement and controversy regarding the opportunity of learning important things from the pagan Aristotle.

Thomas had a large physique, was absorbed in his own reflections, and practiced constant reserve. Because he was at the same time big and silent, he was called “the dumb ox.” From his early childhood on, his mind was unusually inquisitive. As a child, he used to annoy his entourage by repeatedly asking, What is God? Because he was almost continually getting insights, people compared his mind to an angel’s. Eventually, they gave him the title of “the angelic doctor.” He worked very hard. He gave homilies, composed hymns and prayers, lectured on the Bible, took part in debates, replied to intellectual queries, wrote treatises, commented on Aristotle’s works, and composed two long syntheses of Catholic thinking, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*. Ironically, he who once had said that one could not become accomplished as a metaphysician before the age of fifty, died at the age of forty-nine, as one of the best metaphysicians in the West.

At the end of his life, he put to a test by Christ. Knowing that brother Thomas had thoroughly thought out the issue of human desire and would therefore most probably pass the test, Jesus his friend nevertheless tried to trip him up. He said to him: “Thomas, you have written excellently about me. What do you want from me in return?” Thomas was quick to reply: “Nisi Te, Domine. Nothing less than you, my Lord!” Even God could not fool this wise man. ☺