



Henry of Ghent's Summa of Ordinary Questions: Article One: On the Possibility of Knowing

Henry of Ghent

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Following the condemnation of 219 propositions in philosophy and theology by Étienne Tempier, bishop of Paris, in 1277, there was a revival of Augustinian thought and a move away from aspects of Aristotelianism that were – rightly or wrongly – condemned as incompatible with the Christian faith. Henry of Ghent was the most important representative of such Neo-Augustinian thought in the late thirteenth century. His Summa, which represents his ordinary lectures at the University of Paris, affords an excellent insight into the character of theology and philosophy in the years after the death of Aquinas. The first article of the Summa, translated here, is devoted to the possibility of human knowledge and provides a sophisticated attempt to combine an Aristotelian empiricism, Platonic exemplarism, and an Augustinian doctrine of divine illumination. Born no later than 1240, Henry studied arts and theology at the University of Paris, where he held a chair in theology from 1275 until about 1292. He died on 29 June 1293. His principal works were the Summa of Ordinary Questions and the Quodlibetal Questions, that is, questions on any subject in theology, philosophy, or church law that were publicly debated by a master of theology at the end of Advent and Lent. Article One of the Summa, which contains twelve questions on the possibility of human knowledge, provides an excellent introduction to Henry's theory of knowledge with its doctrine of two exemplars and two intelligible species, one derived by abstraction from the sensible species and the other impressed by a divine idea. Question one presents and refutes the principal arguments of ancient skepticism. In question two Henry argues that human beings can know many things without divine illumination, that is, by purely natural means. In the third question, he argues that, despite many texts from Augustine seemingly to the contrary, human beings do not have a natu

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