

# Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas and Dante Alighieri

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## Peter Abelard, 1079 – 1142

### Life

Abelard was born in Le Pallet in Brittany, and gave up a position in lesser nobility to study philosophy.

He started to beat Guillaume de Champeaux (1070 - 1122), an eminent theologian and philosopher, in argument. Guillaume refused him a licence to teach at Paris.

He turned to theology and studied with Anselm of Laon (d. 1117), but Anselm expelled him in 1113 and he branched out on his own.

Back in Paris, and a professor at Notre Dame, he had an affair with Héloïse and a son, Astralabe. Her uncle, Canon Fulbert, had him castrated. He became a monk at Saint Denis and she became a nun. He resumed teaching.

A synod at Soissons in 1121 condemned his writings. He ceased teaching but then came back to it.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153) objected to some of his work and to his methods. He went to Sens in 1140 for what he thought would be a public debate with Bernard but turned out to be an enquiry into possible heresy. It condemned some of his views and the Pope upheld this condemnation.

He died on 21 April 1142.

### Works

*Logic and Dialectic*

*Ethics, or Know Yourself* and *The Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian*

Analyses of the Trinity: *Theology* (two books) and *Christian Theology*

*Sic et Non* (For and Against)

## Nominalism

Some people take "universal thing" in such a way that they set up essentially the same substance in things diverse from one another through forms. This substance is the "material essence" of the singulars it is in. It is one in itself, and diverse only through the forms of its inferiors. ... For example in single, numerically distinct men there is the same substance *man*, which becomes Plato here through these accidents and Socrates there through those accidents.

Objection: If essentially the same thing exists in several singulars, then even though diverse forms occupy it, this substance brought about by these forms must be identical with that one occupied by those forms. For example the *animal* formed by *rationality* is the *animal* formed by *irrationality*. Thus *rational animal* is *irrational animal*.

[If Socrates and Brunellus the Ass both partake in some universal *animal*, then the rationality of Socrates and the irrationality of Brunellus feed back up into the universal.]

The word "man" names single men on the basis of a common cause: that they are men. It is called a universal on account of this cause. It also constitutes a certain understanding. ... First let us consider the common cause. Single men, who are discrete from one another, nevertheless agree in that they are men. I do not say that they agree in *man*, since no thing is a man unless it is discrete. Rather they agree in *being a man*.

## Ethics

What do we merit before God from what we do, either willingly or unwillingly? I reply: nothing, of course, since in giving out rewards he takes account of the mind rather than the action. The action does not add anything to the merit.

There are people who entirely regret being drawn into consenting to lust or to an evil will, and are compelled by the flesh's weakness to want what they do not want to want at all. I really do not see how this consent that we do not want can be called voluntary.

No-one should say that sin itself is increased by the action when one extends the mind's consent to the point of performing the deed, so that one is defiled not only by consent to shamefulness but also by the stains of the act. As if what occurred outside in the body could defile the soul!

Therefore, any kind of carrying out of deeds is irrelevant to increasing a sin. Nothing taints the soul but what belongs to it, namely the consent that we have said is alone the sin, not the will preceding it or the subsequent doing of the deed. For even if we want or do what is improper, we do not thereby sin.

## Thomas Aquinas, 1225 – 1274

### Life

By Aquinas's time, Aristotle had become available in Latin. Universities were replacing monastic and cathedral schools.

Aquinas was born in 1225 at Roccasecca, midway between Rome and Naples. He studied at Montecassino and at the University of Naples, then joined the Dominican Order.

He went to Cologne in 1244 to study with Albertus Magnus (b. 1193-1206, d. 1280). Albertus: "Natural science does not consist in ratifying what others have said, but in seeking the causes of phenomena". Aquinas (based on Aristotle): "Nothing is in the intellect that is not first in the senses".

He spent a few years at the University of Paris, moving there with Albertus. He would have studied a summary of Christian doctrine called the Sentences, compiled by a Bishop of Paris, Peter Lombard (1100-1160).

He spent ten years in various places in Italy with the papal court, was called back to Paris and then to Naples. In 1274, on his way to the Council of Lyon, he fell ill and died in the Cistercian abbey at Fossanova, not far from where he was born.

Some of his views were condemned in 1277 but he was canonised in 1323. He is known as Doctor Angelicus, Doctor Universalis and Doctor Communis.

### Works

*Commentary on the Sentences*

*On Being and Essence*

*The Principles of Nature*

*On the Trinity*

*Summa Contra Gentiles*

*Summa Theologiae*

*Commentaries on a dozen works of Aristotle*

### Can it be demonstrated that God exists?

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated. For it is an article of faith that God exists. But what is of faith cannot be demonstrated, because a demonstration produces scientific knowledge; whereas faith is of the unseen (Hebrews 11:1). Therefore it cannot be demonstrated that God exists.

Objection 2. Further, the essence is the middle term of demonstration. But we cannot know in what God's essence consists, but solely in what it does not consist; as Damascene says. Therefore we cannot demonstrate that God exists.

Objection 3. Further, if the existence of God were demonstrated, this could only be from His effects. But His effects are not proportionate to Him, since He is infinite and His effects are finite; and between the finite and infinite there is no proportion. Therefore, since a cause cannot be demonstrated by an effect not proportionate to it, it seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated.

On the contrary, The Apostle says: "The invisible things of Him are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Romans 1:20). But this would not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made; for the first thing we must know of anything is whether it exists.

I answer that, Demonstration can be made in two ways: One is through the cause, and is called "a priori," and this is to argue from what is prior absolutely. The other is through the effect, and is called a demonstration "a posteriori"; this is to argue from what is prior relatively only to us. When an effect is better known to us than its cause, from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the cause. And from every effect the existence of its proper cause can be demonstrated, so long as its effects are better known to us; because since every effect depends upon its cause, if the effect exists, the cause must pre-exist. Hence the existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us.

Reply to Objection 1. The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected. Nevertheless, there is nothing to prevent a man, who cannot grasp a proof, accepting, as a matter of faith, something which in itself is capable of being scientifically known and demonstrated.

Reply to Objection 2. When the existence of a cause is demonstrated from an effect, this effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in proof of the cause's existence. This is especially the case in regard to God, because, in order to prove the existence of anything, it is necessary to accept as a middle term the meaning of the word, and not its essence, for the question of its essence follows on the question of its existence. Now the names given to God are derived from His effects; consequently, in demonstrating the existence of God from His effects, we may take for the middle term the meaning of the word "God".

Reply to Objection 3. From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence.

## Dante Alighieri, 1265 - 1321

### Life

Dante was born into a prominent family in Florence, aligned with the Guelphs (mainly pro-Pope) against the Ghibellines (pro-Holy Roman Emperor). But he was with the wing of the Guelphs who were wary of papal power (the White Guelphs), and he himself wanted the Emperor to get involved so as to exclude papal rule over Florence.

He married Gemma di Manetto Donati but was really in love with Beatrice Portinari from age 9, although they did not have an affair. Beatrice died in 1290. She features in much of his work.

He studied philosophy and learnt about the theories of Thomas Aquinas.

He got involved in politics. In 1301 the Black Guelphs triumphed while Dante was in Rome. He was permanently exiled from Florence.

He spent the rest of his life in Verona, Ravenna and other places. He continued to meddle in Florentine politics from the sidelines, but never returned to the city.

### Works

*La Vita Nuova* (poems and commentary recounting his love for Beatrice)

*Il Convivio* (the Banquet – covers metaphysics, ethics and politics)

*De Monarchia* (a work of political philosophy)

*La Commedia* ("*Divina*" was added later)

### La Commedia

Dante wrote this work from 1308 to 1321 in language that reflected several dialects. It is set in 1300, when Dante was 35.

There are three canticas, each containing 33 cantos:

Inferno, where Dante is guided by Virgil (70 – 19 BC)

Purgatorio, where Dante is guided by Virgil

Paradiso, where Dante is guided by Beatrice

There are three lines in each verse, rhyming ABA, BCB, CDC, ... :

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,  
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura  
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte  
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

## Reason and religion in the *Commedia*

The first circle of Hell is Limbo, where the only punishment is separation from God. The virtuous pagans reside here, including Virgil, Socrates and Plato.

Virgil cannot be Dante's guide in Paradise.

At the end of *Purgatorio*, Beatrice tells Dante that there is a truth beyond philosophy:

"I thus: "As wax by seal, that changeth not  
Its impress, now is stamp'd my brain by thee.  
But wherefore soars thy wish'd-for speech so high  
Beyond my sight, that loses it the more,  
The more it strains to reach it?" - "To the end  
That thou mayst know," she answer'd straight, "the school,  
That thou hast follow'd; and how far behind,  
When following my discourse, its learning halts:  
And mayst behold your art, from the divine  
As distant, as the disagreement is  
'Twixt earth and heaven's most high and rapturous orb."

From *Paradiso* 4: I clearly see that our intellect is never satisfied unless the Truth illumine it, outside of which no truth extends.

In *Paradiso* 10, Dante meets Thomas Aquinas who introduces Albertus Magnus and other philosophers.

The end of *Paradiso* brings together the Aristotelian prime mover and the Christian God of love:

Here vigour fail'd the tow'ring fantasy:  
But yet the will roll'd onward, like a wheel  
In even motion, by the Love impell'd,

That moves the sun in heav'n and all the stars.

A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;  
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,  
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.