

### How to read a “question” in the *Summa theologiae*

Compared to many other sorts of writings, the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas can seem quite foreign and strange, not least in its layout and execution. The *Summa* encompasses a great deal of material, spanning three main parts (the second of which is itself broken up into two subparts), but it is especially with regard to its most fundamental building block—the scholastic *quaestio* or “**question**”—that this foreignness to the modern reader is most apparent.

In the first place, and despite its name, the scholastic “question” does not take the form of a standard interrogative (e.g., “What is your name?” “Does God exist?”) but is instead a sustained inquiry into a particular topic (e.g., “Concerning the necessity of grace”). The *Summa* contains many hundreds of these inquiries, each of which is in turn made up of a series of smaller, more focused inquiries, called “**articles**.” Depending on the topic under consideration, articles can range in number from one to more than a dozen, yet together they comprise a single “question.”

A second curious feature of the scholastic “question” concerns the makeup of these individual articles, which in the case of the *Summa* has several basic components: After the title of the article (which identifies the specific topic that is under consideration, and this typically in a more standard interrogative form), there is first given a series of **objections**, which introduce various potential complications to the inquiry; next comes the *sed contra* (“on the contrary”), which is a brief counterpoint to the objections and is often (though not always) reflective of Thomas’s own position; next comes the **corpus** or *respondeo* (“I answer that...”), in which Thomas lays out his solution to the broader inquiry; and finally come his **replies** to the various objections, in which he resolves the complications that were introduced toward the beginning of the article.

In preparing your reading from the *Summa*, it is important to try to discern how these various parts (article components, articles, questions, etc.) have been fitted together by Thomas into a complex but unified whole. And of course, in order to attend to *how* Thomas is teaching, it is necessary to pay attention also to *what* he is teaching, and on whom he is relying in teaching this (i.e., his “authorities”). The following are some valuable points to keep in mind while reading:

- What is the topic of the question? How does this question fit into its surrounding context (i.e., the treatise in which it is located, and/or the ST’s larger architecture)?
- How has Thomas organized the question? That is, how has he arranged the various articles, which treat different aspects of the topic? Can the articles be divided into sub-groups?
- For later questions in a given treatise (e.g., the treatise on faith, or on Christ): How does this question build on what has been established earlier in the treatise? And, for any of the questions: How does this question build on or anticipate his teaching on related topics elsewhere in the *Summa*? (This latter consideration is trickier—it will be necessary to pay attention to Thomas’s own cross-references in the text.)
- Based on his quotations and references, what are the sources of Thomas’s teaching? To whom is he most indebted? Does he employ different sources in different ways?
- What are the principal insights (e.g., about God, about the created order, about the human person, etc.) that govern his treatment of a given topic?