



## St. Bonaventure Denis Hawkins

### §1

The three great mediaeval systems are those of Bonaventure, Aquinas and Duns Scotus. They are all the result of the fruitful intermingling of the older Augustinian tradition with the new Aristotelianism. Of the three, Aquinas is the most Aristotelian and Bonaventure is the least, but it is impossible to represent Bonaventure otherwise than as powerfully affected by Aristotle. He was born in 1221, joined the Franciscan order and studied at Paris under Alexander of Hales. Later he became general of his order and a cardinal, and died while taking part in the Council of Lyons in 1274. His philosophical doctrines are to be discovered mainly in his commentary on the *Sentences of Peter Lombard*; he also composed a number of *Quaestiones Disputatae*, a summary of theology under the name of the *Breviloquium*, and two shorter works of considerable philosophical import, the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* and the *De Reduclione Artium ad Theologiam*.

While all the mediaeval systems are religious philosophies, that of Bonaventure is pre-eminently so. The philosopher is most fully himself when he is not only considering God in the comparatively external relation-ship to the world which consists in being its first cause and last end but is seeking the traces of God in the universe, the reflections of the divine being which is the exemplar after which all things are framed. The whole argument of the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* is the gradual unfolding of these intimations of deity in the created world.

Bonaventure found the mistakes of the pagan thinkers quite natural. He saw clearly and, with less care than Aquinas to save Aristotle's face, was prompt to declare that, according to Aristotle, the world was uncreated and eternal, and God had no thought or care for it. Although, absolutely speaking, right reason might have been sufficient to enlighten Aristotle on these questions, his errors were nevertheless only to be expected from a thinker without the support of faith. Yet, with the restoring power of faith and grace, Bonaventure attributed more to the human reason than Aquinas, for he expected it to be able to demonstrate that the world had a beginning, which Aquinas thought to be inaccessible to reason alone.

The general headings under which Bonaventure expounds his proofs of the existence of God are that this is a truth impressed upon all minds, a truth which every creature proclaims, and a truth which is in itself most certain and evident. Under the first heading he insists that the natural human tendency towards the true and the good is implicitly a tendency towards the absolute truth and absolute good, which is God. The consciousness of the self naturally expands into an awareness of God, who is intimately present to the self. Hence the existence of God is not a question for subtle and complex argument; it becomes evident upon the least reflection.

These and similar utterances of Bonaventure have led some critics to suppose that he was what in later terminology came to be called an ontologist, one who believed that we naturally had some immediate knowledge of God and a vision of all things in God. Grunwald, for example, thinks that an other than ontologistic interpretation is scarcely possible. This, however, seems to be reading into Bonaventure a good deal more than is really there. It is true that he describes his arguments as rather intellectual exercises than reasons conferring evidence upon the conclusion which they are intended to prove. Yet, in the very next paragraph, he draws a clear distinction between God's full comprehension of himself, the immediate vision of God in heaven, and the partial and relatively obscure knowledge of God which men are capable of having on earth. This last is due to the recognition of a supratemporal cause of man's temporal existence, and is thus plainly the result of reasoning, however brief and however obvious. It is true, also, that Bonaventure speaks of the knowledge of God as innate in the rational mind (*cognitio huius veri innata est menti rationali*), but it would be an antihistorical error to press this term in the sense of a later philosophy which Bonaventure never anticipated. In the context it appears clearly enough that Bonaventure meant that the recognition of God was natural to man and required only a momentary reflection and reasoning to which nature itself impelled him. Philosophical arguments for the existence of God were merely the making explicit and drawing out at length of a process of thought which the natural man had already made spontaneously and implicitly.

The arguments collected under the second and third headings are precisely the making explicit of the grounds upon which man naturally recognizes the existence of God. That every creature proclaims its creator, as Augustine had said, covers the different forms of the causal argument. Caused being proclaims uncaused being; possible being proclaims necessary being; limited being proclaims unlimited being; changeable being proclaims unchangeable being.

Under the heading that the existence of God is a truth certain and evident in itself, Bonaventure expounds both the ontological argument of Anselm and the Augustinian argument from eternal truth. He does not share St. Thomas's critical objections to the Anselmian argument, and is content to repeat it. On the whole, Bonaventure is not very critical of the various efforts made by his predecessors to make evident the truth of the existence of God, just because it is so very obvious to him. A more critical philosopher will perhaps discriminate the values of the different lines of thought set out by Bonaventure, but he will acknowledge in him the verification of the Pauline saying that God is not far from every one of us, at any rate if we think with rational impartiality and rational simplicity. It is not difficult to rise from contingent, caused and limited being to being which is necessary, uncaused and infinite, and this is God. Such, at least, is Bonaventure's position.

## § 2

On the burning question of the relationship between creation and time, Bonaventure stands firmly for the view that, as soon as the genuine notion of creation is established, it follows that the created world had a beginning. The great Arabic philosophers had thought differently. While the orthodox Mohammedan theologians held to the notion of creation as a beginning of time, and Alfarabi still regarded matter as emanating from God, Avicenna and Averroes set matter up as a principle coeternal with God and

independent of him. With Avicenna this is a clear-cut dualism of a principle of utter being and a principle of utter non-being; with Averroes matter has more of being in so far as it actively tends towards form. For both, however, matter is eternal, and the mediate activity of God which confers form upon it and constitutes the cosmos is likewise eternal.

The Latin Averroists, as far as they dared, adopted the position of Averroes. Among the orthodox scholastics Albertus Magnus maintained that it could not be philosophically demonstrated that matter was created; this had to be accepted on grounds of religious faith. Given, however, that matter was created, it followed that the world could not have existed eternally. Aquinas took precisely the opposite view. That creation extended to all finite being and every principle of being, not excluding matter, was rationally demonstrable, but it could not be proved philosophically that the result of the creative act was not eternal, as was the creative act itself. It was the doctrine of a beginning of time which had to be accepted on faith.

Bonaventure here attributed greater power to reason than did either Albert or Thomas. He shows himself not uninfluenced by Albert, inasmuch as he appears to believe it to be more evident that, if matter was created, the world had a beginning, than that matter was indeed created. He remarks that, if matter were a principle uncreated and coeternal with God, it would be more reasonable to suppose that the divine action upon it was eternal than to think that this began at a moment separated from the present only by a finite duration. Nevertheless he maintains that it can be established that all being is from God and that, if this is so, it follows very clearly that the world had a beginning.

Some of his arguments are based on the difficulties connected with an infinite multitude. An infinite multitude, he says, cannot be increased, nor can it compose an ordered series of units which can be traversed one by one. But time is an ordered series which is traversed from moment to moment, and the number of moments is being continually increased. Moreover, if men had always existed, there would by now be an infinite multitude of souls, unless one were to take refuge in the erroneous hypothesis either of the transmigration of souls or of the unity of soul in the entire human race. But an infinite multitude of simultaneously existent things is surely an absurdity.

A critic might be disposed to judge that the modern mathematical theory of infinite numbers had taken the sting out of these arguments of Bonaventure. The series, say, of all whole numbers is an ordered infinite series. Nor are all infinite numbers equal or incapable of increase; the infinite number which is the sum of all even numbers can be added to the infinite number which is the sum of all odd numbers to make the infinite number which is the sum of all whole numbers. Bonaventure cannot, however, be refuted so easily. The success of a mathematical theory does not prove that the concepts with which it deals are not fictions but can be realized. Bonaventure might still retort that his arguments really concerned the application of the notion of infinite number to existent things. The point at issue is whether an infinite number is necessarily a fiction or not.

In any case there was another and more decisive consideration which prompted the opinion of Bonaventure. For he plainly believed that he discerned an essential connection between causality and time, such that being caused entailed having a beginning. He refers to Augustine's image of an eternal foot making an eternal footprint on an eternal ground. That is conceivable, he says in effect, but the ground

would not in that case be created. If matter were eternal, God would not be the sole absolute being. Absolute being would comprise both God and matter; there might still be a relation of consequence between the divine activity and the information of matter, but this would not be what is meant by causation in the full sense of the term, and we could not speak of creation. He was evidently reaching out towards a distinction between a relation of real consequence which was indifferent to time and a relation of causation in which time was embodied, but the terminology was not available and he did not invent it. It is clear, however, that for Bonaventure, being created was inseparable from having a beginning, and his more discursive arguments were rather in the nature of confirmation of this primary acknowledgment.

### § 3

It was more or less common ground among the thinkers of the thirteenth century that the finiteness and change-ability of things other than God was rooted in their being metaphysically composite. There was in them both a unity and a tension of opposed principles of being, related as determinable and determinant. Both with corporeal and with spiritual beings, Bonaventure speaks of this metaphysical composition in terms of matter and form. The modern reader must be warned that, in the mouth of Bonaventure, the statement that spirits are composed of matter and form does not imply that he held them to be material in the sense in which that word is now employed. For it is now usually taken as synonymous with corporeal, but for Bonaventure the “matter “ of spiritual beings was very different from the matter of corporeal things.

This brings us to another point that for Bonaventure the matter even of corporeal things is not the completely indeterminate principle of pure potentiality which is the first matter of Aristotle and the *materia prima* of St. Thomas Aquinas. The matter of sublunary bodies is already something in its own right, apart from form. In common with many other thinkers of the period, Bonaventure conceives corporeal matter in a way which belongs more to physics than to metaphysics. Matter is the ultimate substratum of bodies, and it is because all bodies have the same substratum that even the elementary bodies are capable of transformation one into another. Nevertheless, matter possesses a definite character as matter, for it is what all bodies have in common, and it possesses a seminal force to assume, under the appropriate conditions, the forms which it is capable of assuming.

In connection with the composition of things out of matter and form occurs the problem of the source of individuality. For matter, considered in abstraction, is the common element in all bodies. Form, on the other hand, is brought by the mediaeval thinkers into very close relation with the universal concept. To think in universal terms is to abstract form from matter. Forms, therefore, appear in abstraction to be universal elements, features which one thing shares, or may share, with others. With an analysis of things into matter and form, individuality seems to evaporate. Yet the individual alone is real. What is the metaphysical ground of individuality?

When Bonaventure considers this question, he remarks that some attribute individuation to matter on the ground that forms are the objects of universal concepts, while matter makes them real and, consequently, individual. Others, however, regarding individuality as the final perfection of the existent thing, attribute it to a final form supervening upon merely specific determination. Bonaventure comments

bluntly that it does not require much intelligence to see that neither view is satisfactory (*Quaelibet istarum positionum aliquid habet, quod homini non multum intelligent! rationabilius videri potest improbabile*). For matter is common to all bodies, while form must be upheld to be correlative with the universal concept.

Bonaventure's own opinion is that individuality arises from the actual conjunction of matter with form. He compares matter with wax and form with a seal; the wax is not differentiated until it is impressed with the seal, while the seal remains one in itself and only its impressions are multiplied. In the sequel, however, he comes nearer to the view which we shall find to be that of Aquinas. To be an individual, he says, is to be *hoc aliquid*, this thing of a determinate nature. 'But to be this results primarily from matter, on account of which a thing is situated in space and time, while its determinate nature is the contribution of form. Hence matter confers existence upon form, and form makes matter to be something determinate (*Existere dat materiae formae, sed essendi actum dat forma materiae*).

#### § 4

For the human soul, as having an activity of thought and will which is independent of the body, Bonaventure vindicates a considerable degree of substantial independence. While the body is composed of corporeal matter and corporeal form, the soul is composed of spiritual matter and spiritual form. Bonaventure mentions the opinion of those who, like Aquinas, assigned to the soul no other composition than that of essence and existence, but he objects that this is insufficient to make it a subject of independent change and activity. Where there is change, he maintains, there must be a principle of plasticity and tendency, and this is precisely matter in its widest meaning.

This applies only to the human soul; the vital principle of brute animals, which has no activity independent of the organism, must be regarded as no more than a corporeal form. The human soul, although composed of matter and form, is not spatially extended. Bonaventure repels this notion by insisting once again on the distinction between corporeal matter, which entails spatial extension, and spiritual matter, which is a principle of plasticity exempt from spatial limitations.

Nor will he admit that his theory makes body and soul into separate substances. Matter and form make up a complete substance when their union exhausts their mutual tendencies, but, in the case of human nature, the soul has a further tendency or appetite towards an appropriate organism, and the human body has a similar appetite to be completed by the soul. Hence, while the soul can and, after death, does exist and act separately, it is still not substantially complete in itself; body and soul are both necessary to full human nature. This, it must be confessed, sounds more like an ingenious verbal expedient than a really satisfactory answer.

Bonaventure names the faculties of the soul in Augustinian fashion as memory, understanding and will. On the question of the relationship between the soul and its faculties he does not profess to have attained complete clearness, but he makes an interesting attempt to reach a satisfactory point of view. It has always been a difficult matter to define. If powers are put on a level with actual qualities, they cease to be powers and begin to masquerade as explanatory factors, like the *virtus dormitiva* of which Moliere made fun. But it is evident that they belong to the sphere of description and not of explanation. They are not, however, mere names; to say that a man has the

power of thinking is really significant, even when he is not actually thinking.

Bonaventure rejects both extremes. He rejects the opinion which reduces a power to a mere relation between the substance and its activity, in spite of the ostensible authority of Augustine. This would make a power to be nothing at all when the substance is in fact inactive. He rejects also the opinion, attributed to Hugh of St. Victor, that powers are qualities like other qualities and mutually distinguished in the way in which accidental qualities are distinguished. The formula at which he arrives states that powers are not accidental determinations of substance but belong reductively to the sphere of substance itself; nevertheless they are not to be completely identified with substance, for they differ from it and among themselves precisely as powers.

## § 5

Bonaventure's view of the nature of thinking is a characteristic part of his philosophy. He is the most prominent exponent of a theory of divine illumination of the intellect which had many supporters among the more Augustinian scholastics. Its ancestry is plainly to be found in the Platonic system of ideas which are at the same time ideals, standards which are only imperfectly realized in the objects of experience but in relation to which these objects are judged by the mind. Justice is but poorly manifested in human affairs, but we judge the actions of men by a consummate standard of justice which is justice itself. No individual man realizes all of which human nature is capable, but we judge the worth of men in accordance with a standard of perfect humanity. Augustine indicated this feature of thinking as the point of contact between the human mind and the eternal truth of God, and as a means by which it could be seen that there existed an eternal truth which was no other than the mind of God. Many of the scholastics, and among them Bonaventure, drew this out into a theory of the divine illumination of the human mind in its natural activity.

It is made quite clear by Bonaventure that this illumination signifies more than the universal creative causation by which God is the source of all things. If it were only this, he says, God could not be said to bestow wisdom in any fuller sense than he makes the earth fruitful, nor could knowledge be held to proceed more directly from him than wealth.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is altogether different from the vision of God which is the privilege of heaven and proceeds not from nature but from grace. If not, then, from God simply as *principium creativum*, and not from him as *donum infusum*, this illumination must be said to be from him as *ratio movens*.

It must be confessed that Bonaventure's positive view is lacking in final precision. It would be tempting to father some clear cut interpretation upon him, but it would be unhistorical and- probably unjust. Perhaps a useful clue is afforded by his use of the word *imago*. A created thing, he says, is related to the divine exemplar as trace, image or likeness (*vestigium, imago, similitudo*). Material things are merely *vestigia Dei*; likeness in the full sense (*similitudo*) belongs only to the supernatural life; but a created mind is already by its nature *imago Dei*. In what way can human thinking be said to be in a special sense an image of the divine mind? Bonaventure would point to ideal standards and to the necessity and certainty of genuine universal propositions as possessing a character which transcends the contingent particular things to which they may be applied. There is a sense in which we may be said to judge contingent things with reference to a truth which is superior to them, which is in fact absolute.

It is not that we have a direct vision of absolute truth, but absolute truth is implied in the higher functions of the understanding. In the universality and necessity of thinking we reflect in a special way the activity of the divine mind. The created mind is *imago Dei*.

In the third chapter of the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* Bonaventure applies this conception to the whole mental life. Memory, taken in Augustinian fashion as the primary function of mind in static simplicity, reflects the divine mind in more than one way. In envisaging past, present and future it transcends the successiveness of time and reflects the divine eternity. In the formation of pure abstractions such as points and moments it displays a power independent of and superior to the influence of the objects of sense. In the apprehension of immutable general truths it reflects the unchangingness of God.

Similar considerations are alleged about the understanding as the discursive function of mind. The penetration of the meaning of a term, which is to define it, is incomplete until it is resolved into the notion of being, and until what kind of being the thing is can be stated. But the limitation of a finite being cannot be understood without some sort of knowledge of the positive perfection of which it is devoid. Hence a genuine comprehension of the nature of anything is at the same time an implicit recognition of infinite being too. So also the certainty of general truths and the necessity of inferences cannot be derived exclusively from the contingent and changing facts which provide their material.

Of the will Bonaventure says that deliberation about what is better implies some conception of what is best, that right choice depends upon the recognition of a law superior to finite mind, and that desire of any good presupposes the universal attraction of absolute good. "See, therefore, how near the soul is to God, and how memory presents it with eternity, understanding with truth, and choice with absolute goodness, each by its proper activity."

These instances of Bonaventure are not beyond cavil, and a critical analysis might reduce their claims and make them yield more modest, although more precise, conclusions. Our present business, however, is rather to describe than to appraise. Yet, even if Bonaventure is not so exact a thinker as he might be, and even if he sometimes mistakes for a premiss leading to the acknowledgment of the divine being what is really a conclusion from it, we should not fail to perceive the core of hard thinking which gives solidity to his work. His absorption in God is that not only of a religious man but of a genuine metaphysician.

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