AQUINAS ON ARISTOTLE AND CREATION
USE OR MISUSE?

The question of the Aristotelianism of Aquinas has no better theatre of debate than Aquinas' discussions of creation. Perhaps on no other issue can one find so much controversy involving the «pure» Aristotle, the «pure» Thomas, the nature of Thomas' commentaries and even what Thomas understood himself to be doing in his use of Aristotle. The fact that Thomas employed Aristotle in his discussions of creation raises serious concerns among modern scholars about Thomas' reading of Aristotle, especially of the *Metaphysics*[1]. According to some Thomas turned the water of pagan philosophy into the wine of Christian theology and was thereby writing as a theologian[2]. There are not a few, on the other hand, who argue that

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[1] Since the work of Eduard Zeller in the late 19th century, it has become customary for scholars to distinguish between the young «Platonic» Aristotle and the mature «independent» Aristotle. E. ZELLER, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtliche Entwicklung*, 5th ed. (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1920-1923). W. Jaeger later employed Zeller's work to identify the authentic Aristotle and the various stages of thought as opposed to the material of later editors. W. JAEGER, *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Metaphysik des Aristoteles* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1912). More recent scholarship has witnessed a return to the study of the *Metaphysics* as a unity; e.g., E. BERTI, «Origine et originalité de la métaphysique aristotélicienne»: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 63 (1981) 227-252; F. INCIARTE, «Die Einheit der aristotelisiche *Metaphysik*»: *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 101 (1994) 1-21. In either approach, the notion of creation in Aristotle is generally disallowed except as it may be found in certain presuppositions or as the implicit yet logical conclusion to certain arguments; e.g., R. JOLIVET, «Aristote et la notion de création»: *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 19 (1930)5-50, 209-235. Those who study Thomas' commentary on the *Metaphysics* bolster this reading of Aristotle as they emphasize the great advance on the philosophical discussion made by Aquinas as a Christian philosopher; e.g., F. X. MEEHAM, *Efficient Causality in Aristotle and St. Thomas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1940); E. GILSON, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Scribner, 1940), pp. 69ff; J. OWENS, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian «Metaphysics»: A Study in the Greek Background of Medieval Thought* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1951), ch. 19; ID., «Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator», in *St. Thomas Aquinas: 1274-1974: Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), esp. pp. 217-229.

[2] Cf. J. OWENS, «Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator», p. 236f; M. JORDAN, «Theology and Philosophy», in *The Cambridge Campanion to Aquinas*, ed. by N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 247. The image, of course, is Thomas' own; cf. *In Boethium De Trinitate*, q. 2 a. 3 ad 5um. However, Thomas was concerned in that text with the use of philosophy *within* theology, and so the status of the commentaries remains problematic.

Thomas' position is warranted by Aristotle's own principles and hence not exactly abusive of the texts[3]. But therein lies the real question: is the Aristotle who appears in Thomas' discussions of creation the historical Aristotle or a Thomistic Aristotle? Are the arguments ones that Aristotle would recognize as his own or accept them as logically deducible from his own?

Even in his own day Thomas' use of Aristotelian philosophy was not without controversy. We can see a great uneasiness about Aristotelian philosophy in the condemnations of 1277 in which Thomas' own teachings seem to have been implicated[4]. The heated debates of that time are now continued in the controversy over what Thomas understood Aristotle to know and what constitutes a proper use of his texts[5]. Thomas was no doubt interested in pointing out the errors in Aristotle[6]. Yet at other times, he radically transforms Aristotelian terminology without calling attention to it[7]. Among Thomists there are those who want to emphasize the profound contribution made to philosophy by the Christian philosopher. Others see Thomas as simply a good philosopher advancing Aristotle's arguments on their own terms. Still others have no concern for evaluating Aquinas as a philosopher, Christian or otherwise, and view his work as inescapably theological, shot through with the fuller perspective that revelation provides.

What has become a touchstone of the debate is a controverted text from the *Summa Theologiae* in which we find the following judgment on ancient philosophers and their knowledge of creation:

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[3] E.g., L. J. ELDERS, «St. Thomas Aquinas' commentary on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle»: *Divus Thomas* (Placentiae) 86 (1983) 307-326; A. GHISALBERTI, «Percorsi significativi della *Metafisica* di Aristotele nel Medioevo», in A. BAUSOLA and G. REALE (Eds.), *Aristotele: Perché la metafisica* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1994), pp. 451-470.

[4] Cf. R. HISSETTE, «L'implication de Thomas d'Aquin dans la censure parisienne de 1277»: *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévale* 64 (1997) 3-31.

[5] M. JOHNSON, «Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?»: *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989) 129-155. Johnson contends that Thomas indeed did attribute such a doctrine precisely because the error regarding Aristotle's view of creation is at many points explicitly limited to positing an eternal world. T. NOONE, «The Originality of St. Thomas's Position on the Philosophers and Creation»: *The Thomist* (1996) 275-300. Noone contends that Thomas proposed an original position that separated the question of the eternity of the world from its createdness thereby allowing him to posit a notion of creation in Aristotle. Creation is then defined not in terms of temporal beginning but in terms of total ontological dependency.

[6] E.g., on Aristotle's mistake regarding the motion of the stars, *In XII Metaphysicorum*, lect. 9, n. 2558; on the eternity of the world, *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis*, 1, 116-119 (Leonine ed.); on the eternity of motion, *In VIII Physicorum*, lect. 2, n. 986.

[7] E.g., *Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 6-17. One might argue then that the «Aristotelianism» of Thomas is fundamentally a myth because the only thing Thomas takes over from his distant predecessor is terminology. Cf. M. JORDAN, «Philosophy and Theology». More common perhaps has been the assertion that Thomas could not help but interpret Aristotle according to Christian revelation and therefore unknowingly infused pagan philosophy with bits of revelation, finding full-blown doctrines where only rudimentary notions obtain. Cf. J. OWENS, «Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator», pp. 213-238. One author goes so far as to contend that taken at face value, Aquinas is actually «uttering a lie when he asserts, "Aristotle knows a *primum principium essendi*"» (F. X. KNASAS, «Aquinas' Ascription of Creation to Aristotle»: *Angelicum* 73 (1996) 503.

> «*They*distinguised rationally between substantial form and matter, which they supposed to be uncreated. *They* perceived change to arise in bodies by means of essential forms. For these changes, the posited certain universal causes such as the oblique circle of Aristotle or the ideas of Plato. But matter is contracted through form to a determinate species, just as the substance of some species through accidents is contracted to a determinate mode of being, as man is contracted [or "determined"] through white. *Both* of these considered being under a particular aspect, either as "this being" or as "such being». Thus, they assigned for the causes of things particular agents»[8] [italics mine].

According to E. Gilson and A. Pegis, this article shows Thomas' clearest insights into peripatetic teaching[9]. Thomas clearly delineates what Aristotle (and Plato) attained to and in what way they fall short of a correct understanding of universal causality. Aristotle «arrived at the idea of creation only to the extent of asserting principles upon which creation could be based». But Aristotelian physicism stood in the way of seeing those principles clearly. In fact, in other texts where Thomas seems to attribute a notion of creation to Aristotle, Pegis argues that Thomas is using Aristotle's principles and proceeding *secundum sententiam*. Hence, Thomas generally invests Aristotle's arguments with «an existential significance that they did not originally have»[10].

However, there are a number of texts in which Aquinas seems rather clearly to attribute a notion of creation to Aristotle[11]. Clear examples can be found in the *De Potentia* and the commentaries on the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. Pegis and other Christian philosophers did not deny that such texts exist. Rather, their argument is based upon a distinction between Thomas' «existentialism» and Aristotle's «essentialism» wherein Thomas' interpretation is most certainly an addition to the

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[8] "[D]istinxerunt per intellectum inter formam substantialem et materiam, quam ponebant increatam; et perceperunt transmutationem fieri in corporibus secundum formas essentiales. Quarum transmutationum quasdam causas universaliores ponebant, ut obliquum circulum, secundum Aristotelem, vel ideas, secundum Platonem. Sed considerandum est quod materia per formam contrahitur ad determinatam speciem; sicut substantia alicuius speciei per accidens ei adveniens contrahitur ad determinatum modum essendi, ut *homo* contrahitur per *album*. Utrique igitur consideraverunt ens particulari quadam consideratione, vel inquantum est *hoc ens*, vel inquantum est *tale ens*. Et sic rebus causas agentes particulares assignaverunt» (AQUINAS, *ST* I, q. 44 a. 2c).

[9] E. GILSON, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Scribner, 1940), pp. 68f (n. 4, pp. 438-441). Cf. also A. PEGIS, «A Note on St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, I 44 1-2»: *Mediaeval Studies* 8 (1946) 159-168.

[10] A. PEGIS, *Ibid.*, p. 167. Pegis contended there that what might seem to be an attribution of creation to Aristotle is actually a «consideration of creation», limited to the causing of all being by God. Thomas' reticence in the *Summa Theologiae* is then evidence of his more honest and critical appraisal as he separates out the explicit teaching from the implications of such teaching; that is, simply completing arguments and moving beyond Aristotle's «physicism». L. Dewan has argued convincingly that Gilson and Pegis were simply following the lead of Maritain in protecting the authority of the «Christian philosopher». Cf. L. DEWAN, «Thomas Aquinas, Creation, and Two Historians»: *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 50 (1994) 363-387.

[11] AQUINAS, *De Potentia* q. 3 a. 5; *In II Metaphysicorum*, lect. 2; and *In VI Metaphysicorum*, lect. 1; *In VIII Physicorum*, lect. 2 and 3. Cf. M. JOHNSON, «Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?».

teaching of Aristotle[12]. Thomas' discovery in that text of efficient causality, of a creative *ex nihilo* causality in the *Metaphysics*, for instance, has no foundation in the text. Thomas was neither in fact nor in intention an Aristotelian[13]. Such is the implication of an existentialist reading of Thomas, and that reading has provoked no small controversy[14]. More recent scholarship has, in fact, taken the more explicit references as more telling and attempted to read the *Summa* text in their light. In fact, it is hardly news that Thomas referred to a doctrine of creation in Aristotle. Among those who study Thomas' Aristotelian commentaries, it is assumed that he did. The problem is the status of that attribution: is it an interpretation or interpolation, use or misuse of Aristotle's teaching. And was Thomas interested in an historical reading or a philosophical interpretation, making clear what is only implicit? Further, was Thomas speaking as a philosopher or a theologian when so attributing parts of Christian doctrine to Aristotle? Some have even contended that Thomas spoke not as a «philosopher» nor even as a Christian philosopher. The «inaccuracy» of Thomas' reading proves that Thomas speaks as a Christian theologian even in the Aristotelian commentaries. Aristotle was simply the «language of the day», tools to be employed in the service of a new master, the science of theology.

The difference between Thomas being a reader or a misreader depends as much on an authentic reading of Aristotle as it does on an authentic reading of Thomas. And consensus is no guarantee of an «authentic» reading of either, especially of Aristotle. The *Metaphysics* has been described as «tortuous in the extreme»[15]. The multi-volume collection of articles, *Aristotle: Critical Assessments* testifies to the great divisions among modern Aristotelian scholars on the very nature and status of metaphysics, its subject and its attainment[16]. Any attempt to solve these dilem-

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[12] Owens has furthered this view by arguing that in his reading of the *Metaphysics*, there is no fundamental notion of efficient causality. Aristotle's God is purely a final cause. J. OWENS, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian «Metaphysics»*, p. 13f.

[13] F. VAN STEENBERGHEN, «The Problem of the Existence of God in Saint Thomas' *Commentary on the Metaphysics* of Aristotle», trans. J. Wippel: *The Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974) 554-568; C. J. DE VOGEL, «Deus Creator Omnium: Plato and Aristotle in Aquinas' Doctrine of God», in *Graceful Reason: Essays in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, ed. L. P. Gerson (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), pp. 203-227. They argue on the basis of the «authentic positions» of Arisotle and what is «admitted by all commentators» in order to point out that Thomas has taken advantage of ambiguities in the text. Thomas then offers not Aristotle but a Platonized Aristotle with major elements from Proclus and Dionysius. De Vogel contends that while Thomas is certainly influenced by Aristotle, the «accent» should be placed upon the Platonic character of Thomas' doctrine of God. Cf. DE VOGEL, *Ibid.*, p. 227.

[14] Cf. G. PROUVOST, *Thomas d'Aquin et les thomismes* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1996) esp. pp. 105-121. For a concise critique of Thomistic Existentialism, see R. MCINERNY, *Being and Predication: Thomistic Interpretations* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), pp. 173-228.

[15] J. BARNES, «Metaphysics», in ID. (Ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[16] Ed. L. P. Gerson (New York: Routledge, 1999). For an excellent response to the heated debates over the proper subject and scope of metaphysics, see R. MCINERNY, «Ontology and Theology in the

mas must take account of the meaning of Aquinas as well as the meaning of Aristotle at each point without assuming either one to be a conclusion from consensus.

It is undeniable that Thomas uses texts from Aristotle in theological discussions, and at least some of these contexts are completely alien to Aristotle's own intention. One need only turn to Thomas' discussion of inner divine relations (*ST* I, q. 28) or of the union of two natures in Christ (*ST* III, q. 4) to see examples of pagan philosophy being used within patently Christian discussions. Of course, such environments are alien to Aristotle and the conclusions reached may not be recognizable to him. At other times Thomas may even interject such principles and terminology with specifically Christian meaning[17]. The question is whether Thomas can do otherwise, or better, whether he self-consciously does either[18]. The fact that Thomas may on occasion take Aristotle's principles to their logical conclusion and beyond what Aristotle himself explicitly claimed or weave such principles into Christian theological arguments does not in itself invalidate his interpretation.

One of the fundamental problems in this debate is a pervasive assumption that Thomas pursued only one mode of interpretation and use. One cannot generalize his reading of Aristotle in one text, because Thomas wrote in very different styles with very different intentions. That there is a difference between his *Summa Theologiae* and his commentary on the *Metaphysics* is hardly debatable. It need not be the case then that Thomas was either always using Aristotelian principles to further the explanation of Christian doctrine or offering a critique of Aristotle's conclusions at every turn. He could have pursued different projects in different texts. In order to illustrate this point, we will examine three different types of texts while focusing on one subject: creation. In the process, we will be able to clarify the ambiguities surrounding the question of whether and in what sense Thomas attributed to Aristotle a notion of creation.

1. *De Potentia*

The *De Potentia* was composed shortly before Thomas began his *Summa Theologica*. The disputed questions are a peculiar type of text with rather peculiar advantages and disadvantages for understanding the thought of Aquinas. As a set of disputed questions, the text enjoys some of the lengthiest discussions of particular issues, often with a dozen or more arguments and counter arguments in each article. The textual units in the two *summae* are by contrast much smaller,

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Metaphysics of Aristotle», in *Being and Predication*, pp. 59-66. McInerny employs Aquinas' commentary as he takes up the most controverted text of the *Metaphysics*, Book Delta. Indeed, far from being a useless or misplaced addition, it is for Aquinas and for McInerny the key to the whole book.

[17] E.g., *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 55 on the definition of virtue.

[18] Some have claimed that Thomas interjects «new meanings» into Aristotle unconsciously, the disastrous implications of which are obvious. Cf. J. C. DOIG, *Aquinas on Metaphysics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 384ff.

with fewer and truncated arguments. The disputed questions are also important for containing Thomas' determinations as a university master —the solution must be determinative and confirming of his magisterial office[19]. Once the topic is decided, the questions are taken from the gathering, sometimes the masters and students from the entire university. The master then organizes the questions and his response and then presents that response publicly over a period of days or months[20]. The written record of such exercises became during the 13th century more and more a product of careful editing and thus contained a more extended consideration than was possible during the oral debate.

The ten questions making up the group known under the theme *De potentia* form roughly two groups: the first six concern the power of God, as absolute or generative or conserving; the last four questions concern the Trinity. On the face of it, there seems to be no direct connection and indeed one manuscript even entitles the work, *De potentia Dei cum annexis*[21]. The similarity of order and topics to that of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas' most carefully constructed theological work, however, suggests that there is a real unity in these questions[22]. According to that somewhat later text, the very reason for the revelation of the Trinity of divine persons was so that we would understand rightly the nature of creation (and our salvation) —that it is not necessary[23]. Further, the generative power of God with respect to the divine Persons (inner processions) is intimately related to God's creative power (outer procession) as cause to effect[24]. Hence, in the *Summa* the discussion of creation follows immediately the discussion of the Trinity and is intimately connected to it. (Thomas makes the same points in the *De Potentia*, yet not in so systematic a fashion). The structure of the *De Potentia* reverses that order and can be understood broadly as an Aristotelian procedure of investigation moving from effect to cause. Certainly, the order here is not a strict, logical procedure, but the point is that the topics are closely connected in Thomas' theology and should not be dismissed as some type of conglomerate for lack of an obvious principle of ordering.

Within this particular set of disputed questions, it is important to note the location of our text, in the middle of a discussion of God's power. In question

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[19] Cf. B. BAZÁN, G. FRANSEN, J. F. WIPPEL & D. JACQUART, *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine* (Turnholt, 1985), pp. 13-149. It is important to note that the *disputatio* was a rather fluid and varied exercise with both public and private forms extending over several days or years. The *De veritate* for instance could represent as much as three years of such exercises.

[20] The length and difficulty of these questions, however, preclude the possibility of public presentation. According to J.-P. Torrell both the *De veritate* and *De Potentia* are more likely private disputes held in the context of Thomas' own classes over the entire year. Cf. J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. R. Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

[21] MS Vat. Borghese 120, cited by J.-P. TORRELL, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. I, p. 163, n. 8.

[22] On the *De Potentia*, cf. J. A. WEISHEIPL, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), p. 200-211.

[23] Cf. *ST* I q. 32 a.1 ad 3um.

[24] E.g., *ST* I, q. 14 a. 8; q. 19 a. 4; q. 45 a. 6.

one Thomas discussed the absolute power of God: whether it is infinite, the application of the terms «possible» and «impossible», and omnipotence. Throughout that discussion, Thomas clarifies the character of divine power as opposed to finite, creaturely power. References to Aristotle are not infrequent in these articles[25]. The second question concerns the generative power of God: whether it is essential or notional, directed by the divine will, whether there are many sons generated, whether it is an omnipotent power, and whether it is identical to the creative power. Here we have evidence as to unity of these questions regarding the power of God and the Trinity of Persons. The generative power both within and flowing out of God are related, and in fact Thomas argues that «generative power» signifies both notionally the inner processions and essentially the outer processions of creatures[26]. It is also evident that we are certainly not dealing with a strictly philosophical discussion. References to the Trinity (as well as texts from Scripture and the Fathers) remind us that the data of revelation is in play throughout and that regardless of the philosophical appearance of these debates, they are the product of theological reflection[27]. When Thomas comes to question three, on creation, he has already determined much about the power of God and even drawn the connection between the generation of the Son and the generation of creatures. There can be no distinction between the divine essence and divine power or between different powers. The creative and generative powers differ only «according to diverse respects to diverse acts»[28].

Question three is then not an abrupt introduction of creation but a more focused discussion. The nineteen articles in this question concern what kind of act creation is, its range, the primacy of God's act and the role of creatures, the status of the soul, whether creation is necessary or eternal, etc. The range of questions reflects perhaps more the concerns of the day rather than a complete exposition of the topic. Such is the nature of a disputed question. What is evident though is that the three articles preceding the fifth all concern creatures directly —either the nature of their origin, whether their origin marks them in some way, and whether the creative power is shared with them. The first article of the question discusses whether God is able to create *ex nihilo*[29]. Thomas establishes there that the nature of God's power does not require matter. And from the *Liber de Causis*, Thomas takes the distinction of *creatio* and *informatio* to make more clear the notion that

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[25] E.g., *De Potentia* q. 2 a. 1 on perfect power being generative; q.1 a. 3 on defining possible and impossible; q. 3 a. 1 on defining possible in opposition to impossible rather than by passive potencies.

[26] *De Potentia* q. 2 a. 3c.

[27] In *De Potentia* q. 1 a. 4 Thomas discusses the two kinds of wisdom: philosophy and theology. Philosophy is concerned with inferior causes while theology is concerned with superior, uncaused causes. Hence, «possibility» and «impossibility» are determined differently by each science. Cf. AQUINAS, *In IX Metaphysicorum*, lect. 1.

[28] «[S]ecundum diversos respectus ad actus diversos» (*De Potentia* q. 2 a. 6).

[29] The placement of this question will be noticeably altered in the *Summa*. The order in the *De Potentia* seems to move from what could not be contradicted by the philosophers to what they actually assert. In the *Summa*, the first place goes to what is most evident to natural reason, i.e., the procedure is solid Aristotelian pedagogical order.

the very being of things is given by God and not only their form. Thomas then takes up a common objection presented on the basis of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* VII whereby the possibility of something precedes its actuality, hence, the passive potentiality of matter must «precede», a point taken from Anaxagoras and developed by Aristotle[30]. Thomas points out that the argument drawn from Aristotle was actually used by Aristotle to contradict the Platonists on the generation of natural kinds by separated forms[31]. Aristotle's intention was to deny that any form can «inform» matter because the matter must possess a potentiality for it. It is a simple point about like generating like and did not concern the actual being of the matter (*In VII Metaphysicorum*, lect. 7; cf. *In I Metaphysicorum*, lect. 12, n.188).

For that reason, Thomas chose a text from Book V which lists metaphysical terms and their various meanings. According to Aristotle's definition of «possibility» in *Metaphysics* V[32], the «possibility» of the world before its being is due to the active potency of a cause rather than the passive potency of some matter. The common rule that *ex nihilo nihil fieri* Thomas takes to apply to natural agents and not to supernatural ones. Aristotle's discussion of possible and impossible provides then a basis for dealing with a different sort of power, one not constrained to act by motion. Hence, Thomas does not use Aristotle to enunciate Christian doctrine but shows that Aristotle's arguments do not disprove it. The way is open for affirming another kind of causing. Thomas realizes the incongruence between the question and Aristotle's own text, especially as Aristotle addresses errors of the Platonists. Moreover, Thomas can open the door to *creatio ex nihilo* by way of Aristotle's discussion of divine, perfect power[33]. We have then in this text an example of Thomas reading Aristotle *ex Aristotele*, i.e., according to Aristotle's own textual context and intention[34].

The passage that concerns us more directly is from article five. This article is best understood as a reconsideration of the issue from article one. In article one, the question was whether God created *ex nihilo*. The question in article five is whether anything is not created by God —either prime matter or quiddities. And it is in this context that Thomas introduces his survey of pagan philosophy and its progress *paulatim* toward considering the universal cause of being. One might argue that it is noteworthy where this survey is placed, for it would suggest that *creatio ex nihilo* is not something actually attained by any philosopher (i.e., in the manner in which God created, as in *ST* I, q. 44 a. 1), yet philosophers did attain to

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[30] Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* VII, 6 and 7.

[31] *De Potentia* q. 3 a. 1 ad 2. This example of Thomas' careful consideration of the context and object of Aristotle's argument says much about Thomas' sensitivity for the polemic of ancient Greece. Thomas did not ignore Aristotle's main interlocuter nor did he forget that the guiding concerns for Aristotle were not necessarily the same as those of the Theology Faculty in 13th century Paris. See, e.g., *In VII Metaphysicorum*, lect. 6, n. 1381f.

[32] Ch. 12: 1019 a 15 - 1020 a 6.

[33] *De Potentia* q. 1 aa. 1-4.

[34] Cf. AQUINAS, *In I Metaphysicorum*, lect. 12, nn. 194 and 199.

an awareness that there can be only one uncaused cause, i.e., that things in the world are caused (which is the same conclusion positively expressed). Thomas notes that the first philosophers were content with material being and material causality: «They said that all forms were accidents and that only matter is substance [...] hence, they did not think there was a cause of matter»[35]. Later philosophers began to consider substantial forms and the particular causes for things being this or that; however, they did not attain to universal causes[36]. Still later philosophers, Thomas says, among whom are Plato and Aristotle, attained to a consideration of universal being itself. «They posited a universal cause of things»[37]. And with this *sententia*, Christian faith agrees. Thus, little by little, generations of philosophers were able to attain to a rudimentary knowledge of a universal cause. And that universal cause accords with the Christian notion of creation in so far as it denotes a fundamental dependency of all things on one cause both for their nature and their being.

Thomas then presents three arguments to bolster this assertion. First is the Platonic argument that multiplicity is dependent upon unity both in number and the nature of things. Second, is the Aristotelian argument from the gradation of perfections in creatures. Such gradation demands a first, most perfect being from which everything else receives being[38]. The argument proves two essential points: there is one first and most perfect, and all beings depend upon that one. He gives also Avicenna's argument that the real composition of created being is dependent upon some first being that is pure act. What is perhaps surprising is that this philosophical development toward an understanding of universal cause, including three proofs for the existence of a first being, is understood by Thomas to demonstrate that everything is created by God. The trajectory of the article suggests that the question is on the existence of God, but the conclusion is on the nature of things, i.e., that they are created. The text from Aristotle for example is used elsewhere by Thomas as proof of God's existence[39]. Hence, for Thomas, to know that something is caused yields knowledge of the cause as well as additional insight into the subject itself as an effect[40]. And this is where the context becomes

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[35] «Primi philosophers omnes formas accidentia esse dixerunt, et solam materiam esse substantiam. Et quia substantia sufficit ad hoc quod sit accidntium causa, quae ex principiis substantiae causantur, inde est quod primi philosophi, praeter materiam, nullam aliam causam posuerunt; sed ex ea causari dicebant omnia quae in rebus sensibilibus provenire videntur; unde ponere cogebantur materiae causam non esse, et negare totaliter causam efficientem» (AQUINAS, *De Potentia* q. 3 a. 5). Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* I, chs. 3-7.

[36] «[T]ota eorum intentio circa formas speciales versabatur: et ideo posuerunt quidam aliquas causas agentes, non tamen quae universaliter rebus esse conferrent, sed quae ad hanc vel ad illam formam, materiam permutarent». This second group is most likely the Pythagoreans.

[37] «et ideo ipsi soli posuerunt aliquam universalem causam rerum, a qua omnia alia in esse prodirent» (*Ibid*).

[38] The *quarta via* of *ST* I, q. 2.

[39] E.g., *ST* I q. 2.

[40] A circular argument is avoided here by the fact that the argument begins with the notion that material things cannot be the source of their own motion or their own being.

important. As mentioned above, the three articles prior to this one (5) deal with creation on the part of creatures and the way creation «marks» creatures as such. But how do these three arguments given define the term createdness? The first two arguments from Plato and Aristotle define the being of things in terms of receptivity because the cause of things is outside the group that constitutes things in the world. Hence, the distinction between God and the world, first cause and everything else, seems to underlie the very idea of a first cause. Not a first in a series such as a first human person, but a unique first, uncaused, immobile, perfect. The third argument from Avicenna[41] adds the note that reception of being is actually a participation in being. The distinction between first cause and the world is then between what is composite and what is simple, pure act. Certainly, there is room to fill in some details from revelation about the fullness of this «distinction» between God and the world, but we do in fact have its rudiments in pagan philosophy, as Aquinas notes[42].

It should be noted that this discussion of the development of pagan philosophy is not in a commentary on pagan philosophy, hence we do not get a determination of Aristotle's view but a use of one of his arguments. He is simply one pagan authority from which Thomas draws as an example of natural reason. What we can extrapolate from this particular use is rather limited. Indeed, throughout the numerous articles here on creation or even throughout the entire *De Potentia* text, we find Thomas invoking an argument or insight of Aristotle at many points. That Thomas finds Aristotle to be very useful, there can be no question, and his enthusiastic appraisal seems warranted. Yet Thomas is careful to delineate the intention of Aristotle's arguments. His definitions and principles of argumentation are readily employed by Thomas particularly as he clarifies what he takes to be Aristotle's own position. At no point in this text do we find an explicit judgment by Thomas on the extent of Aristotle's understanding. And consequently we do not have a neat answer regarding what Thomas considers to be the full

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[41] Cf. A.-M. GOICHON, *La distinction de l'essence et l'existence d'après Ibn Sina (Avicenna)* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1937); G. C. ANAWATI, «Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la Métaphysique d'Avicenne», in *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274-1974: Commemorative Studies*, ed. A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), vol. I, pp. 449-465. Anawati traces the interest and study of the Arab philosophers from Gilson's insistent pleading in 1927 to the latest editions of recent years. What Gilson thought indispensable for understanding Aquinas and his contemporaries soon became the favorite explanation of all things medieval by the third quarter of the twentieth century. Gilson has perhaps been proven right in the pervasive impact of the Arabic commentaries on Western thought; many aspects of Thomas' own polemic can be understood as responses, criticisms and even appropriation of Arabic teaching. Doig's study of Aquinas' commentary is built around a comparison with the Arabic commentators.

[42] R. Sokolowski argues that the distinction is inaccessible to human reason alone, but his notion is defined largely by the freedom with which God creates. Cf. R. SOKOLOWSKI, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 110ff. However, for Thomas, the identity of powers for generating within God and without suggests that what we learn from revelation only adds to our understanding of the fundamental dependency of things for their very being on God. (cf. *De Potentia*, q. 2 a. 6).

understanding of Aristotle on the dependency of creatures on God and the way such understanding falls short of the Christian doctrine[43].

2. *Summa Theologiae*

When we turn to a very similar text in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas appears surprisingly reticent in his evaluation of Plato and Aristotle. In our key text from q. 44 a. 2 mentioned above, it appears that they have not gotten beyond the understanding of substantial forms and particular causes. It seems that they fell short on the question of whether prime matter was in fact created or uncaused: Thomas says that «they» believed matter to be uncreated and that «they» considered particular being and not *ens inquantum ens*. Of course, some would solve the problem by noting the ambiguity of the references in this article. In fact, the three groups here in the Summa match rather well the three groups referred to in the *De Potentia*. The problem is the mentioning of Plato and Aristotle in the second group and no names in the third. One possibility is that the references are mere examples of a type of argument and not representative of the philosophers' general position. Plato and Aristotle would in that case not be indicted and would remain as potential members of the third group who considered the universal cause of things *as* beings. Further, what is signified by «both» (utrique) is not Plato and Aristotle specifically, but the first two groups: one understood only accidental changes; the other dealt with substantial changes[44].

The first group in both texts considered accidental forms and were limited to material causality. The second group or generation considered substantial forms and the causes for something being this or that. Thomas faults them (in both texts) for assuming the existence of matter and not dealing with its cause[45]. The

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[43] Even in q. 3 a. 17 on the eternity of world, Thomas does not categorically state what Aristotle did or did not believe but rather carefully delineates the import of a particular text. Thomas there limits himself to a consideration of the text in dispute, *Physics* VIII, whereby Aristotle is thought to have posited an eternal world by necessary reason. Thomas simply notes that the argument is directed against Anaxagoras and Empedocles and therefore circumscribed in its intention. Moreover, *diligenter consideranti, rationes ejus apparent quasi rationes disputantis contra positionem* —the position of Anaxagoras that the matter of the world does not have a cause. Thus, Aristotle was not considering the *exitus universi* from God, but the particular cause that is through motion. And his conclusion as he refutes Anaxagoras is that indeed the world in its matter and form is caused (eternally). Aristotle does not prove that the world is eternal but that it is not uncaused. This text can be construed as a judgment by Aquinas on Aristotle only with the qualification that it is a negative judgment, a denial that Aristotle meant what others have assumed that he meant. Cf. *De Potentia* q. 3 a.17c. and ad 17um.

[44] Cf. TH. PÈGUES, O. P., *Commentaire francais littéral de la* Somme Théologique *de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 21 vols. (Toulouse: Imprimerie et Librairie Édouard Privat, 1908), vol. III, pp. 14-15; L. DEWAN, «Thomas Aquinas, Creation and Two Historians». Indeed in light of the opinion of most commentators, it is very puzzling why Christian philosophers in the mid-20th century would hold to Pegis' interpretation and see in the *Summa* text a denial that pagan philosophy attained to a notion of creation. Cajetan points out that the attainment to universal cause of being *qua* being can be found «a thousand times» in Aristotle. See his commentary on *ST* I, q. 44 a. 2 (Leonine ed., vol. 4, pp. 458-459).

[45] Johnson's suggestion then that the «utrique» does not signify Plato and Aristotle.

third group is identified in the *De potentia* as consisting of Plato, Aristotle and their followers who considered being in general (*esse universalis*) and the universal cause of all things. In the *Summa*, this group is identified only by their consideration of *ens inquantum est ens* and to the cause of all things as beings[46]. The similarity of these texts provides grounds for understanding the mentioning of specific arguments from Plato and Aristotle as examples only and not a general inclusion of these two within that group. In fact, it is evident in the objection and response sections of this same article that Thomas is quite capable of seeing variations or development within the writings of a single author. For example, from the *Physics* we have the rule that whatever comes to be, is made from a subject and *aliquo alio*. Prime matter is not composed, therefore not made by God. Thomas understands the text in *Physics* I to be a specific rule and is not Aristotle's final position. Aquinas responds to the objection by noting that «the Philosopher in *Physics* I was speaking about coming to be of particulars». The point is restricted to that text and does not necessarily apply to the later books in the *Physics* and certainly not to the *Metaphysics* in which being and its cause is discussed.

Given his clarifications in the *De Potentia*, however, one might expect Thomas to make more positive use of Aristotle at this point in the *Summa*, and to mention him by name in the third group, but he doesn't. Why? To answer that question, let us examine briefly the larger context of this article.

Question 44 begins what Thomas defines as the third major division of the *Prima pars*. In q. 2 he intimated that the Prima Pars concerns first what pertains to the unity of divine essence (qq. 2-26); second, what pertains to the distinction of divine Persons (qq. 27-43); and finally what pertains to the procession of creatures from God (qq. 44-119). At three points (qq. 2, 12, 32), Thomas argues that natural reason knows God only through creatures, as a cause is known through its effects. Natural reason can know God as the principle of all things, for that is one way of knowing that God exists. As we noted in *De Potentia*, the proofs for God's existence can also function (and sometimes do) as proofs for the createdness of all things, that all things are created or come from God. We must keep in mind that Thomas always proceeds from the general to the specific, from unity to distinction. He moved from the unity of the divine essence to the distinction of Persons (not from abstract to concrete)[47]. Beginning in q. 44 he treats first the production of creatures and then their distinction (qq. 44-47). Then we are not yet at the level of natural kinds but are dealing with the existence of things *per se* —that they are and not what they are. For this reason we may say that Thomas' own discussion takes place in the third group mentioned above and not beyond it. This procedure can be helpful in determining the level of discussion in each article.

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[46] Taken by Gilson and Pegis to be other Christian philosophers of the time.

[47] For a detailed discussion of the structure of the Prima Pars and its theological implications, see my «Thomas Aquinas' *De Deo*: Setting the Record Straight on his Theological Method»: *Sapientia* 53 (1998) 119-154.

That is, the notion of creation in the first few articles will be most general and fundamental.

In q. 44 we notice that the material that was united in *De Potentia* q. 3 a. 5 is here divided between the first two articles: on the necessity of everything being created by God (q. 1) and on whether prime matter itself is created by God (q. 2). Moreover, the material of *De Potentia* q. 3 a. 1 is now after the discussion of prime matter (*ST* I, q. 45 a. 1). Within the first and most general discussion in the *Summa*, Thomas employs the text from *Metaphysics* II in which Aristotle argues that what is *maxime ens et maxime verum, est causa omnis entis et omnis veris*. Thomas also turns to Aristotle to clarify whether necessary things are caused. The objection seemed to have equated necessary with uncaused, at least in regards to mobile things. However, necessary principles «cause» necessary conclusions; the necessity of an effect then does not preclude its being caused. And so Thomas once again uses the *Metaphysics* to interpret and to determine the *Physics* (to correct the «earlier» Aristotle), to indicate that the necessity of something does not deny its cause but only that it cannot fail to be when the cause obtains.

In this response, we see two references to Aristotle, one correcting or clarifying the other. This play in the one authority reveals an interesting feature of Thomas' reading of Aristotle. Thomas realized full well that the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* are different kinds of texts with different subjects. In this case, we see him noting the limited scope of the former in order to make room for the latter. In fact, it seems that Thomas gives the *Metaphysics* a corresponding higher authority, at least in regards to our subject. We see this same phenomenon in a. 2. There the first objection is taken from the *Physics*: *omne enim quod fit, componitur ex subjecto et ex aliquo alio* [...] *Sed materiae primae non est aliquod subjectum. Ergo materia prima non potest esse facta a Deo*. Thomas responds by noting the limitation of that text to the coming to be of particulars. He does not indicate that Aristotle should be identified with that limitation to physical particulars, as some contend. Rather, the text in question is so limited. Hence, it should be no surprise that Thomas' second response employs an argument from the *Metaphysics* to deny dual ultimate principles: every imperfect is caused by a perfect, therefore the first principle must be most perfect. Thus, in the same article, Aristotle is employed on both sides of the question, though not on the same point.

A more striking example of this interplay of texts is in q. 46. Thomas refers to Aristotle's *Physics* and *De caelo et mundo* in a. 1 as suggesting that the Philosopher thought the heavens to be uncaused because ungenerated. Thomas clarified the meaning of those texts by distinguishing uncaused from ungenerated. Aristotle was simply arguing that the heavens did not come to be by a process of generation. After clarifying Aristotle's argument, Thomas then notes what «we say [now]». Three times Thomas makes a determination concerning the import of an Aristotelian text and then concludes with *nos autem dicimus*». The contrast is not between error and truth but between two expressions, one negative and one positive. Thomas contends that what others take to be an assertion that the heavens and matter are not caused is actually an assertion that they did not come

to be by generation. And on this point, Thomas does not disagree. His response is that they came to be by creation. The Aristotelian position is not rejected but clarified in terms of its own limitation. Creation is then not antithetical to Aristotle's point but provides an answer for what Aristotle did not assert nor did he deny. Aristotle's «universal causality» is then subsumed into the Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. The character of the world as created becomes subordinated to the nature of the divine work. The important point Thomas wants us to see is that Aristotle's argument in this and other cases should not be taken in absolute terms. Aristotle was only denying one type of coming to be[48].

Thomas is generally careful in determining the extent of Aristotle's claim in a given text. He rarely if ever allows a single argument to function as a general claim. The most fundamental claim of the Christian doctrine of creation is that everything is from God. There is only one first cause, one who is uncaused and all else is dependent upon that one for their identity and being. Thomas finds this notion in Aristotle. In the *Metaphysics* he finds Aristotle arguing for the fundamental dependency of all things on the first principle (*ST* I, q. 44 a. 1). Moreover, Aristotle's consideration of *ens inquantum ens* in the *Metaphysics* demonstrates for Aquinas that Aristotle understood universal causality (*ST* I, q. 44 a. 2).

If we were to search for general pronouncements by Thomas on what Aristotle understood, what he went right and where he erred, we will find very few such statements. And in general on the question of what pagan philosophers did or did not know, Thomas invariably discusses them without names at least in his *summae*. Hence, his determination of what natural knowledge can know of God (in q. 12 and 32) does not include names. Such is the nature of q. 44 a. 2 and also q. 46 a. 2. In the latter, Thomas delineates two groups among pagan philosophers: they all thought the the world is eternal, but only some of them concluded that it is therefore uncaused, and this is an «intolerable error». Others, however, concluded that the world was indeed caused by God but necessarily so in such a way that the effect was virtually «instantaneous» to the cause, and therefore, eternally caused. Why he does not mention them by name is difficult to say. Certainly, what the philosophers actually understood is no unqualified answer to what natural reason in theory can know.

What we have established so far then is that Aristotle is cited in a. 1 to advance the argument that all things are created by God. Further, only the *Physics* text is cited as an example of a limitation in Aristotle of considering only particular coming to be and not being in general. The *Metaphysics* on the contrary seems to be used by Thomas as a corrective or alternative to the *Physics*, at least on some occasions. Also, in q. 46 (aa. 1-2), we can find a second reference to the success and failure of pagan philosophy. And that reference distinguishes not those who

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[48] Thomas deals in much the same way with Aristotle's claim that there can be no void. He clarifies the notion of void as a space capable of a body but not yet having it. The notion of creation does not negate this assertion then because creation posits neither space nor time *ante mundum* (ad 4um).

understood the temporal beginning of the world from those who did not but among those who affirmed the eternity of the world, some understood there to be only one uncaused cause.

What is perhaps difficult for the modern reader to see is the real objection that underlies Thomas' discussion. The concern in the mid-13th century was that Aristotle actually demonstrated things contrary to the faith. Some seemed to have felt or feared that such articles of the faith had to be held in contradiction to rational arguments. From early philosophers and from the *Physics* and *De caelo*, it may seem that the world always was in the sense that its matter is ungenerated. And the apparent eternity of the world casts doubt on whether the entirety of the world was created by God as far as natural reason is concerned[49]. Even the opening lines of Genesis do not clearly support the notion that God created the world *ex nihilo*[50]. One might wonder then what is the status of our belief in creation from nothing.

What Thomas attempted to do then in his discussion is determine the scope of each argument that seems to contradict Christian faith. His is not a Bonaventurian dismissal of Aristotle as a faulty authority, nor an over-enthusiastic Victorine embrace of rational arguments for every doctrine[51]. Aquinas realized the importance of the work he was pursuing and the need to delineate what could and could not be known by reason. For, on the one hand, to assert that a particular tenet of the Christian faith could be demonstrated when the reasoning is faulty and weak is to invite derision[52]. On the other hand, to assert a theological tenet in the face of an apparent argument for the contrary brings the rationality of the faith into question. For Aquinas, there can be no division of truth. The conflict between philosophical argument and theological beliefs had led to what was known as a «two-truth» theory in the Arabic world. The philosopher in the Arabic world at that time was one who did not need revelation, but understood things more clearly than the average believer dependent upon scriptural metaphors. In Averroes, one

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[49] On the implication of Aquinas in the 1277 condemnations and the changing attitude toward Aristotelian philosophy, see L. BIANCHI, «1277: A Turning Point in Medieval Philosophy?», in *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter?*, edited by J. A. Aertsen and A. Speer, Miscellanea Mediaevalia 26 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1998), pp. 90-110; J. THIJSSEN, «What Really Happened on 7 March 1277?», in *Texts and Contexts in Ancient and Medieval Science: Studies on the Occasion of John E. Murdoch*, edited by E. Sylla, M. McVaugh (Leiden & New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), pp. 84-114; ID., «1277 Revisited: A New Interpretation of the Doctrinal Investigations of Thomas Aquinas and Giles of Rome»: *Vivarium* 35 (1997): 72-101; J. F. WIPPEL, «Thomas Aquinas and the Condemnation of 1277»: *The Modern Schoolman* 72 (1995) 233-272.

[50] Cf. W. E. CARROLL & S. E. BALDNER, *Aquinas on Creation: Writings on the «Sentences» of Peter Lombard, 2.1.1* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), pp. 1f.

[51] Cf. RICHARD OF ST. VICTOR, *De Trinitate* I, c. 4.

[52] Only in the Summa does Thomas bring forth this reason for not attempting demonstrations for what cannot be demonstrated. In his commentaries on the *Sentences* (I d. 3 q. 1 a. 4) and on Boethius' *De Trinitate* (q. 1 a. 4) as well as in his *De Veritate* (q. 10 a. 13) Thomas argues that the Trinity of Persons, for example, is impossible to demonstrate. He offers numerous reasons for its impossibility. Only in the Summa does Thomas discuss the danger to the faith of employing non-cogent reasoning. Cf. *ST* I, q. 32 a. 1. For the same point made in the discussion of creation, see *ST* I, q. 46 a. 2c.

can find evidence that he allows for asserting truths by argument and truths on religious grounds that stand in opposition. Thomas wanted to avoid this fideistic stand for theology in the Christian West and the resulting crippling opposition of philosophy. Hence, he wanted to embrace pagan philosophy where he could and correct it where it fell short. The danger of misusing philosophy was no less than the danger of dismissing its claims.

It is not difficult to uncover in Thomas' writings notations concerning the errors of pagan philosophy, points at which philosophical claims and Catholic teaching are at odds. More commonly Thomas simply employs the best pagan philosophical teaching when it is useful for his discussion. And on the issue of creation, he does both, as we have seen in the *Summa Theologiae*. Thomas also pursues this course of action in his *In Sententiarum* and the *De substantiis separatis*. In the earlier text, Thomas finds it necessary to correct the characterization of Aristotle's position offered by Peter the Lombard. Aristotle's error then was not in positing multiple principles but in assuming the eternity of the world. Indeed, Aristotle's position agrees with Catholic teaching in positing only one first principle, which, according to Thomas, is most evident in the *Metaphysics*[53]. Much of the confusion on this matter seems to have arisen from the apparent necessity of immaterial substances. In the *De substantiis separatis* (among other texts), Thomas clarifies the problem by pointing out that when Aristotle or even Plato posited necessary or eternal immaterial substances and celestial bodies, they were not denying that they had a cause[54]. For Thomas the notion of creation at its core is not a statement about the world's beginning but its dependency upon God for its very being. And this notion he finds in both Plato and Aristotle. The error of the pagan philosophers and in fact the impossibility of knowing by reason the *novitas mundi* is a minor rather than a major problem in understanding rightly the world as created[55].

Compare this position with the following: «sic creatio potest demonstrari, et sic philosophi creationem posuerunt» and indeed such creation involves «omne id quod est in re»[56]. In fact, Thomas argues that reason cannot abide a formless

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[53] Aquinas, *In II Sententiarum*, d. 1, expositio textus. Cf. also *In II Sententiarum*, d. 1 q. 1 a. 5. References taken from M. JOHNSON, «Did St. Thomas Attributte...?».

[54] Aquinas, *De substantiis separatis*, ch. 9.

[55] These texts, however, appear to put some distance between Thomas and many commentators on Aristotle, medieval and modern. Moreover, on the larger question of whether the doctrine of creation is an article of faith known only by revelation, Thomas does not represent popular opinion in his own time or today. His position puts him at odds with his own teacher, Albert the Great, in addition to Bonaventure and others. And considering the opposition (some would even say the «specter of condemnation» in so far as many would contend that Aquinas was himself at least one of the targets of the 1277 condemnations), one might ask why Aquinas defended Aristotle (and Plato). After all, his teaching on natural science was forbidden at the University of Paris up until 1225 and many theologians made efforts at the time to show the deficiencies of Aristotle on fundamental issues. Note that the commission set up to «correct» Aristotle did not complete its task primarily because its head died shortly after appointment and the political will was changing.

[56] Thomas, *In II Sententiarum*, dist. 1 q. 1 a. 2. For an excellent survey of the literature on Aquinas and the doctrine of creation, see S. E. BALDNER & W. E. CARROLL, *Aquinas on Creation*, introduct-

matter (*ST* I, q. 44 a. 2). And according to his reading of *Metaphysics* (Bk. 2, ch. 2), Aristotle also said that what is «maxime ens» is the «causa omnis entis»; that is, the imperfect beings (mixture of act and potency) are caused by the most perfect. Hence, the metaphysicians considers not things as this or that but as beings, caused beings the most common category (note that prime matter would have otherwise entered metaphysics as a cause of sorts, but it does not; thus, it is not «prior» to the composite).

3. *In Metaphysicorum*

In studying Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, we will set aside questions of the unity or Platonism in Aristotle's text. First, Aristotelian scholarship has almost in mass turned away from the genetic issues so avidly pursued in the early twentieth century toward interpreting the work itself[57]. Secondly, Thomas read the work as a unified whole, and a well-ordered one at that[58]. And it is Thomas' use of the text that concerns us in this study.

Some contend that the commentaries are merely objective investigations of what Aristotle meant and consequently give us no clue as to Aquinas' assessment[59]. Proponents of this view tend to import modern notions of commentary in which the text is treated primarily as an artifact. But if our aim is to understand Thomas' use of Aristotle, we will have to become sympathetic to Thomas' own enterprise as a medieval theologian; and such is not a strictly historical interest in Aristotle. As a medieval theologian, Thomas was foremost concerned with questions of truth. One does not comment on a text for the sake of the text or its author, but because the text has been deemed to be helpful in the pursuit of truth. In the same way, the value of those in Aristotle's narrative of ancient philosophy (*Metaphysics* I) is measured by the stimulus and direction they provided for others to reach the truth. So it is with Aristotle in the hands of St. Thomas. One may discuss and write about a text today that is not at all believed to be true but only interesting. But what does not bring one to truth was not "interesting" to the

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ion. On the debate among Thomists regarding whether Thomas attributed a doctrine of creation to Aristotle, cf. L. DEWAN, «Thomas Aquinas, Creation, and Two Historians». Dewan shows that Gilson and Pegis were more dedicated to modern conceptions of Christian philosophy than to an honest reading of Thomas and imputed to him some dishonesty in his use of Aristotle.

[57] J. OWENS, «Metaphysics Revisited» and current studies listed.

[58] On the interpretation of the *Metaphysics* according to several medieval authors, see A. GHISALBERTI, «Percorsi significativi della *Metafisica* di Aristotele nel Medioevo», in *Aristotele, Perché la metafisica*, pp. 451-470. For a modern reappraisal of the unity of the *Metaphysics* in the face of the ontology/theology debate, see F. INCIARTE, "Die Einheit der Aristotelischen *Metaphysik*».

[59] One author contends that Thomas wrote no philosophy «in his own voice» but changed philosophy into Christian theology as Christ changed water into wine. M. JORDAN, «Philosophy and Theology», in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, pp. 232-251. R. McInerny points out, however, that examples from the *Ethics* commentary enables us to «conclude nothing» about Thomas' commentary on the *Metaphysics*. Cf. R. MCINERNY, *Being and Predication*, p. 78.

medieval thinker[60]. Thus, at the very outset we can set aside one reading of Thomas' commentaries on Aristotle that assumes a disinterested perspective or the aim of highlighting differences between the pagan text and Christian doctrine.

Others have found such an invasion of Christian doctrine in the commentaries as to render them useless for understanding Aristotle himself. J. C. Doig, for instance, sees no problems with an "incursion" of Thomas' own metaphysics into the commentary[61]. Because Thomas is not conscious of such differences between Aristotle's views and his own, there is no blame. Unfortunately, this explanation casts Thomas' commentary in a very bad light. Many scholars see at least some distance between Aristotle's text and Aquinas' interpretation on some points, such as whether the subject is separate substances or common being. The central question concerns the nature and extent of that distance. Thomas' commentary is no philological analysis nor a strictly historical investigation. Yet there is also no indication that Thomas employed any scriptural or patristic authority in his commentary. The authorities in play throughout include only other Aristotelian texts and commentators and is, therefore, arguably a strictly philosophical commentary[62]. Thomas is then arguably dealing with Aristotle on his own terms, *Aristoteles ex Aristotele*.

Yet even with his careful attention to the text and self-limitation of employable authorities, Thomas does give the impression that his metaphysics is not that of Aristotle. For instance, the essence/esse distinction is not explicit in the *Metaphysics* but seems to be something originating with Avicenna; and in fact Thomas explicitly addresses Avicenna when he discusses that distinction[63]. However, it need not be the case that Thomas' conclusion at any one point is based solely on that specific point in the text. In fact, Thomas does not hesitate to link parts of the text showing relations and implication. That is the work of a good commentator —make sense of the whole and the details. Moreover, to be fully engaged with other commentators adds stimulus and insight to the enterprise. Just as it

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[60] Concept of «interest» being defined by its mediation between the self and true understanding (especially of the self) from R. Brague, Sorbonne, Lecture at the University of Notre Dame, 1999.

[61] J. C. DOIG, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics*. In general, Doig's work has been met with adverse reviews, particularly regarding his reading of the commentary as he attempts to situate it within the historical context. F. X. Knasas' recent work bears an interesting similarity to that of Doig: KNASAS, «Aquinas' Ascription of Creation to Aristotle». Knasas, however, pays no attention whatsoever to the Arabic influences nor does he seem to be aware of Doig's work, but his conclusion is the same: Thomas read into Aristotle a Thomistic metaphysics but was unaware of it. For an intense criticism of this position, cf. V. J. Bourke's review in *The Thomist* 37 (1973), pp. 241-243; G. PERINI, "Il Commento di S. Tommaso alla Metafisica di Aristotele»: *Divus Thomas* (Placentiae) 77 (1974) 106-145. Perini is more even-handed than Bourke and after ample consideration, concludes: «Se la metafisica contenuta nel Commento fosse realmente quella che Doig ci presenta, dovremmo dire che il giorno in cui Tommaso ha preso la penna per scriverla non andrebbe registrato tra quelli fausti per il pensiero umano».

[62] Cf. L. J. ELDERS, «St. Thomas Aquinas' commentary on the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle». Indeed, even J. Owens who sees a great difference between Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics agrees that the work is strictly philosophical. Cf. J. OWENS, «Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator», pp. 217ff.

[63] AQUINAS, *In IV Metaphysicorum*, lect. 2 , nn. 554-558.

would be foolish for someone to comment on the *Metaphysics* today without knowing anything of contemporary debates, so Thomas would have only handicapped himself by ignoring other interpretations. Thus, before one can say that Thomas has introduced ideas into the text or inferred a metaphysics that is not there or that he has used the text to articulate a distinctively Christian metaphysics, one must first determine what a good commentary should look like. Ultimately, the criterion for judging cannot be a simplistic pure view of the target text[64]. The sheer difficulty of the *Metaphysics* precludes such criteria. And, in fact, the great differences among those who have studied Thomas' commentary belies the complexity of the problem.

We have been discussing the *Metaphysics* throughout this article, hence, we already know Thomas' position with respect to our topic. We already know that he sees in the *Metaphysics* the fundaments of a notion of creation, proof that Aristotle understood that there is one universal cause of all things in their very existence. In order to illustrate the nature of Thomas' commentary then, it is necessary only to draw our attention to one passage.

In Thomas' commentary on *Metaphysics* VI, he makes the following comment:

> «For these immaterial and immobile causes are the causes of sensible things evident to us because they are beings in the highest degree, and therefore are the causes of other things, as it was evident in the second book. Therefore it is apparent that the science that treats these beings is first in the order of sciences and considers the common causes of all beings. Hence, there are causes of beings as beings, which is the concern of first philosophy, as [Aristotle] proposed in the first Book. From this it is quite evident that the opinion of those who contended that Aristotle believed that God is not the cause of the substance of the heavens but only of their motion, is false»[65].

Some readers have noted that this comment in Bk. VI is «sudden» and «without warning» and for that reason interpreted as evidence for an the intrusive character

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[64] Typical studies begin with an attempt to define first the «pure» Aristotle. E.g., F. VAN STEENBERGHEN, «The Problem of the Existence of God in Saint Thomas' *Commentary on the Metaphysics* of Aristotle», 555. Such attempts, however, are rendered immediately problematic by the very complexity of the text. It is «rife with interpretive difficulties» (*Aristotle: Critical Assessments*, Ll. P. Gerson, p. XX), «extremely difficult terrain» (J. OWENS, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian «Metaphysics»*, p. 25); «desperately difficult» (W. D. ROSS, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Translation with Introduction and Commentary, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924], I, p. VI).

[65] "Hae namque causae immateriales et immobiles sunt causae sensibilibus manifestis nobis, quia sunt maxime entia, et per consequens causae aliorum, ut in secundo libro ostensum est. Et per hoc patet, quod scientia quae hujusmodi entia pertractat, prima est inter omnes, et considerat communes causas omnium entium. Unde sunt causae entium secundum quod sunt entia, quae inquiruntur in prima philsophia, ut in primo proposuit. Ex hoc autem apparet manifeste falsitas opinionis illorum, qui posuerunt Aristotelem sensisse, quod Deus non sit causa substantiae caeli, sed solum motus ejus» (AQUINAS, *In VI Metaphysicorum*, lect. 1, n. 1164). One can find a similar statement much earlier in the commentary: «Ex quo ulterius concludit quod principia eorum, quae sunt semper, scilicet corporum caelestium, necesse est esse verissima [...] quia nihil est eis causa, sed ipsa sunt causa essendi aliis. Et per hoc transcendunt in veritate et entitate corpora caelestia: quae etsi sint incorruptibilia, tamen habent causam non solum quantum ad suum moveri, ut quidam opinati sunt, sed etiam quantum ad suum esse, ut hic Philosophus expresse dicit» (AQUINAS, *In II Metaphysicorum*, lect. 2, n. 295).

of Thomas' commentary. There simply does not seem to be any specific line in the text at that point to warrant Thomas' comment. Aristotle's text does say anything explicit no this subject at this point in the text. He is only discussing the nature of the science, the scope of the science that is metaphysics. And for Aristotle, as for Thomas, there must be a clear distinction between natural science and metaphysics in order that the latter maintain its own sphere of endeavor. In point of fact, the more general character of the latter implies that it is also higher. Metaphysics concerns not particular kinds of beings but being in general, the very being of things. The causes of beings as beings must themselves be higher, immaterial and immobile. In Aristotelian science, the investigation of the subject terminates and includes the investigation of causes. Hence, this science cannot be concerned merely with common being nor can it treat only a particular, higher class of things or even a single nature. It is both theology and first philosophy, because the being it investigates is both the being which is common or general and the being which is primary. For that very reason, Thomas cannot abide by any interpretation that denies to Aristotle the notion of a universal cause. The science demands it in order to be whole and complete, for it to make sense. What is for Thomas the strongest evidence is for moderns the greatest stumbling block —the very nature of an Aristotelian science, what makes a given study a science, complete and differentiated.

As Thomas reads him, however, Aristotle's arguments are intricate and interwoven, parts of a larger whole that is the science of metaphysics. No single argument is properly understood without its complete context. For Thomas, it is important whether a given statement is from the *Physics* or the *Metaphysics*, as we have seen in our study of the *Summa Theologiae* discussion. Moreover, Bk. II of the *Metaphysics* cannot be understood without Bk. XII and vice versa[66]. The vision of metaphysics or the science of metaphysics is what one finds in those pages. And that science becomes clearer as one proceeds from one book to the next, as one proceeds toward a knowledge of the cause of the subject genus[67].

Hence, what is clear to Thomas may not be clear to a modern commentator simply because the style of reading the text is different. J. Owens notes that Thomas keeps very close to the text as modern commentators are wont to do, yet Thomas interjects things that jar the modern reader, including Owens. Thomas, however, is not attempting to discern the *Ur-text* or the core and most authentic text. For him, the text at hand is the object of concern and as one proceeds through the whole in its own order, one comes to understand larger arguments and implications as one works through more detailed discussions. And it is that

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[66] See, for example, the many references to later books in Aquinas' commentaries on Bk. III, lect. 7-15; IV, lect. 2; VII, lect. 9, and 16; and references to earlier books in VIII, lect. 1; IX, lect. 1; X, lect. 4; XI, lect. 1, 8; XII, lect. 6. In addition, Thomas often begins his discussions of each book with reference to the order and contents of the larger context. The first lectures for Bks. VI, X and XI are excellent examples.

[67] Cf. AQUINAS, *In Metaphysicorum*, prologue.

larger picture that Thomas keeps in view as he comments, as we can see in Bk. VI. In this book, Aristotle is concerned with the scope of metaphysics, its subject and distinction from other sciences. For the past century, the very subject of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* has been the focus of heated debate[68]. Is it a theology or an ontology? A discussion of separated substances or common being? One's answer typically depends on which book one focuses on. The problem becomes even more serious if one buys into the typical reordering schemes influenced by the work of Natorp, Zeller and Jaeger. These schemes propose to uncover in the text two separate and even contrary investigations. One is then free to chose which is the more authentic or mature opinion of the ancient philosopher. On the other hand, not a few see in the very controverted nature of the debate a solution that encompasses both[69]. And according to Thomas' prologue to his commentary, the distinction is in fact a false one. Metaphysics considers what is most universal, first causes, and separated substances; yet only one is the subject properly speaking: *ens commune*. A subject is known only by knowing its cause, hence, one is more properly the subject and the other the goal. Just as physics then rightly ends with the knowledge of the Unmoved mover, so metaphysics ends with the uncaused cause[70].

Thomas characteristically begins his commentary on this book by considering its place within the larger context of the work. He surveys the contents of Bks. IV-VII in order to show the logic and importance of this sixth book. Bk. IV concerned the actual subject under consideration and the necessity of the multiple signification of these terms as comes in Bk. V. This book contains Aristotle's consideration of a multitude of terms and shows they way they, like «being», can be understood in many ways. The proper study of the subject of metaphysics, being, begins here in Bk. VI. Thomas is insistent that if being is the subject, as indicated in Bk. VI, then its causes must be investigated; hence, this investigation is at once a justification and requirement to attain to the first cause of all. It is noteworthy also that Thomas finds the notion of creation in Bk. VI on method rather than in Bk. VII which contains the actual resolution of certain problems in this science such as distinguishing between essence and being. Thomas sees in the very distinction of

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[68] For a concise survey of the *status quaestio* since P. Natorp's dichotomous deconstruction of 1888, see J. OWENS, «The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian *Metaphysics*—Revisited», in P. MOREVEDGE, ed., *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 33-59. Natorp was developing a distinction traceable to Suarez between metaphysics as a special and as a general science. This division was eventually developed into a division of studies between ontology and natural theology at Louvain and the Collegium Angelicum by the beginning of the twentieth century (cf. G. PROUVOST, *Thomas d'Aquin et les thomismes*, pp. 104f). In Aquinas' commentary, we find no such dichotomy. In fact, R. McInerny reminds us that according to Aquinas it is more appropriate to see in Aristotle's metaphysics a range of subjects, the principles and causes of being, in order to understand being *qua* being. R. MCINERNY, *Being and Predication*, pp. 59ff.

[69] Cf. W. D. LUDWIG, «Aristotle on the Science of Being»: *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989) 379-404. J. Aertson sees a similar unity in Aquinas' commentary, «Method and Metaphysics: The *via resolutionis* in Thomas Aquinas»: *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989) 405-418.

[70] Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* VI: 1026 a 27-32.

this science the necessity of universal causality. The structure of Aristotelian science demands it, if in fact metaphysics concerns reality and not mere grammar.

Returning to our quoted passage, we can see the way the very science of metaphysics is for Thomas an important part of the discussion. Thomas points out that the very subject of the science is a useful indicator of what Aristotle understands. In the first chapter of that book, Aristotle lays out what he sees to be the distinguishing feature of this science. Other sciences study this or that thing, some particular class, but only this science studies being itself. And unless someone were to be confused on this matter and think Aristotle is an essentialist, he adds the contrast of «whatness» or «substance» of things. That is, Aristotle is distinguishing between the being of things and their whatness or substance. Surely, the being he has in mind is therefore other than the whatness, the «essence» as Thomas will say. The study of being is not taken up in natural philosophy because it considers particular beings. The consideration of the common causes of being itself must be prior and distinguishable. Hence, if metaphysics is a separate science because it studies being as being, then the cause of being will be included, and this cause is more than the cause of motion. This cause causes being itself.

According to Thomas, the suggestion in Aristotle that the world came to be from nothing, at least in so far as it is not generated through a substantial change, can be signified by the [positive] name, creation —in the *Metaphysics*. Thomas gives a similar reading in his early *Sentence* commentary. In response to the apparent necessity of preexistent matter for the formation of creatures, Thomas suggests that there are two types of agency: one that causes through motion and one that gives being (*quoddam divinum quod est dans esse*[71]). The former requires a passive and an active potency; the latter requires only an active potency. «Giving being» (*dans esse*) is then to be understood according to the Christian notion of creation, not bringing form to matter but bringing something wholly into being[72]. And in so far as «giving being» means that *everything* is produced from a first principle, that notion is rationally accessible. What Thomas terms a «certain reception of being» is then not to be understood as an order of unformed to formed, from potential to actual; rather, as night follows day, so being follows non-being in creation. And this notion Thomas finds in the pagan Philosopher.

Conclusion

There is no question that Thomas made great use of the whole of the Aristotelian corpus. One cannot but be struck by the sheer number of references to Aristotle throughout Thomas' discussion of creation in practically every major work from the *Sentence* commentary to the *Summa Theologiae*. The question is whether what comes out of the Thomistic grinder is Aristotle's teaching, Thomas'

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[71] THOMAS, *In I Sententiarum*, d. 1 q. 1 a. 2.

[72] «[P]roducere rem in esse secundum totam suam substantiam» (*Ibid*).

teaching or some monstrous confusion of the two[73]. What is at stake here is not the level of purity in a particular commentary or the extent of condescension in making the best of an imperfect system of thought. Rather, the issue concerns the nature and unity of truth[74]. If, like medievals, we are sympathetic to the aims of the philosophical text and our desire to understand it is of a piece with our seeking after the truth, then we must be committed to more than an historical reading of the text, although a good reading must encompass that as well. The body of commentary that grows up around a given text adds to the discussion and enriches it. What we must consider is whether the basic text can bear the weight of this enriched discussion, whether there remains a serious organic unity between the text and its growing body of commentary.

According to Thomas, there is in Aristotle an understanding of the universal cause of all things, that being itself must have a cause. Thomas finds such understanding suggested in various passages but most clearly in Aristotle's discussion of the science itself, its subject and distinction from the other sciences. In his avowedly theological works, Thomas investigates what can and cannot be known by natural reason, or, more accurately, what pagan philosophers have in fact attained. And just as Augustine saw a portion of the Johannine prologue in Neoplatonic texts, so Thomas sees in Aristotle the rudiments of Christian belief about the origins of the world. In his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Thomas probed the boundaries of what in fact Aristotle understood and what he was working toward. In doing so, Thomas took up Aristotle's own intention, the pursuit of truth, and sought to provide deeper roots for Christian belief in the soil of natural knowledge. Such understanding bears witness to the unity of truth, the continuity between what is naturally known and what is supernaturally revealed. Indeed, the two overlap and convince us more of what is revealed yet beyond our reach.

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[73] M. Jordan sees a clear separation between Aristotle's philosophy and Thomas' theology. Thomas speaks only as a theologian and therefore must transform Aristotle's philosophy for theological use. Jordan contends, however, that Thomas is a good and faithful commentator and does not inject his commentaries with his own views. What we find in the commentaries is only an objective rendering of the text as Aristotle himself understood it. Owens, on the other hand, sees Thomas performing a similar «baptizing» of Aristotelian philosophy in the commentaries themselves. He argues for major differences between A. and T. on various issues and assumes fuller Christian doctrines when terms are used (e.g., creation). Owens, «Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator», p. 213 and 238. Grabmann and Chenu would agree with Owens on this point, but none of them impute Thomas with bad motives, only an inability to do otherwise. M. GRABMANN, *Mittelalterlisches Geistesleben* (Munich: Max Hüber, 1926), pp. 305-306; M.-D. CHENU, *Towards Understanding St. Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), p. 209, and 206, n. 9. O. H. Pesch follows Grabmann and Chenu on this matter but leaves open the question of whether this supposed inaccuracy of Thomas' commentary extends to the notion of creation. O. H. Pesch, *Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1988), pp. 131-139.

[74] It is a relatively recent phenomenon whereby one is thought to understand a given text best by dissecting it into its constituent parts and even according to its supposed chronological construction. In every philosophical text we look for contradictions and development as a way of getting at the naked or first opinion. We weigh the earlier against the later Augustine or Wittgenstein. We choose one as the more authentic, usually the later one, and prune off the less mature opinions.

«Faith seeking understanding» is not a vague hope but an earnest endeavor for the medieval theologian. The pursuit of understanding that is metaphysics roots theology more firmly in our natural ways of knowing and prevents Christian faith from becoming fideistic, from beating a cowardly retreat from the world into mere confessional categories. At the same time, however, for such work to be valid, it must be done on natural reason's own terms, or in this case, Aristotle's own terms. The text may indeed be subordinated to the truth, yet this order does not give license to violate the text. The text is or is not a guide; it cannot be other than it is nor can the commentator perform such change. The seriousness with which Thomas reads Aristotle then is seen best in his few indications where Aristotle has erred. Those who explain Thomas' interpretation and use of the *Metaphysics* in terms of misuse are imputing Thomas with an intellectual dishonesty of the worst sort; one that would fully justify the ravaging of just any philosophical work, even that of Foucault, for the expression of Christian doctrine. We cannot forget that Aristotle was not the only philosopher available to Thomas. He chose Aristotle because he saw in the ancient Greek the master of those who know, a serious and useful guide for understanding the world.

TIMOTHY L. SMITH

Thomas Aquinas College,
Santa Paula, California.