

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AND POSTMODERNISM*

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Today I shall try to do what I've always been raring to do: contextualize St. Thomas Aquinas in our time, the postmodern time. Indeed, if I accept this invitation to read a paper today, it is in large measure because how you call this event – the St. Thomas Day Lecture – is quite appealing to me. You can be sure, then, of my highest regard for this saintly man who richly deserves his reputation as *the* Catholic philosopher. In this paper, I shall follow his thinking as literally as I can, and where this is not possible I shall nevertheless attempt to remain faithful to what I consider to be the spirit of his philosophy, and where even that becomes impossible I shall humbly acknowledge my inability to pursue his thought any further. Since I am writing this in the manner of someone who's thinking aloud for himself and within the hearing of others, I cannot at this early point anticipate the end of my discourse. I cannot even guess how far my own thought will be able to run parallel to that of the Angelic Doctor and at what point my wings will have already been clipped so that I shall no longer be able to soar so swiftly and so loftily.

I shall start at random, and so far the most convenient place for me to start momentarily is with Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical Letter of 1879, *Aeterni Patris*, which "remains to this day the one papal document of such authority devoted entirely to philosophy."¹ Here we are reminded of how the Apostle Paul "warns us that the faithful of Christ are often deceived in mind 'by philosophy and vain deceit,' and that thus the sincerity of faith is corrupted in men." The Encyclical continues:

For this reason the Supreme Pastors of the Church have always held that it is part of their office to advance, with all their power, knowledge truly so called; but at the same time to watch with the greatest care that all human learning shall be imparted according to the rule of the Catholic Faith. Especially is this true of "philosophy," on which

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¹ Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 1999), 57. Henceforth referred to as FR.

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

the right treatment of other sciences depends in great measure... Now, by the importance of this matter, and by the state of the times, We are forced again to write to you, that you may so organize the course of philosophical studies as to insure their perfect correspondence with the gift of Faith, and also their agreement with the dignity of human knowledge.

A few points stand out from this paragraph. There is, on the one hand, the Church's great esteem for philosophy, something that continues to this day,² and there is, on the other hand, her cautious regard for philosophy's tendency to deceive if it is not organized in "perfect correspondence with the gift of Faith."³

It is easy to see that the Pope is setting the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas as the exemplary model for a philosophy that corresponds perfectly with faith.⁴ A paragraph later he will trace the "root of all the evils which are

² A proof of this great esteem of the Church for philosophy is the relatively recent Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II entitled *Fides et Ratio* (1998). Among others, it admits that "the Church cannot but set great value upon reason's drive to attain goals which render people's lives ever more worthy. She sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life. At the same time, the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it." (FR, 5) Through this Encyclical Letter, "the Church reaffirms the need to reflect upon the truth" and philosophy, with its "enduring appeal to the search for truth," is cited as having "the great responsibility of forming thought and culture; and now it must strive resolutely to recover its original vocation." (FR, 6)

³ For his part, Pope John Paul II describes as 'philosophical pride' what he refers to as "the temptation to identify one single stream with the whole of philosophy." (FR, 4) He observes that "at the present time in particular, the search for ultimate truth seems often to be neglected...(R)reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them. Sundered from that truth, individuals are at the mercy of caprice... In short, the hope that philosophy might be able to provide definitive answers to these questions has dwindled." (FR, 5)

⁴ This is no less the case with Pope John Paul II who claims that "the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology." (FR, 43) He quotes his predecessor, Paul VI, who says: "Without doubt, Thomas possessed supremely the courage of the truth, a freedom of spirit in confronting new problems, the intellectual honesty of those who allow Christianity to be contaminated neither by secular philosophy nor by a prejudiced rejection of it. He passed therefore into the history of Christian thought as a pioneer of the new path of philosophy and universal culture. The key point and almost the kernel of the solution which, with all the brilliance of this prophetic intuition, he gave to the new encounter of faith and reason as a

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

now overwhelming us" in the fact that "evil teaching about things, human and divine, has come forth from the schools of philosophers." This "evil teaching" has "crept into all the orders of the State" and has been "received with the common applause of very many." Thus, the *Summa* is here posed against the "darkness of error" prevalent in our time. And so on.

What the Encyclical says about the work of St. Thomas Aquinas is, to me, highly accurate. However, what it says about our time, if applied to our time, may only be partly correct. This is why I would like us to sort of review the present human condition as mirrored in the philosophy or philosophies which I will here describe as postmodern. There might be other ways of doing this, but my expertise being limited to philosophy I am therefore constrained to cover only the ones that belong to it.

The *Summa Theologica* is a work of theology just as much as it is a work of philosophy. To St. Thomas, metaphysics (which is the queen of the sciences) is simultaneously concerned with being and with God. Following Aristotle's suggestion that we need a science that inquires into the ultimate reason and principle of all things, this science (which is metaphysics) is inevitably bound with the first cause which is God. And so metaphysics (which is the other name for philosophy) is also a theology.

I mentioned the name of Aristotle advisedly. A teacher of mine, when I was still a student of the Pontifical University, used to say that St. Thomas is ninety percent Aristotle. If that means anything at all, it is that Thomistic philosophy has a basis in science, which happens to be Aristotelian. If the metaphysics of Thomas is fundamentally theological, that of Aristotle is fundamentally scientific. Ergo, the metaphysics of Thomas is rooted in Aristotelian physics. That explains the ease by which the Angelic Doctor is able to formulate the cosmological argument for God's existence. Metaphysics is an extension of physics.

The lesson this teaches us is that our philosophical exemplar is not to be without scientific competence, which in the days of St. Thomas might not have been insurmountable. Aristotle's hylemorphic theory of the universe seemed to suffice, something which is lame for our time. What was competent in the seventeenth century is understandably weak in the twenty-first. But the weakness is not to be imputed to St. Thomas, who could not

reconciliation between the secularity of the world and the radicality of the Gospel, thus avoiding the unnatural tendency to negate the world and its values while at the same time keeping faith with the supreme and inexorable demands of the supernatural order." (FR, 43)

have known better. We can, indeed, take it for granted that Thomas' grasp of science was adequate, but to make the hylemorphic doctrine as the scientific basis of philosophy would not have been appropriate in our days. If St. Thomas were doing his *Summa Theologica* today, he would blush in shame if he were to base his theology solely on the physics of Aristotle.

And so there's nothing wrong with the philosophy of St. Thomas as it stands. What will be wrong is to adopt it literally for our time. I suspect that St. Thomas, if living today, would not even do that. One reason why he will not do that is because, if his intent is to pose a challenge to the "darkness" of our age, the Aristotelian theory will not even manage to pose a challenge. The postmodern age which is built upon the likes of Einstein will not be willing even to waste its time on a paradigm whose days are gone.

But let me pause at this point to make sure that you have not misunderstood me. What I am saying is that the theory of hylemorphism may no longer be made the basis of today's St. Thomas Aquinas, but this is not to mean that we should not try to understand Aristotle in preparation for Aquinas. What I'm trying to say is that, in imitation of our philosopher, we are expected to have a credible grasp of the science of our time. And, as in the days of Thomas, this is an enormous project to undertake, certainly more so now than any time before.

I would like to take this up in more details. The hylemorphic theory, as everybody knows, states that all things are made up of matter and form. It would be deceptive to treat these two terms, matter and form, as though their meaning has remained unaltered through the centuries. As early as George Berkeley (1685-1753) the concept of matter as an underlying substrate has been challenged, and in the hands of David Hume it simply explodes. Whereas form is an objective component in Aristotle and St. Thomas, it is reduced to something subjective (*a priori*) in Kant and never reverts to its former 'noumenal' objectivity in Husserl.

Too, causality is never the same again after David Hume has made it bomb. The necessary connection between cause and effect is only a tautological connection; in reality we connect two events or objects through sheer force of habit. Thus, it is only our mind which makes for a series of connections leading to a first causality; that first causality is a lazy man's solution. What we call a thing or substance is merely a bundle of impressions; there's nothing to connect them, and so the thing is not a thing.

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

If you think that's a crazy thought, then think again. People are now likening Hume to the Buddha who has theorized long before modernity that the self is not a self. The no-self theory or *anatta* is gaining reputation. Everything is *lila*, the Hindu will say; all's a play. When referring to words, it's Wittgenstein's language-games.

By the time you reach this far, you will already have a hard time finding a niche for the matter and form of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. And their metaphysics which is also a theology makes for a non-entity. Now have we arrived at what Pope Leo XIII's encyclical calls "the darkness of error"? I would like to answer this straightaway with a 'no'.

This is perhaps where we should remind ourselves that the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas is an unfinished opus.⁵ That he refused to bring it to completion is, according to his biography, due to his perception that all those written volumes are nothing but straw compared to what has been revealed to him. This is, I think, the best of St. Thomas Aquinas, the best of both the philosopher and the saint in him. This single gesture by which he deconstructs his own thoughts is what in fact links him to postmodernity. Through it he has avoided the supreme pitfall of Hegel who has sealed the closure of his system. In the case of Thomas, it is not the philosopher but those who came after him, so-called Thomists, who

⁵ Josef Pieper recounts what is supposedly contained in the acts of the canonization process of St. Thomas Aquinas: "On the feast of St. Nicholas, in the year 1273, as Thomas turned back to his work after Holy Mass, he was strangely altered. He remained steadily silent; he did not write; he dictated nothing. He laid aside the *Summa Theologica* on which he had been working. Abruptly, in the middle of the treatise on the Sacrament of Penance, he stopped writing. Reginald, his friend, asks him, troubled: 'Father, how can you want to stop such a great work?' Thomas answers only, 'I can write no more.' Reginald of Piperno seriously believed that his master and friend have become mentally ill through his overwhelming burden of work. After a long while, he asks and urges once again. Thomas gives the answer: 'Reginald, I can write no more. All that I have written seems to me nothing but straw.' Reginald is stunned by this reply. Some time later, as he had often done before, Thomas visits his younger sister, the Countess of San Severino, near Salerno. It is the same sister who had aided Thomas in his escape from the castle of San Giovanni, nearly thirty years ago. Shortly after his arrival, his sister turns to his traveling companion, Reginald, with a startled question: what has happened to her brother? He is like one struck dumb and has scarcely spoken a word to her. Reginald once more appeals to Thomas: Would he tell him why he has ceased writing and what it is that could have disturbed him so deeply? For a long time, Thomas remains silent. Then he repeats: 'All that I have written seems to me nothing but straw...compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.'" Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O'Connor, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1965), pp. 39-40.

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

have fixed his system into something like a dogma. We can thus count it as a work of grace that Thomas himself refused to finish it, even declaring it to be thrash.

This finale of his life's work qualifies him among the philosophers of the highest rank. Socrates, for one, is reputed to be the wisest of men for his having stood out as the only one who knows that he does not know.⁶ This learned ignorance is the stance of the landmark thinkers of both East and West, including Lao Tzu and Immanuel Kant, and this cloud of unknowing becomes indeed an unassailable component of the age beyond the classical age. What distinguishes the postmodern man and woman is the unflinching consciousness of one's supreme ignorance. So much so that a Michael Polanyi is no longer hazy about the status of our knowledge as no more than 'personal knowledge.'⁷

What happened to St. Thomas Aquinas is the normal destiny of an earnest searcher after truth who tirelessly pursues his calling until the end, culminating (*a la* Kant) in the realization that all knowledge is only phenomenal. Those younger than Kant, whom we now refer to as the German idealists, refused to give in and struggled to prove the ability of our reason to know things absolutely (which they call Science), only to raise hell from all quarters so soon as Hegel's phenomenology became complete.

We now know better. The rational animal is not everything that man is, but the dream of reason has been thoroughly explored through at least two millennia of Western history. Within this history is the experiment of that metaphysical reason which hopes to find in God the final goal of knowledge. It turns out that that divine residue is not good enough; it is then supplanted, epistemologically that is, by the monadic cogito which is now called by various names, such as consciousness, apperception, ego,

⁶ Apology 21d.

⁷ "I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill... Such is the *personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding. But this does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; a contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe the fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge." Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

spirit, reason. It is the perfection of this cogito or reason which is properly called Enlightenment and which aims at Science.

Thus, the whole stretch from ancient Greece to modern Europe is all of classical history which is based on the assumption that the human goal is the perfectibility of man's rational nature. This is what Martin Heidegger calls the "first beginning" and what Husserl perceives as the crisis of European philosophy is actually the coming to its end of this first beginning or the classical age. The post-classical age, also called by the Heidegger the "second beginning", is thus post-rational and post-Enlightenment. Aristotle's rational animal now gives way to Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Heidegger's *Dasein*. The cogito, as the fundamental assumption of knowledge, bursts and scatters, leaving no traces of assumptions in its trail. All foundations are now left in ruins.

It is this which St. Thomas understood when he dismissed his *Summa Theologica* as nothing but straw. He saw the fragility of all knowledge. Before him came floundering all doctrines and propositions strung together by the flimsy thread of the cogito. The majestic syllogistic structures he helped construct through impressive analysis crumbled like the twin towers of New York being hit by midget machines. Thomas knew only too well that "all is vanity." Indeed, "what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Eccl. 1:1-2) The search for the principle of knowledge ends with the realization that there are no principles, that all so-called principles belong to us and not to the "thing itself."

In saying that all is straw, is Thomas being an atheist, a corrupter of the mind? No one of us, I'm sure, will dare say that. On the contrary, we will attribute such a statement to a higher spiritual experience, to a more sublime revelation. All that is straw only when compared to that which is revealed to us. Is that similar to Nicholas of Cusa's *visio intellectualis*? In any case, it is unmistakably a certain mystical intuition. When Henri Bergson says that mysticism is the future of this which Freud calls an illusion, he (Bergson) means that the mystic is no illusory evolute of the vital urge or *elan vital*.⁸ Rational animal, pushed to its limits, crosses its own bounds and its transformed imagination turns into a mystical consciousness.

⁸ To Bergson, "the essence of the new religion was to be the diffusion of mysticism" and "the task of the great mystic is to effect a radical transformation of humanity by setting an example." Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1935), pp. 238 and 239.

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

There is nothing to fear, then. The anxiety over the postmodern tendency toward radical nihilism is not a bad thing at all. What's worrisome is not radical nihilism such as that of Nietzsche but selective nihilism such as that of most everyone of us. I would say that St. Thomas' summary demolition of his vast work as nothing but straw is a type of radical nihilism, the type that gives access to another radically new experience which I here refer to as the mystic consciousness. Allow me to give you another eminent, though a less pious, example: Ludwig Wittgenstein.

We normally distinguish between two Wittgensteins: Wittgenstein I of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and Wittgenstein II of the *Philosophical Investigations*. There has to be a real distinction between the early and later Wittgenstein if we consider the latter's admission that he is "forced to recognize grave mistakes in what (he) wrote in that first book." (*Philosophical Investigations*, Preface) These "grave mistakes," however, seem to have already dawned on him by the time he finished the first book, as shown in the following aphorism:

6.54 ...anyone who understands me eventually recognizes (my propositions) as nonsensical, when has used them – as steps –to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

This aphorism precedes the very last proposition, so that by now the ladder has already been almost completely climbed. This ladder, as everyone knows, refers to the logic whose philosophy Wittgenstein develops in the book, which is akin to the one Russell and Whitehead have done in the *Principia Mathematica*. Just to give an example, this would be like Aristotle having tediously formulated his *Organon* in five books, only to be condemned by him in the end as "nonsensical." Aristotle, of course, did not do that, and this spells the difference between him and Wittgenstein, who is now doing just that with his logic. What madness is this? Allow me to quote myself in a recent published work.

The history of Western philosophy has predominantly been given to the perfection of scientific reason, perhaps its greatest contribution to humanity. The rational device by which to do this is through a logic that belongs to reason itself, requiring strict and rigid standards before any judgment can qualify as scientific. Aristotle's *Organon*, the

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

earlier Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and Russell's *Principia Mathematica* are three major classics in this connection. Together, they constitute the 'ladder' which the later Wittgenstein dares to 'throw away.' (Karunungan, 2004, p. 98)

This is where I connect what's happening to postmodernism. Allow me to continue.

Throwing the ladder of reason, Wittgenstein thus joins Heidegger in the courageous move to cross over to 'the other shore,' here taken to mean the effort to go beyond reason into that *common and unknown root of knowledge* which, Heidegger says, Kant is able to identify as the *imagination*. Following Kant, Heidegger concludes that "everything in the essence of pure knowledge that has a synthetic structure is brought about by the imagination." Further, the transcendental imagination "is transformed into more original 'possibilities' so that even the name 'imagination' becomes inadequate."

What I'm trying to say is that Wittgenstein's throwing away of the 'ladder' is perhaps about the wisest move that anyone who has mastered his logic can undertake. Had he not done this, he would have become a prisoner of it and unable to bring him to more creative shores. It is because Kant has brought humanity to the epistemological limits through his critique of pure reason that the imagination is able to charter paths hitherto unknown. Not only Hegel, but also Husserl, has tried to confine us to the scientific work of reason, but it is Marx and Heidegger – both children of Hegel and Husserl, respectively – who dare go beyond their masters and thereby create even greater possibilities for mankind.

Had Wittgenstein not thrown away his ladder he would not have helped us discover and justify the countless language-games of ordinary life. And so, this 'letting-go' is coming from strength rather than weakness, and the 'ladder' can properly be dismissed only by one who has a full command of it.

Thus, Wittgenstein's open admission of the inadequacy of his own philosophy is singular and, one might say, unprecedented...The 'ladder' which he has painstakingly

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

designed in the *Tractatus* is now to be 'thrown away,' but only by him who has thoroughly understood it... The scientific venture of the first book is now given up as a child's language-game, fully conscious that "even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched."
(*Karunungan*, 2004, p. 90)

Wittgenstein, like Heidegger, has brought us to what the latter calls "the other shore." That "other shore" is what I mean here by postmodernity. My thesis is that, by dismissing his *Summa Theologica* as nothing but straw, St. Thomas Aquinas is able to prefigure this paradigm shift. In this St. Thomas is postmodern.

There is, however, another point that I wish to show you. The 'missing link' between the classical and the post-classical paradigms is a mystical point. Let me quote Wittgenstein:

6.522 There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

"They *make themselves manifest*" is underscored not by me but by Wittgenstein. How different is that from what St. Thomas has to tell us, that all is merely a straw *compared to what has been revealed*? This is what Josef Pieper calls in his book "the silence of St. Thomas." This jibes well with Wittgenstein's last proposition:

7 What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

This mystic silence is what I would like to explore in the future, but it would lead us too much astray if I pursued it now. Still, I want you to see another point before I bring this paper to a close. This, which I call 'mystical point', has no name, and moreover it leads into countless ways. One can say that, once crossed, it becomes the ecological dimension that colors all our actions. It makes for the difference between classical and post-classical behavior.

The postmodern consciousness is thus a mystical consciousness in a secular environment. It is religious in a world of irreligious concerns. Perhaps this is why we are called by Christ to cease being judgmental, for in these global

Br. Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD, Ph.D.

times we shall be at home in Nietzsche's transvaluation of values, where evil can look good and virtue can look evil. This is why St. Thomas is undoubtedly right in situating ethics in a law that goes beyond what is written. There is, he says, an unwritten law, placed there by the divine hand itself, written no longer in tablets of stone but in our hearts.

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