

Aquinas on Memory and Study

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A Letter of Saint Thomas Aquinas to Brother John

Because you have asked me, my brother John, most dear to me in Christ, how to set about acquiring the treasure of knowledge, this is the advice I pass on to you: that you should choose to enter by the small rivers, and not go right away into the sea, because you should move from easy things to difficult things.

Quia quaesisti a me, in Christo mihi carissime frater Joannes, quomodo oportet incedere in thesauro scientiae acquirendo, tale a me tibi super hoc traditur consilium; ut per rivulos, et non statim in mare, eligas introire; quia per facilia ad difficilia oportet devenire.

Such is therefore my advice on your way of life:

Huiusmodi est ergo monitio mea de vita tua:

I suggest you be slow to speak, and slow to go to the room where people chat.

Tardiloquum te esse iubeo, et tarde ad locutorium accedentem;

Embrace purity of conscience; do not stop making time for prayer.

Conscientiae puritatem amplecti; Orationi vacare non desinas;

Love to be in your room frequently, if you wish to be lead to the wine cellar

Cellam frequenter diligas, si vis in cellam vinariam introduci;

Show yourself to be likable to all, or at least try; but do not show yourself as too familiar with anyone; because too much familiarity breeds contempt and will slow you in your studies; and don't get involved in any way in the deeds and words of worldly people.

Omnibus amabilem te exhibeas, vel exhibere studias; sed nemini familiarem te multum ostendas; quia nimia familiaritas parit contemptum et retardationis materiam a studio administrat; Et de factis et verbis saecularium nullatenus te intromittas;

Above all, avoid idle conversation; do not forget to follow the steps of holy and approved men.

Discursum super omnia fugias; Sanctorum et proborum virorum imitari vestigia non omittas.

Never mind who says what, but commit to memory what is said that is true: work to understand what you read, and make yourself sure of doubtful points.

Non respicias a quo, sed quod sane dicatur memoriae recommenda: Ea quae legis fac ut intelligas, de dubiis te certificans.

put whatever your can into the cupboard of your mind as if you were trying to fill a cup.	Et quidquid poteris, in armariolo mentis reponere satage sicut cupiens vas implere;
"Seek not the things that a higher than you"	"Altiora te ne quaeras".
Follow the steps of blessed Dominic, who produced useful and marvelous shoots, flowers and fruits in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts for as long as life was his companion.	Illius beati Dominici sequere vestigia, qui frondes, flores et fructus, utiles ac mirabiles, in vinea Domini Sabaoth, dum vitam comitem habuit, protulit ac produxit.
If you follow these things, you will attain to whatever you desire. Farewell.	Haec si secutus fueris, ad id attingere poteris, quidquid affectas. Vale

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Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II, q. 49, a. 1, ad 2	
Whether- memory is part of prudence	Utrum memoria sit pars prudentiae
Objection 2. Furthermore, prudence is acquired and develops by exercise. But memory is within us by nature. Therefore memory is not part of prudence.	Obj. 2. Praeterea, prudentia per exercitium acquiritur et proficit. Sed memoria inest nobis a natura. Ergo memoria non est pars prudentiae
<i>note: Every article in the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas has the form of a debate. First he presents the objections, then, after addressing the question, he answers each objection</i>	
TO THE SECOND OBJECTION, it should be said that just as prudence involves an ability that comes from nature, but its fullness comes from exercise or talent; so also, as Tullius says in his <i>Rhetoric</i> (book 3, ch. 16), memory develops not only from nature, but owes much to learned skill and hard work.	AD SECUNDUM dicendum quod sicut prudentia aptitudinem quidem habet ex natura, sed eius complementum ex exercitio vel gratia; ita etiam, ut Tullius dicit in sua <i>Rhetorica</i> (l.3 c. 16), memoria non solum a natura profiscitur, sed etiam habet plurimum artis et industriae.
<i>note: Tullius here refers to Cicero, and the Rhetoric is a later work wrongly attributed to Cicero.</i>	
And there are four things by which a man makes progress in remembering well.	Et sunt quatuor per quae homo proficit in bene memorando.

<p>The first of these thing is that he should find certain things [or mental images] that match the things he wants to remember, but this should not be at all usual: because we marvel more at things which are unusual, and the soul is held by such things more and with greater force; whence it happens that we remember more those things that we see in childhood.</p>	<p>Quorum primum est ut eorum quae vult memorari quasdam similitudines assumat convenientes, nec tamen omnino consuetas: quia ea quae sunt inconsueta magis miramur, et sic eis animus magis et vehementius detinetur; ex quo fit quod eorum quae in pueritia vidimus magis memoremur.</p>
<p>Therefore the devising of such likenesses and images is necessary, because simple and spiritual intentions fall out of the soul very easily if they are not linked to some physical likenesses: because human cognition is more powerful with regard to sensible things.</p>	<p>Ideo autem necessaria est huiusmodi similitudinum vel imaginum adinventio, quia intentiones simplices et spirituales facilius ex anima elabuntur nisi quibusdam similitudinibus corporalibus quasi alligentur: quia humana cognitio potentior est circa sensibilia.</p>
<p>Hence the [faculty of] memory is placed in the sensitive part [of the soul].</p>	<p>Unde et memorativa ponitur in parte sensitiva.</p>
<p>Second, it is necessary that a man should arrange in an orderly way the things that he wishes to hold by memory under his consideration, so that from one remembered thing he may progress easily to another.</p>	<p>Secundo, oportet ut homo ea quae memoriter vult tenere sua consideratione ordinate disponat, ut ex uno memorato facile ad aliud procedatur.</p>
<p>So the Philosopher (Aristotle) says, in his book <i>On Memory: People sometimes seem to recall things from places: the reason is that they quickly move from one thing to another</i>.</p>	<p>Unde Philosophus dicit, in libro <i>De memoria: A locis videntur reminisci aliquando: causa autem est quia velociter ab alio in aliud veniunt</i>.</p>
<p><i>Note: This refers to Aristotle's short work, "On Memory and Reminiscence" (ch.2, bk 452a13). Thomas wrote a commentary on this work.</i></p>	
<p>Third, a man should apply interest and emotional energy to the things he wants to remember: because the more deeply something is impressed upon the soul, the less does it drop out of the soul.</p>	<p>Tertio, oportet ut homo sollicitudinem apponat et affectum adhibeat ad ea quae vult memorari: quia quo aliquid magis fuerit impressum animo, eo minus elabitur.</p>

Hence Tullius also says, in his *Rhetoric* (book 3, ch. 19), that *meditations keep memory*: because, as it says in the same book: *custom or habit is like nature*: hence the things that we understand many times we also recall quickly, as if moving from one thing to another in some sort of natural order.

Unde et Tullius dicit, in sua *Rhetorica* (l.3 c. 19) quod *meditationes memoriam salvant*: quia, ut in eodem libro dicitur, *consuetudo est quasi natura*: unde quae multoties intelligimus cito reminiscimur, quasi naturali quodam ordine ab uno ad aliud procedentes.

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Some more links to memory help

<http://www.imindmap.com>

A site that sells Tony Buzan's products (computer programs and videos). Tony Buzan invented the "mind-map" technique. There are lots of links on that site.

(The links below are probably not available anymore, but try if you want.)

[Mind Tools - Memory Techniques and Mnemonics](#)

This is a very good site I found on memory techniques. It contains many different methods.

[TMI Research: Human Memory](#)

A paper on some advanced techniques to aid memory.

[PLU - Student Learning Center - Memory Techniques](#)

A few very concise tips on memory and study from a university study center.

[Memory Bank - Study Aid Manual](#)

If you want to buy some memory software, maybe find out more about this. I haven't tried this particular package.