

## Liberty University Graduate Research Symposium Proposal

**Title** - Toward A Thomistic Environmental Ethic: How Thomas Aquinas's Metaethic Can Provide a Foundation for Environmental Responsibility

**Program of Study** – Master of Arts in Philosophical Studies

**Presentation Type** – Choose one of the following: PowerPoint

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**Category** – Choose one of the following: Textual

**Abstract:** The Judeo-Christian tradition is often portrayed as being antagonistic to the environmental project, with Thomas Aquinas being nearly universally derided as one of the principle advocates of environmental apathy. Some of his remarks on animal treatment ethics are particularly troubling, most notably his concession that there is nothing inherently wrong with animal torture and that animals are only valuable insofar as they are of use to humans. These remarks have led many to believe that Thomas's metaethic and general philosophical system are necessarily antithetical to a responsible zoological and environmental ethic. My research is dedicated to critically examining these claims and evaluating the core of Thomas's philosophical system in light of our contemporary understanding of the non-human world. Ultimately, my aim is to show that, contrary to popular belief, Thomas's metaethic provides the foundation for a robust and responsible Christian environmental ethic. Thomas's controversial claims are ultimately explained not by a deficiency in his philosophical reasoning, but rather in his scientific understanding of the nature of non-human animals. Thus, I argue that if Thomas possessed the knowledge we now have regarding the cognitive and emotive capacities of animals, he would likely not have made the statements that we find most troubling. Ultimately, Thomas's metaethic is well suited to environmental responsibility, though his applied ethics are troubling merely because of the insufficient scientific knowledge of the middle ages.

**Christian worldview integration:** Because Thomas Aquinas wrote specifically in the Christian tradition, my evaluation of his metaethic presupposes a Christian worldview. One simply cannot divorce Christian Theism from Aquinas's thought, as God is the metaphysical ground of all reality on Thomas's account. Thus, my research is of particular interest to the Christian community. As stated above, Christians are often viewed as antagonists when it comes to environmental and zoological responsibility. Many secular ethicists purport Christianity to be the primary cause of our environmental crisis in the West. Thus, developing a robust and intellectually satisfying Christian environmental ethic ought to be a priority. My hope is that this

research will be one step toward a broader movement that promotes environmental responsibility within the context of the Christian faith. The Thomistic intellectual tradition has a long and storied history in the Christian Church, with roots that can be traced back to Aristotle in ancient Greece. The fact that this tradition is alive and well after centuries of development speaks volumes to its veracity and insight. With Thomism remaining the official intellectual tradition of the Catholic Church, the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas are still an integral part of the Christian life of the mind. I hope this new application of Thomas's ideas to be helpful on a practical and devotional level, using a time-tested Christian tradition to help us understand our relationship to God and the non-human world.