



St. Bonaventure Maurice de Wulf

Life and Works.

St. Bonaventure (John of Fidanza) was born in 1221 at Bagnorea in Tuscany. About 1238 he entered the order of St. Francis and was sent to Paris in 1242. There he followed the lectures of Alexander of Hales, whom he calls *pater et magister*, and in 1248 received the *licentia publice legendi*. Most of his theological works were commenced about this period. In 1255 he was mixed up in the disputes between the seculars and the regulars, and made a bold defence of his position in conjunction with St. Thomas, for whom he cherished a deep and close friendship. It was not until the 23rd October, 1257, that the University, in obedience to Papal injunctions, conferred the title of *magister* on himself and St. Thomas. That same year St. Bonaventure was made general of his Order. In 1260 he drew up the new Franciscan constitutions at the chapter of Narbonne. He was created cardinal in 1273 and assisted at the council of Lyons, but died the next year while the council was yet in progress. His successors gave him the title of *Doctor Devotus*; but since Gerson's time he has been better known under the title of *Doctor Seraphicus*.

The following, among his authentic theological works, are of most importance for the understanding of his philosophy: (1) *Commentarii in I. Sententiarum P. Lombardi*, commenced about 1248, in which St. Bonaventure, while following his master, Alexander, rises far above the latter in the elevation and clearness of his teaching. The extracts from Alexander's *Summa*, believed to have been plagiarized by St. Bonaventure, are, on the contrary, interpolations introduced into the *Summa* after St. Bonaventure's time, in accordance with the latter's teaching. (2) *Quaestiones Disputatae* (especially *De Paupertate*); (3) *Breviloquium* (prior to 1257) the famous *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (1259); (4) *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*, a classification of the sciences. His chief works on mystical theology are *De Triplici Via* and the *Soliloquium*, modelled on the writings of Hugh of St. Victor.

Personal Influence of St. Bonaventure.

In philosophy, as in theology, St. Bonaventure stands forth as the champion and promoter of tradition....His philosophical system is altogether in the *conservative spirit* of the earlier scholasticism, of which he may be taken as perhaps the last great representative. He is Augustinian by inclination as well as by tradition; yet the Augustinian elements of his philosophy are incorporated into what is fundamentally a peripatetic system. And although he defended to the last the great organic ideas of the earlier school, his works are free from all trace of direct opposition to the Thomistic innovations. He was too gentle by temperament as well as by virtue, and too intimate a friend of St. Thomas, to identify himself with the attacks directed by other Augustinians against the teaching of the great Dominican master. Let us add, moreover, that St. Bonaventure's conservatism was far from making him a slave to the tradition of the past. He exposed and rejected errors not merely in Aristotle and the Arabians, but in the work of his own master, Peter Lombard, and was the first to compile from the *Sentences* a list of false theories

unanimously repudiated by his successors.

St. Bonaventure is, in the next place, the very incarnation of the purest theological mysticism of the thirteenth century. But he does not allow his mysticism to weaken or obscure in any way his genius for pure speculation, as has been often erroneously asserted of him; on the contrary, he controls and masters his mysticism. In giving expression to it he is influenced by the Fathers of the Church, by Pseudo-Denis and St. Bernard, but still more deeply and directly by the Victorine tradition.

Many writers have drawn a parallel between St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas. The domination of the mystic tendency in St. Bonaventure accounts for his attachment to the synthetic method and his constant care to bring all psychological and metaphysical problems into relation with God, as the great centre of philosophical investigation. St. Thomas, less ardent and more calmly logical, gives greater *organic coherence* to the component elements of his great philosophical structure. He had also more time to perfect his work; for St. Bonaventure's scholastic labours were interrupted, from the age of thirty-five, by the distracting cares of his office as general of his Order.

Philosophical Teaching.

St. Bonaventure is at one with all the great masters of the thirteenth century upon an imposing array of fundamental doctrines. Their adversaries are his: he misses no opportunity of striking a blow at Averroism and pantheism (notably at that of David of Dinant). The *Scholia* of the Quaracchi editors have brought out clearly this important fact, and it deserves to be carefully noted. Deferring to Art. III. the doctrines he taught in common with all the leading scholastics, we will indicate here the theories by which he made a personal impress on the philosophical teaching of his age.

I. On the *relations between philosophy and theology*, St. Bonaventure subscribes to the common opinion; but he makes theology a *practical*, rather than a *speculative*, science, and accentuates its *affective* (emotional and volitional) elements and significance. In this, perhaps, we may recognize an echo of the favourite Augustinian theory of the primacy of will over intellect and knowledge.

II. In his *Metaphysics* three main positions call for some attention. Firstly, in all creatures we must recognize a real distinction not merely between essence and existence, but between *matter* and *form*. Act and potency, form and matter, are convertible pairs of correlatives. The angels, therefore, are not *formae subsistentes*. Though matter cannot exist without form, yet it has a representative idea in the Divine mind, for it is a reality, though an indeterminate one; and if we abstract from the forms which differentiate it, we must admit it to be *homogeneous* in material bodies and spiritual beings (as against Alexander of Hales). This theory of the hylemorphic composition of immaterial substances, as understood in the peripatetic sense by the earlier scholastics, is a legacy from Avicbron. But St. Bonaventure seems unaware of its origin; for he does not mention the name of the Jewish philosopher; he even tries to trace it to St. Augustine; and the Franciscans after him appeal more and more to the authority of the Fathers rather than to that of the Jewish.

The *plurality of substantial forms* is a second theory, imbibed by St. Bonaventure from the teaching of his master, Alexander. Not that he rejects the formula, *Unius perfectibilis una sola est perfectio*, but he contends that the *forma completiva*, which gives the being its ultimate, specific perfection, is not incompatible with other subordinate substantial forms which would be principles of inferior perfections; — and this view he applies not only to organic and inorganic compounds (*mixta*), but even to the elements in Nature. The plurality theory was accepted and

defended universally in the Franciscan schools.

Thirdly, between the specific essence and the individual essence *there is no real distinction*, the principle of individuation is neither matter alone nor form alone, but both together.

III. The *Existence of God*, *Divine Exemplarism* and *Creation*, are the great characteristic themes of St. Bonaventure's *Theodicy*. God's existence is proved *a posteriori*....But if we consider the Divine essence in itself, or suppose an intelligence endowed with a proper, and not merely negative and analogical, idea of that essence, for such an intelligence the Divine essence would indeed imply existence. This is the commentary of St. Bonaventure on the argument of St. Anselm.

Secondly, in regard to *Exemplarism*, there are numerous passages in the *Commentaries on the Sentences*, in the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* and in the *Hexaemeron*, as well as a *Quaestio disputata de cognitionis humanae suprema ratione*, in which St. Bonaventure expressly examines the famous Augustinian texts to the effect that all knowledge takes place *ratione lucis increatae* or *rationibus aeternis*, that God is present by His truth to all intelligences, etc. It is certain that St. Bonaventure did not understand those texts in an ontologistic sense while his opposition to the Averroïst theory of the unity of the human intellect (*hic error destruit totum ordinem vivendi et agendi*), and his own ideology, clearly imply the view that man is himself an efficient cause of his intellectual activities. He merely throws into bold relief and expounds more eloquently than the other great scholastics, the Augustinian theory on the *Divine ideas* as *objective* foundations of truth and certitude, and the *illumination* of the human intelligence by a light that is Divine. This illumination consists firstly in the Divine resemblance imprinted on our intelligences by the creative act itself, and secondly in the immediate *concursus* of the First Cause with every exercise of thought. We do not think that St. Bonaventure accepted the theory of a *special* illumination, which, according to some of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, representing the earlier scholastic tradition, would be something distinct from God's general or ordinary cooperation with the creature. On this important point of Augustinian exegesis — important in theodicy, in metaphysics and in ideology — St. Bonaventure *thinks* with St. Thomas and Duns Scotus: only in his *mode of expression* does he appear to differ from them.

Creation, which offers the only intelligible explanation of the origin of the world, took place in time: an *eternal* creation implies a contradiction. On this question, so hotly debated in the thirteenth century, St. Bonaventure defends with great energy the view of the earlier scholastics, not only against Aristotle and the Averroïsts, but also against the more moderate conclusions of Thomism.

IV. In *Physics* and *Psychology* respectively, we may note the theory of the *rationes seminales* and the doctrine on the *nature of the soul* and its *relation to its faculties*. Primary matter is not purely passive. It contains within itself; in an undeveloped and imperfect state of being, the various substantial forms with which it is destined to be united under the operation of natural agencies. It is in order to distinguish the transformations of natural substances from *creation* and *annihilation* that St. Bonaventure has recourse to the *rationes seminales*. He thus reinstated the old Augustinian doctrine, and the authority of his great name was quickly claimed by the promoters of a movement of reaction against Thomism towards the end of the century.

On the delicate question of the *distinction between the soul and its faculties*, St. Bonaventure propounds, though not without hesitation, a sort of compromise between the old Augustinian and the new Thomistic theory. On the one hand, he does not allow with the Thomists that the three great faculties of the soul are superadded, distinct realities; but neither, on the other hand, does he admit identity of essence between the soul and the principles of action which emerge from the soul: they are, however, con-substantial with the soul. Supporting the peripatetic ideology, he denies that we have any *innate* ideas, but we have an innate intellectual habit which

he calls the *naturale judicatorium*. Then, also, he holds with St. Augustine that the will is the noblest of our faculties.

In accordance with the general principles of his metaphysics he distinguishes in the human soul a *forma* and a *materia spiritualis*, and in the individual human being a plurality of forms. His teaching is peripatetic in regard to the nature of the human *compositum*, and on the spirituality and immortality of the soul.

Mysticism of St. Bonaventure.

Intimate union with God is the term of all knowledge (*De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*). It is achieved by a process with several distinct stages, all of which are described by St. Bonaventure, on the lines of the Victorine mysticism, in a comprehensive work entitled *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. Besides the eye of the flesh (*oculus carnis*) and the eye of reason (*oculus rationis*), there is also in every man an eye of contemplation (*oculus contemplationis*).

Firstly, we may know and love God in Nature, which was made to His likeness (*vestigium*). This knowledge (*cogitatio, theologia symbolica*) we reach (a) by the external senses (*per vestigium*), and (b) the imagination (*in vestigio*). Thus the Saint completely justifies his holy founder's fervent outbursts of love for even the lowliest of God's creatures in the hallowed regions of Assisi.

Secondly, we may know and love God in His image (*imago Dei*), i.e., in our own soul. This is *meditatio, theologia propria*. We see God thus, *through* our soul (*per imaginem*) and *in* our soul (*in imagine*): (a) through our soul when its three faculties, memory, understanding and will, by mirroring the Blessed Trinity in us (St. Augustine), raise us up towards God. Memory preserves for us the Divine deposit of first principles. Will can be moved only by having presented to it the ideal good which is God. Understanding grasps the supreme and immutable truth of things only in virtue of an illumination from on high, which unites it with God. The supernatural aid of Divine grace, though helpful to the advance of the soul along those first three stages, is not formally required until the fourth stage is reached. (b) For this fourth stage the preceding stages are but a preparation: here we see God in the soul (*in imagine*): for this, Divine grace and the theological virtues are communicated to us.

Thirdly and finally, after having learned to know God in His works, we attain to a *direct* knowledge of Him. His grace reveals Him to us successively (a) in His Being and (b) in the boundless Goodness of the Blessed Trinity: upon which revelation there follows a seventh and final stage of indescribable bliss and repose, the state of ecstasy which marks the culmination of the soul's ascent towards the Deity. Carried up to this highest apex of the mystic life (*apex mentis*), we are in the enjoyment of the Infinite. Here we have contemplation *par excellence*: the real object of the *theologia mystica*. We need scarcely observe that this outpouring of love between Creator and creature in no way compromises the substantial distinction between them.

Maurice de Wulf. *History of Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

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