



St. Thomas Aquinas Denis Hawkins

§1

The greatest of mediaeval thinkers came from an Italian family of Norman descent. The son of a count of Aquino, he was born at Roccasecca in 1225. In spite of the opposition of his family he entered the Dominican order in 1244, and his life thereafter is a record of study, teaching and writing. He died in 1274 at Fossanuova on his way to the Council of Lyons.

Into this comparatively short lifetime St. Thomas crowded an immense literary output. His best known works are the two great syntheses of the *Summa Theologica* and the *Summa contra Gentes*. A complete understanding of his philosophy requires also the study of his opuscula, such as *De Ente et Essentia*, *De Aeternitate Mundi* and *De Unitate Intellectus*, his *quaestiones disputatae*, especially *De Veritate*, and his commentaries on Aristotle, especially those on the *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*.

While wholeheartedly Aristotelian in his principles, he made full use also of the older Augustinian and Neoplatonic tradition. The result, however, is not simply a blend of Augustine and Aristotle; it is Thomism. Aquinas did what any powerful thinker should aim at doing, neither slavishly following his predecessors nor constructing a new system in utter disregard of what had been thought by others, but bringing an original mind to the work of rethinking and completing the results of previous inquiry.

In one way the best tribute to his originality was the opposition which he provoked from more conservative minds. Three years after his death, Stephen Tempier, bishop of Paris, in condemning the opinions of the Averroists, attacked also some of the Thomistic theses. At the same period two archbishops of Canterbury, Robert Kilwardby, himself a Dominican, and the Franciscan John Peckham, spoke out forcibly against Thomism. William de la Mare produced a *Correctorium fratris Thomae*, which was answered by the *Correctorium corruptorii fratris Thomae*. The Dominicans, however, were gradually won over to Aquinas, and attacks on his orthodoxy naturally ceased from any quarter after his canonization in 1323. He became acknowledged as the greatest doctor of the middle ages, and in modern times the Church has once again strongly recommended not only his theology but also his philosophy. The justification of this is to be found in the truth that he was in fact the most eminent thinker of a period which gave its deepest attention to the philosophical questions which border on theology and provide the foundation of a religious view of the world. A fruitful Thomism must, of course, set out to rethink and add to his work as he set out to rethink and add to the work of his predecessors.

§ 2

The mediaeval thinkers did not develop a theory of knowledge in the sense in which it is understood nowadays; they took common sense for granted and did not inquire systematically into the meaning and validity of our spontaneous convictions. Aquinas is no exception to this rule, but he has a theory of knowledge in another sense; he has a clearly defined conception of what knowledge is and what in particular is the range of human knowledge.

Knowledge and being are correlative. In so far as a thing is, it is knowable, and in this resides its ontological truth. Hence, whatever the difficulties inherent in specific fields of knowledge, Aquinas would have dismissed as a pseudo-problem the question whether we are capable of genuine knowledge of anything at all or are rather, according to the idealistic contention, condemned to a perpetual spinning out of ourselves of ideas whose correspondence with fact remains doubtful. Thomism maintains a wholehearted epistemological realism.

But, while the object of the intellect in general is being in general, the specific object of the human intellect is the being of sensible things. St. Thomas is completely Aristotelian in finding the whole material of thought in sense-experience. Thomism is, therefore, a philosophy of experience, but it is not a mere empiricism, which stops short at sense-experience and refuses to see in the development of thought anything but an elaboration of sensations and images. Aquinas himself presents the Aristotelian view as a mean between two extremes (ST I, q. 48, a. vi.). The one is the theory of Democritus which reduces all knowledge to sensation and imagination; the other is the Platonic outlook, according to which sensation provides no more than the occasion upon which the understanding comes to contemplate the spiritual world of forms. Aristotle, he says, finds the happy mean by recognizing that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience, but at the same time asserting that thought has its proper activity, by which it can draw from sense-experience the materials of a knowledge which extends beyond the bounds of the world of sense.

Thinking penetrates through the particular to the universal. Particulars are in fact instances of universals, but it is not until thinking has done its work that universals as such are brought before the mind. In sense-experience we are acquainted with red things; by thinking we come to isolate the redness which these things manifest. At the same time we come to see an order in the attributes manifested by the objects of experience; we come to see what they essentially are as distinguished from what they happen to be. In other words, thinking penetrates to the substance of things and distinguishes this from the accidents. The Abelardian theory of abstraction serves St. Thomas as a beginning, but *intelligere* is also *intus legere*. Thinking arrives at the essences of things.

The intellect, then, is both active and passive. As passive it receives its material from sense-experience; as active it elaborates this by abstraction and by its consequent penetration through the unanalysed superficiality of sensation. Hence, with Aristotle, we must make a distinction between *intellectus possibilis* and *intellectus agens*. But St. Thomas is quite certain that the nature of anything suffices for the performance of its natural operations; he will have none of the theories, whether Arab or Latin, which make the *intellectus agens* something distinct from the individual mind. The active intellect is a part of the soul, and consequently each human soul possesses its

own active intellect (ST I, q. 79, a. iv-v). This we know not only on grounds of general principle but also from experience; we are conscious of our own activity of thought when we bring our mental powers to bear upon the material provided by sensation. Hence, while Aquinas was willing to adopt the formula of a divine illumination of the mind, this took on for him a new meaning which excluded the necessity of a special divine assistance at every moment of the activity of thought.

The intellect is by its nature a participation of the divine light and, once created, it has in itself all that is needed for the fulfilment of the purpose for which it is naturally intended (ST I, q. 84, a. v).

The mind, aware that its concepts are derived from fact and are attributable to fact, is conscious of possessing truth and of being by its nature orientated towards truth. In the building up of knowledge it has at its disposal two kinds of truths. It makes judgments about the particular facts which enter into its experience, and it makes judgments about the relations of its concepts in the abstract. Primitive judgments of the latter kind are *principia per se nota*, general propositions which contain their evidence in themselves. The generative process by which the sciences are constructed is now apparent; general principles are applied to the facts of commonsense experience, and a series of deductions is the result. St. Thomas was not unaware that many theories, especially about the material world, do not enter into this scheme of simple deductive inference. He acknowledged that the Ptolemaic astronomy current at his time could not be deduced from the facts of observation. While accepting it as an hypothesis which fitted the facts, he admitted that some other system might fit the facts equally well or better (ST I, q. 32, a. i). Such remarks show that he could have appreciated the methods by which the physical sciences have developed in modern times, but his real interest was in the genuinely philosophical questions to which a deductive method is appropriate.

§ 3

The Thomistic conception of matter and form is entirely metaphysical, and consequently independent of changes in the sciences of observation. All corporeal substances, and corporeal substances only, are composed of matter and form. First matter (*materia prima*) is a principle of pure potentiality in the order of essence. Since it is pure potentiality, it cannot exist by itself, for to exist is to be actually something, and matter becomes actually something only by receiving form.

The principle of pure potentiality which is *materia prima* is the source of the difference between corporeal and spiritual beings. Cognition springs from the possession of form without matter. Hence, when the form is completely immersed in matter, we have a purely corporeal being without cognition, in so far as the form has a certain independence of matter, there arise the various stages of cognitive experience. It should be noted that Aquinas is far from the utter dichotomy of mind and matter which we find in Descartes and which we are nowadays inclined to assume without reflection. There are degrees of immateriality. The experiences of a purely sentient being, an animal, have already a certain immateriality; human mind, enjoying a greater degree of immateriality, is capable of an activity of thought which is intrinsically independent of the organism; and beyond human thinking there are purely spiritual beings, subsistent forms without matter, the angels, whose activity is one of pure thought.

The metaphysical analysis of a corporeal thing, therefore, is into first matter and substantial form, this whole substance being matter in another sense for the reception of accidental forms, some of which, its essential powers and qualities, are necessarily consequent upon the substance of the thing, while others vary from time to time according to circumstances. One of the typical theses of St. Thomas, although it was not completely without precedent, is that one substance has only one substantial form. It was this opinion which was stigmatized by Kilwardby as *fatua positio*. Most of the other scholastics regarded an organism as containing a hierarchy of substantial forms, but Aquinas maintains a solidarity between substantial form and substantial existence. The first form bestows substantial existence, and any additional form can only be accidental. If an organism had a plurality of substantial forms, it would not be one substance but many. After some initial hesitations in his early *Commentary on the Sentences*, this became the mature view of St. Thomas, and he asserts it as a disputed point with great vigour and determination in his later works.

The principle of individuation of corporeal things is *materia quantitate signata*. The form, considered in conceptual abstraction, is common to all members of the species. It is *this* form only because it is received by *this* matter, for matter, although it is in itself entirely indeterminate, is *this* matter in the sense that it is the source of quantitative extension, and the matter of each thing demands a certain determinate extension. The beginner may obtain a vague approximation to the Thomistic view by thinking of the multiplication of individuals within a species as due to the species having instances in different parts of space and time, but he should remember that the metaphysical analysis of St. Thomas is concerned with the principles of substance itself, which are logically prior to actual positions in space and time. Hence a purely spiritual being, which does not occupy space, can be said to be at the same time an individual and a species.

§ 4

Since man as a whole, though blended of the corporeal and the spiritual, is one substance, body and soul cannot be rightly thought of as two complete entities. The soul, in Aristotelian phrase, is the form of the body (*anima est forma corporis*). It is the soul which, by informing matter, is the principle of bodily structure and organic life, of sensation and of thought. If anyone, says St. Thomas, wanted to say that the thinking mind is not the substantial form of the human organism, he would have to discover how in that case thinking could be attributed to a man as his own activity. For we are conscious that it is we who think, just as we know that it is we who are corporeal beings. If soul and body were united merely by their constant interaction, there would be two selves instead of one, a mental self and a bodily self. Similarly, if it were held, with Bonaventure, that soul and body were each composed of matter and form, we should be left with two selves again. The only formula which does justice to the substantial unity of human nature is the Aristotelian proposition that the soul is the form of the body (ST I, q. 76, a. 1).

But, Aquinas adds, there is a gradation in the way in which forms dominate matter. The less a form is immersed in matter, the greater the activity which it manifests. The human soul is a form which transcends matter to such an extent that it possesses in thinking an activity of its own, intrinsically independent of matter. Upon this foundation rests the truth of personal immortality. For whatever has an activity of

its own is capable of independent existence; hence the corruption of the body, while putting an end to organic and sentient activity, does not involve the destruction of the thinking mind (ST I, q. 75, a. ii & vi). The same complete immateriality of thought is the reason why the origin of each individual human soul cannot be attributed simply to the forces of matter but is the result of a special creative activity of God (ST I, q. 118, a. ii). This does not mean that every human soul is of miraculous origin. It comes to be in accordance with the laws of nature and whenever the appropriate material conditions are present, but the relation of the divine causality to its origin is of a special kind and different from the general concurrence which God, in consequence of his creative will, gives to purely material processes.

The possession of the power of abstract and analytic thought entails the freedom of the will. All natural tendency is towards the good or value appropriate to the subject of tendency. The desire of a sentient subject goes automatically and instinctively towards the concrete value which it apprehends. A thinking mind, however, is able to conceive good in general and, therefore, to reach out towards a fullness of good in relation to which all finite values are deficient. Confronted with any finite value, it can appreciate both its positive value and its deficiency. Hence no finite value is by itself sufficient to determine rational choice (ST I, q. 82, a. i-ii).

There remain the general problem of the source of rational choice and the particular problem of the relation to rational choice of the universal divine causality. St. Thomas is clear that while the acts of the human will are genuinely free, they are yet not exempt from divine causation, but he says that the divine activity is proportioned to its objects, so that necessary causes produce their effects of necessity and contingent causes in a contingent manner. It is the very efficacy of the divine causation which ensures that those things which God wills do not only come into being but come into being in the way in which he wills them and in which they correspond with the natures of the agents through which he brings them about (ST I, q. 19, a. viii).

Evidently a difference of emphasis is possible in the interpretation of these statements. Either the emphasis is placed on the efficacy of the divine causation, and we are left with the paradox that God determines a free agent to make this particular choice, but to make it freely; or the emphasis is placed on the freedom of rational will, and it becomes difficult to see what the divine causation precisely determines. Hence the rise of two opposed schools of thought on the subject in later scholasticism is quite intelligible. But, we say, surely Aquinas must have seen the difficulty. Presumably he did see it, and presumably also he never arrived at an answer which satisfied himself, or he would have expressed himself more definitely. He presents us with the two factors which would have to be taken into account for any adequate solution, but their final reconciliation remains obscure. That he could not dissipate this obscurity need not be shocking.

§ 5

The metaphysics of St. Thomas centre in his analysis of existence. We have already noticed that he rejected the ontological argument, by which St. Anselm sought to infer the existence from the nature of God. It seems fair to suspect that the invalidity of this argument is due to some special characteristic of the notion of existence. Aquinas, in fact, for the first time in the history of philosophy, indicates the course of reflection by which we may come to appreciate the uniqueness of existence.

Since being is the most universal of all notions, it might seem that it was a supreme genus of which all kinds of being are the species and all individual beings the members. Yet, following Aristotle, St. Thomas points out that being is not a genus (SCG I, 25). A properly generic notion is, as a notion, complete in itself, and the factors which serve as its specific differences are completely outside it. The notion of an animal is completely defined as a sentient organism, and the possession of reason, which differentiates human animality, is conceptually altogether separate from it. But the different kinds of being are beings as much in that in which they differ as in that in which they agree; every mode of being is itself an existent somewhat. If you try to separate being from anything or from any factor in anything, this becomes nothing; everything, and every factor in everything, is something.

It follows that being is not a true generic notion which can be conceptually cut off from the factors which differentiate it. A genuine universal concept is a principle of identity in those particulars which verify it. All animals, in so far as they are animals or sentient organisms, are alike. It is true that all animals verify animality together with a difference which, in reality, is inseparable from it, but, to abstract thinking, animality represents a complete and self-contained concept. While a genuine universal concept is an identity which connotes a difference, it is in itself a unity for thought. The notion of being, on the other hand, is at the same time a principle of identity and a principle of difference; it permeates its own modes. Being is in itself an identity in difference, while a genuine universal concept is merely an identity which connotes a difference.

That is why there is so close a connection between the notion of being and that of individuality. An excessive realism in the solution of the problem of universals falls before the Aristotelian principle that the individual alone exists in the proper sense of the term. We may now go farther and say that what in the individual corresponds with the universals which it verifies is not the intrinsic ground of its individuality; it is because it is an existent, and precisely through its substantial existence or subsistence, that it is this individual thing. While the principle of individuation of corporeal species is matter, the general principle of individuality is substantial existence or subsistence.

In this way we are led to distinguish between the order of essence and the order of existence. The order of essence represents in abstraction the ramification and interrelation of universal concepts; the order of existence runs parallel with it and lends to it individuality and reality. Existence, therefore, is proportional to essence, to that which exists. Existence is not a closed generic concept which is specified by the differences of essences; it is in itself different, and must be regarded as greater or less, according to the nature of that which it makes to exist. Here lies the fundamental significance of the analogy of being. Analogy, after all, means proportion, and the analogy of being means that the existence of each thing is proportionate to its essence.

If essence and existence are thus proportionate, there is in every finite thing between its essence and its existence a certain metaphysical tension, which in scholastic language is described as metaphysical composition. While existence realizes essence, essence provides the limits within which existence is circumscribed. There is in the application to essence and existence of the Aristotelian concepts of potentiality and actuality a shade of ambiguity which may have contributed to later doubts and controversies on the subject. For, although existence determines essence in the sense of realizing it, essence determines existence in the sense of specifying it. In order, therefore, to appreciate the Thomistic theory of essence and existence, it is

necessary to look at these notions for their own sake without expecting to fit them exactly into some preconceived general formula. The notion of existence is unique, and St. Thomas helps us powerfully to understand its uniqueness. In so doing he opens the way to his philosophical conception of God.

§ 6

Aquinas makes plain that, since the primary object of the human intellect is the being of sensible things, we have naturally no direct knowledge of God, nor is there any short cut to his existence by a purely conceptual argument such as that of Anselm. The existence of God must be the object of a demonstration whose force depends in part upon the existence of the things of experience. The foundations of this demonstration are laid in the Five Ways (ST I, q. 2, a. iii; SCG I, 13)

The first three ways are variant forms of what in modern times is usually called the cosmological argument. The First Way is described in the *Summa Theologica* as especially obvious (*manifestior*). This epithet should probably be interpreted in the light of the much lengthier formulation of the proof in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, where Aquinas employs all the resources of Aristotelian physics to conclude, as Aristotle had done, to the existence of the first unmoved mover. Such a proof would, for the mediaeval man, have conjured up a mental picture in terms of contemporary astronomy, and in this way would have been for him *manifestior*. For us now, and reduced to its metaphysical essentials as it is in the *Summa Theologica*, it could hardly be said to be more obvious than the Second or Third Way. It is an argument from *motus*, which serves as a Latin rendering for and, like *κίνησις*, has a wide range of meaning from locomotion in particular through continuous change to change in general. For the essential metaphysical purpose of St. Thomas's argument, as distinguished from the mental picture which he hoped to summon up in order to make it more obvious, *motus* is best understood as change in general. Any change, then, presupposes an agency which brings it about, and, if the agent is itself subject to change, this can only be under the influence of another agent. Such a series of agencies cannot be infinite. The supposition that every agent is moved by a higher agent is self-contradictory, for there would then be no ground for the process as a whole. Hence there must be a first unmoved mover, an agent which is not itself subject to change but is the primary source of the series of changes which we observe to take place.

The First Way envisages change from the point of view of the effect which requires an agent; the Second Way proceeds directly from the fact of causation. We observe instances of the relation of cause and effect, and we find that the cause is itself the effect of another cause. This series cannot be infinite, for, if nothing could cause without being caused, there would be nothing to set the causal series going. Hence we must conclude to the existence of an uncaused cause.

The Third Way shifts the point of view yet a little again and proceeds from the notions of necessity and contingency. From the fact that things come into being and cease to be, we see that they are not necessary but contingent or capable of non-existence. Here Aquinas reproduces the suggestion of Maimonides that, if everything were capable of non-existence, there would actually be a time at which nothing existed, and in that case nothing could ever come to exist. Whatever may be thought of this, it is clear that the ultimate source of the coming-to-be of the contingent must be sought in the necessarily existent. Aquinas then takes into account Avicenna's

hypothetical distinction between a being which is necessary but derivative and a being which is necessary of itself; the former would be something which necessarily and eternally emanates from the source of all being. Even if there were such derivatively necessary existents, there must be in the end something which is necessary of itself and from which they would derive their necessity.

By the first three ways, therefore, St. Thomas has arrived at the existence of unchanging, uncaused and intrinsically necessary being. He has not yet discussed what sort of being this must be, but, by an anticipation of the later course of his argument, he says that this is to be identified with God. It is worth remarking that his proofs do not depend upon the supposition that the world has had a finite duration; in fact we shall see that he does not regard this as philosophically demonstrable. According to Aquinas it is philosophically conceivable that there should have been an infinite series of caused events succeeding one another, but it is not philosophically conceivable that a series of caused causes, whether finite or infinite, should not ultimately depend upon an uncaused cause outside the series.

The Fourth and Fifth Ways appear as supplementary to this main argument. The Fifth Way is the familiar teleological argument which concludes to an intelligence governing the world, but St. Thomas is content to enucleate it very briefly. The Fourth Way has aroused more discussion. It proceeds from the degrees of being which are observable in the world about us to the existence of an absolute and supreme being. In form it is historically most nearly akin to the kind of proof which St. Anselm uses in the *Monologion*, and the texts of Aristotle to which St. Thomas appeals are in reality from the pseudo-Aristotelian book, *Metaphysics a*. Where you observe, he says, things which are more or less somewhat, you must suppose something which is absolutely and completely so. Where, then, you observe degrees of being, you must conclude that an absolute and supreme being exists....The truth seems to be that Grunwald has been so overwhelmed by the admittedly rather summary terms in which Aquinas expresses himself that he fails to notice that the Fourth Way really amounts to an anticipation of the line of thought by which the being whose existence is demonstrated by the first three ways is seen to be identical with what we usually mean by God. To this we now turn.

St. Thomas has, then, proved the existence of unchanging, uncaused, necessary being. When he goes on to explore what sort of being this must be, it is the notion of being itself which supplies the most characteristically Thomistic line of argument. Contingent things participate in existence, each according to the degree which corresponds with its nature or essence, but they are not their own existence. If their essence included their existence, they would not be contingent but necessary. The privilege of necessary being is that in reality its essence includes or is really identical with its existence (ST I, q. 3, a. iii-iv).

In a necessary being, therefore, there is no composition or metaphysical tension of essence and existence. Essence does not limit or circumscribe existence; necessary being is being itself and pure act (*ipsum esse, actus purus*). If, then, we want to know what we can say about it, we must begin with the notion of being and see that it must comprise all that being positively can be. "Since God is subsistent being itself, nothing of the perfection of being can be wanting in him. The perfections of all things are contained in the perfection of being, for things are perfect in so far as they possess a degree of being; whence it follows that God does not lack the perfection of anything" (ST I, q. 4, a. ii). The ontological argument was invalid, because it proceeded from

the mere notion of infinite being to its actual and necessary existence; St. Thomas, on the other hand, has proved by the application of a causal principle to the facts of experience that a necessary being exists, and can now argue validly that a necessary being must, as pure being, be infinite.

Since there can be only one infinite being, there can be only one God, and, since all pure perfections are contained in God, God must be the supreme intelligence and will. God, therefore, is supremely personal, and this is the real God of religion who revealed himself to Moses as *I am who am* and revealed himself fully and finally in the Incarnate Word. The perfection of the infinite being must inconceivably transcend our finite conceptions, but we have a genuine philosophical knowledge of God as far as it goes. We know that he is infinite being, and that we can rightly attribute to him in its supreme degree and without any admixture of limitation all that we find of perfection in the created world. As we have an analogical knowledge of being, so we have an analogical knowledge of God. With this insight St. Thomas corrects the relatively agnostic attitude of Maimonides, who tends to reduce us to mere negations when we come to speak of God.

God, as subsistent being, is the source of all that in a finite manner participates being. Hence it is a philosophical truth that God is the creator of all things and of every factor in reality, even of *materia prima* (ST I, q. 44, a. i-ii). Aquinas recognizes that Aristotle held the world to have existed eternally, but denies that the reasons given for this opinion are conclusive. The existence of the world is the result of the divine fiat, but it is not necessary that created things should share in the eternity of the creative will. On the contrary, the power of the divine will is such that things exist after the fashion, and specifically with the temporal character, assigned to them by the will of God. It is not, therefore, absurd to assert that the created world had a beginning.

Nevertheless, according to St. Thomas, this cannot be philosophically demonstrated. Since universal concepts are independent of time, they can be instantiated at any time and might be instantiated eternally. Creation belongs to the sphere of divine freedom of choice, which cannot be explored by us on general grounds. Hence there can be no demonstrative reason, either on the part of God or on the part of creatures, by which we could conclude that the world had a beginning. While this is a truth of divine revelation, it cannot be brought into the ambit of philosophy, and St. Thomas issues a friendly warning against trying to provide strictly revealed truths with inadequate philosophical proofs *quae praebeant materiam irridendi infidelibus* (ST I, q. 46, a. i-ii).

§ 7

St. Thomas's moral philosophy is a masterly theistic adaptation of the scheme of the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle. Aristotelian eudaemonism might not seem at first sight a very suitable foundation for a theistic ethic. The notion of obligation takes a subordinate place in Aristotle's theory, although it is not completely absent, for it appears in the form that the good man acts for the sake of the noble (τονχσλού). But the main object of Aristotle's inquiry is, on the assumption that the sense of human striving can be summed up in the complete and lasting happiness which is ενδσσυονίς to ask in what this happiness consists. The answer is given entirely in factors intrinsic to human nature. Happiness consists in the harmonious development and co-ordination of natural human activities, and especially in the intellectual life, which

is the development of the highest part of man and promises a contentment which is uniquely durable and independent of circumstances. This seems to be an eminently self-contained human ethic, in fact *une morale laïque*.

There is a dramatic element in watching how, in the *Prima Secundae*, this is quietly but adroitly transformed into a theistic ethic. The last end of man is described as beatitude, which serves to render $\xi\nu\delta\sigma\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu\acute{\iota}\sigma$, and Aquinas placidly demonstrates that beatitude cannot arise from external or bodily goods. When, however, he has thus narrowed his search to the region of spirit, he does not, like Aristotle, rest in the praises of the intellectual life. While it must be through the soul that man attains to beatitude, he says that the good of which the possession is the source of beatitude must be something beyond the soul itself. For, being aware by thought of good in general, we cannot but hanker after the completeness of good, but any good which is entirely within the soul must be a particular and finite good. Beatitude, therefore, can consist in nothing less than the possession of the supreme good which is God himself. The final aim of man is no longer an immanent perfection but a union with the transcendent Deity.¹

¹ Cf. S. Th. Ia. IIae, qu. 2.

In what does this possession of God consist? St. Thomas says that it must be primarily an intellectual activity. It is clearly not a desire, for this precedes the attainment of good; nor is it primarily joy, for this is a consequence of the fulfilment of desire rather than the fulfilment itself. Beatitude, then, consists essentially in intellectual activity, and obviously in the speculative state of contemplation rather than in the practical use of mind which is reaching out towards goods to be attained. While St. Thomas asserts from experience that speculative knowledge such as we can have in this life is a foretaste of true and perfect beatitude, he realizes that such knowledge is too scrappy and incomplete to be beatitude itself. Beatitude is not knowledge about God but acquaintance with God, the vision of the divine essence.¹

In this way St. Thomas's ethic has linked up with his theology, and in so doing has raised a problem. For the vision of God is not natural to man and cannot be attained by his natural activity, yet it seems that he cannot fulfil himself completely and reach beatitude without it. Although the Christian finds the solution of the difficulty in the supernatural life of grace, this is a free gift of God, and the philosopher as such is not entitled to assume that God wills to bestow it. Aquinas puts the objection to himself that "nature is not lacking in what is necessary. But nothing is so necessary to man as that through which he reaches his last end. Therefore this is not lacking to human nature. Hence man can by his natural powers reach beatitude". He replies that, "as nature is not lacking in what is necessary to man, although it did not provide him with weapons and coverings like the animals, because it provided him with reason and hands by which he could obtain these for himself, so it is not lacking in what is necessary to man, although it did not provide him with the power to reach beatitude, for this was impossible; but it provided him with free will, by which he could turn to God who would confer beatitude upon him".² The point is sound, but questioning is not altogether stilled. In fact this problem of a natural tendency towards a supernatural end remains a centre of discussion in the Thomistic system.

¹ Cf. S. Th. Ia. IIae, qu. 3.

² S. Th. Ia. IIae, qu. 5, art. v, I et ad im,

The Thomistic approach to ethics is, therefore, thoroughly teleological and heteronomous, and appears in extreme contrast with an approach of the Kantian kind through the notion of pure obligation. Obligation arises in the choice of the means which are genuinely appropriate towards the end of beatitude, but the egoistic element is transcended in the specific character of obligations which are not self-regarding. If moral striving is directed not simply towards beatitude, but towards God who is the source of beatitude, it follows that right action must be in conformity with the divine will, which is directed towards the common good of the universe as the created participation of the divine goodness itself. "Hence, in order that anyone should rightly will any particular good, it is necessary that, although what is materially willed is this particular good, what is formally willed should be the common good and the divine good. Therefore the human will is bound to conform with the divine will in its formal object, for it is bound to will the common and divine good" (ST Ia, q. 19, a. x).

In relation to human nature an action is right because it is reasonable. Hence St. Thomas devotes attention not only to the moral virtues, which are habits of right choice, but also to the intellectual virtue of prudence, which is a habit of judging correctly what the right choice should be. While right choice tends to develop the habit of prudence and wrong choice tends to cloud the moral conscience, men must make the intellectual effort necessary to form a right conscience. Aquinas does not think that virtue is knowledge, but he does think that a man will not be completely virtuous unless he uses whatever brains he has to think out what he ought to do.

§ 8

For St. Thomas's political theory it is natural to refer to the *De Regimine Principum*. This is, however, his work only as far as book II, chapter iv, the rest being added later by Ptolemy of Lucca. It was begun as a manual for the political education of a young Lusignan king of Cyprus, and really offers a less comprehensive notion of St. Thomas's social outlook than the synthesis of law in the *Prima Secundae*. It is on this latter that we shall base ourselves.

Aquinas begins characteristically by insisting on the rational character of law. For, law in general being a rule of action, whether positive or negative, it is primarily a dictate of reason, to which it belongs to adjudicate in the order of means and ends. If law is rightful and therefore genuine law, it is willed and enforced because it is reasonable. Hence the rational character of genuine law is central and primary, and law can be defined as "an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by one who has charge of the community" (ST Ia. IIae, q. 90, a. iv).

This brings St. Thomas at once to the ultimate source of law, for the whole universe forms a community in the charge of its Creator. The history of the universe is the working out of the plan of the creative mind of God. Consequently the divine wisdom, in so far as it governs all activities and changes, is an eternal law (ST Ia. IIae, q. 93, a. i). Everything else which can be called by the name of law must in some sense be derived from the eternal law, which is in itself no other than the mind of God.

When, therefore, we speak of the laws of nature, this is not a mere metaphor. The constancies in the physical world which follow upon the natures of existent things reflect the divine mind which eternally contemplates these things as possible. Moreover, it depends upon the divine will that precisely these things should exist

and, by fulfilling their natural tendencies, co-operate in the course of history which God decrees. Purely material things have no power of choice and co-operate blindly; created minds, endowed with free will, are able to yield or to refuse co-operation with the divine plan. If they refuse, the divine plan will not thereby be frustrated, for evil wills are brought into the scheme of divine justice, but in the first instance they are faced with a rule of action which they can obey or not. This is natural law in the sense of natural moral law, which is the participation of the eternal law by a rational creature (ST Ia. IIae, q. 91, a. ii).

There is a parallel between the workings of the speculative and those of the practical reason. In the speculative order there are certain general principles of reason which everyone explicitly or implicitly accepts, but the possibility of disagreement and error emerges and increases as more specific questions are reached. So, in the moral order, the more general imperatives which no one can fail to see, although some may refuse to admit, are contrasted with specific duties about which there may be divergence of opinion from age to age and among individuals in the same age. Truth, nevertheless, is one, and the right application of reason can remove disagreement and error in either sphere. Just as there can be an ascertained body of speculative knowledge, so there can be a true and detailed moral philosophy. Ethical thinking, however, still has a difficulty of its own, for in particular cases it is concerned not with the simple application of a general principle but with taking a multitude of factors into account in due proportion (ST Ia. IIae, q. 94, a. iv).

Natural law is supplemented by positive law, both divine and human. God, having raised man to supernatural life, gives him the divine law, by following which he can preserve and foster this life. Upon this divine law depends the authority of the Church, which from time to time makes human laws for the furtherance of the same spiritual aim. This belongs to St. Thomas's theology rather than to his philosophy, but we may remark that, in spite of the occasional exaggerations of mediaeval Churchmen in the heat of controversy, the essential claim by the Church in the middle ages to supremacy in its own spiritual sphere had historically a great deal to do with the recognition that the powers of the state should rightfully be regarded as limited, and with the attempt to discern what their limits should be. Correspondingly, the political side of the Reformation represents a totalitarian attempt by the state to dominate the spiritual realm and to set up new churches which were its creation, and this has helped in modern times to weight the scales in favour of a conception of the state as

With the consideration of those human positive laws which are the laws of states, we arrive at last at the political theory of St. Thomas. Some laws are concerned only with detailing and enforcing the prescriptions of natural law; these should be the same everywhere, and so belong to what in the middle ages was called *ius gentium*, which is not international law but the common internal law of nations. Other laws determine, where uniformity is desirable, alternatives left open by natural law; these are positive laws in the full sense of the term. Thus, says Aquinas by way of example, it rests with positive law to settle what pains and penalties should be inflicted for different varieties of crimes. Both these kinds of law, however, derive their validity from natural law. The one kind is merely a set of conclusions to be drawn from it; the other depends upon the natural law leaving alternatives open and upon the natural good of society demanding that uniformity should be introduced (ST Ia. IIae, q. 95, a. ii).

Positive laws made in violation of these maxims are, for St. Thomas, not laws at all *magis sunt violentiae quam leges*. In some cases it may be the lesser evil to obey them for the sake of peace; in other cases a stand must be made for principle (ST Ia. IIae, q. 96, a. iv).

In no case, however, do unjust laws carry any obligation of themselves; a doctrine of the juridical omnipotence of parliament would certainly have cut no ice with Aquinas.

St. Thomas wants a reign of law which shall be stable, for he points out that the change of custom brought about by a change of law is a social disturbance of sufficient importance to demand to be compensated by the evident utility of new legislation (ST Ia. IIae, q. 97, a. ii).

The differences of individual cases are such that a certain elasticity must be permitted in the administration of law, but this is a power not to be lightly used (ST Ia. IIae, q. 97, a. iv).

All the time the emphasis is on a stable reign of law whose principles are common to the whole human race.

Asking what is the scope of political legislation, Aquinas proceeds gradually in assigning its due limits. To the question whether human law should restrain all kinds of vice, he replies first that a legislative attempt to repress all evil-doing would defeat its own purpose as being impossible of realization among men as they are. Hence law should be concerned only with major evils and, he adds in a clause whose meaning is expanded in the sequel, mainly those which result in harm to other people and which, if left to take their course, would make it impossible to preserve order in human society (ST Ia. IIae, q. 96, a. ii).

In the next article he inquires whether human law should prescribe every kind of good act. He replies that in one sense there is no kind of virtue which may not be required of the citizen, but that a virtuous act may be demanded of him by law only when it is called for by the common good (ST Ia. IIae, q. 96, a. iii).

This opinion becomes still clearer in a later passage, where he states that “human law is ordained for the sake of civil society, which is that of men in their mutual relations. But the mutual relations of men arise from the external acts by which men affect one another. Now this reciprocity of action belongs to the sphere of justice, which is the proper norm of human society. Therefore human law does not prescribe acts other than those of justice, and, if it prescribes acts of other virtues, it does this only in so far as they assume the nature of justice” (ST Ia. IIae, q. 100, a. ii).

Thus Aquinas finally assigns to political legislation the sphere of justice, cutting off from it not only the affairs of the spiritual community but also those of private and individual life. The principle of the due liberty of the citizen has attained expression.

There remains to inquire who is to be the political legislator. The state of civil society is natural and requires no contract, however implicit, to bring it about.

But it is not the same with the institution of any particular form of government; it cannot be said that any man is naturally designated as the leader and monarch. The right of any particular holder of political power is founded upon the consent of the people, and remains with him as long as he devotes himself to the good of the community as a whole. “To make laws belongs either to the whole people or to some public person who has the care of the whole people” (ST Ia. IIae, q. 90, a. iii).

While there are many legitimate forms of constitution, the best will seek to combine the advantages of all forms traditionally enumerated. “Such is a constitution

in which there is an apt mixture of monarchy, in so far as there is one supreme ruler; of aristocracy, in so far as many share in power according to their deserts; and of democracy or popular rule, in so far as the rulers can be chosen from the people and are chosen by the people” (ST Ia. IIae, q. 105, a. i).

Such is St. Thomas’s political theory, the system of the free citizen in the limited state. In modern times it is rightly associated with the practice and example of England, but it is of very great interest to see that it has its roots in the middle ages and in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Denis Hawkins. *A Sketch of Medieval Philosophy*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1946. This text is in the public domain.