

Aquinas's *Quodlibet* XII, qu. 14

Lawrence Moonan

Among the authentic writings of St Thomas Aquinas is one, addressed to the question: *Utrum veritas sit fortior inter vinum et regem et mulierem?* ('Is the truth is stronger, when you compare it with wine, with the king, and with a woman?') Slight as it is, it reveals both an attitude and a sophisticated approach to university education, which it would do us no harm to reflect on.

The piece is quite literally a quodlibet, which in modern usage sounds as though it ought to be a trifling thing anyway, an intellectual bagatelle. The question considered here, you may think, confirms as much. In fact the *Disputatio de quolibet* was something of a high-point in the intellectual life of the faculty in which it was held. And we find there, much more typically, the mature thought of the faculty's most eminent teachers. But we do find bagatelles too, and perhaps even that, or the reasons behind it, can be instructive.

In medieval universities, the teaching was directed by a double aim: to impart coherent and substantiated bodies of knowledge, *scientias*; and to instruct in crafts in which those sciences could not only be developed, but could be put to use. To instruct, as the statutes sometimes put it, in the *usus scientiarum*. In accordance with this aim, there were two main types of teaching-vehicle. One was the lecture (*lectio*), in which coherent bodies of knowledge could be transmitted economically and in a context minimising distortion in transmission. In the lecture, too, both recent and classical contributions to the *scientias* concerned were critically discussed. The other principal teaching-vehicle was the exercise (*exercitium*), in which the students practised the *usus scientiarum*; thinking on their feet, responding to difficulties by pulling together from different parts of their *scientia* an applicable solution. What they more narrowly practised in the *exercitium* were the skills typically deployed not in the lecture but in the academic disputation. Such a disputation, a *quaestio disputata*, was held at weekly or fortnightly intervals—universities varied on the details, but all had a regular programme of disputed questions—during a prescribed part of each year. And the faculty had to see to it that its masters covered that regular programme. The disputed question was thus of the same general kind as the *exercitium*, but was the task of a master. Selected, advanced students (bachelors) had a subsidiary part in these disputations, in devising or responding to objections to the position which the master wished to defend, but it was the master's responsibility to 'determine' his answer to the

question, one way or another.

The regular disputed questions, therefore, satisfied a number of functions. They permitted the master to publish his work to his peers, in a relatively formal context. He would usually have aired it less formally elsewhere, and had the earlier versions criticized, much as we do nowadays in philosophy clubs or senior seminars. (So the ordinary disputed question provided a platform at a further stage, roughly comparable to modern publication in article form, in one of the journals.) But it also provided regular models for *usus scientiarum* (much as modern journals also provide). Attendance and at times active participation at a prescribed proportion of these was therefore often compulsory for students, just as it was for lectures and exercises. Most importantly, perhaps, it provided what it had to offer in the context of a social activity involving students and masters alike.

In addition to the regular programme of these 'ordinary' disputations, there were—perhaps no more than once a year, and sometimes not even as often—disputations *de quolibet*. These were of the same general form as the ordinary disputations, but they were treated as being rather special. There was their relative rarity, of course, and their being treated as something of a grand occasion. (The statutes sometimes specified an allowance of the faculty's best wine or beer.) They lasted much longer than the ordinary ones, and might be spread over two or three days. They were highly public, with *grandees* invited from beyond the faculty and beyond the university. They were also taxing intellectually. The topics were not chosen in advance by the disputant, but might be chosen by any master of the faculty or other appropriate body, and might be on any topic not ruled out in the faculty. (Strictly theological topics, for example, were not permitted in Arts faculties.) In both these ways, then, the disputations were indeed *de quolibet*: from anyone in the appropriate group, and about anything arguably not inappropriate.

So not just anyone would care to take on a *Disputatio de quolibet*, and not just anyone would be entrusted by his colleagues with the task, but experienced masters of some eminence in their fields. So we often find in quodlibetal questions some of the best expressed thought of the maturity of very able people. But that is not all we find, for it is clear from the texts which survive, that they were also occasions for some academic *fun*. Perhaps when the *grandees*, duty done, had bowed politely out; and at times, no doubt, when the disputant's allowance of the best wine was brimming over in *temulentia loqui*. (Aquinas may be admitting as much in this very question.) So some questions can be found, like the one which follows, where a *prima facie* rather silly question is deliberately chosen, to see what the disputant can make of it, and how neatly he can fit his answer together, and into an overall scheme; and no doubt also to provide some light relief. A good Porter's Scene need do no harm in a serious drama.

Title: Is it true that 'the truth is stronger', if you compare it with wine, with the king, and with a woman?

Videtur... . It would seem that wine is stronger, since that most greatly changes a man.

Item. Again, it would seem to be that the king is stronger, since he drives a man towards that which is most difficult; to wit, towards his exposing himself to the risk of death.

Item. Again, it would seem to be the woman, since women hold sway even over kings.

Contra. On the other hand: 'The truth is stronger' (III Esdras, 4,35).

Responsio. It should be said that this question was proposed in *Esdras* as being suitable to being dissolved by the young.

Sciendum. Let it be known, therefore, that if we consider these four—to wit, wine, the king, a woman, and truth—as things in their own right, they are not comparable, because they are not of one and the same general kind. If, however, they are considered by comparison to some effect, they do concur in one effect, and so can be compared. This effect, moreover, in which they come together and can be (compared), is the changing of a human heart. It therefore fails to be seen which among these changes the heart of a man more.

Sciendum. Let it be known, therefore, that what is capable of changing a man is, in one kind of case, something corporeal; in another, something animal. This animal something is twofold, it may be something open to sense, or something open to intelligence. The something that is open to intelligence is in turn two-fold, to wit, practical and speculative.

Among those things which pertain to the changers (*immutantia*) which change things in the natural way, according to the disposition of the body, wine has the place of excellence, by intoxication of speech.

Among those things which pertain to changing the sensitive appetite, delight is more excellent and, most outstandingly, delight arising in sexual love (*circa Venerea*): and thus the woman is stronger.

Again, in practical things and human affairs, the king has the greatest power to do this. (To effect a change in someone.) In speculative matters, the highest and most powerful thing is truth.

Now corporeal forms are subject to animal ones, animal ones to intellectual ones, and practical intellectual ones to speculative ones: and therefore *simpliciter* truth is more worthy, more excellent, and stronger.

All the formal features of the normal quodlibetal question are there, of course—the initial objections, the *Sed contra*, the *Responsio* and so on. And the useful jargon is deployed just as in more weighty questions. The *sciendum*, for example, introduces not a piece of argumentation but some information for which no particular originality is being claimed, and upon which an argument may be erected. In the present case, the actual arguments in the *Responsio* are very brief, in comparison with the preparatory provision of information.

It is perhaps significant that, in a question of this sort, the 'authority' quoted in the *Sed contra* is from a non-canonical work. The western medieval canon, ratified by the Council of Florence, counted two canonical Books of

Esdras, the second also known as Nehemias. But copies of the Vulgate also traditionally carried (and often still do, in an appendix) two further, non-canonical Books of Esdras, which were respected as works of piety, though not treated as canonical. (Verses from them can be found occasionally in the liturgy, as in the prayer from IV Esdras which forms the Introit of the Mass for the dead.) In III Esdras three young men of the court present arguments in favour of the case for wine, for the king, and for women, as though competing for the favours of King Darius. But the third, having argued his case in favour of awarding the palm to women, adds a further argument, in favour of truth. It is significant for the rest of the story in Esdras, though not for Aquinas's use of it, that the *veritas* of the Vulgate here, as in some of the Psalms, represents a Hebrew term with a sense closer to 'fidelity to promises'. When Darius pronounces in favour of 'truth', and invites the young man to request some favour, the latter reminds the King of the King's vow to restore Jerusalem; and the point, about 'truth' to promises, is of course taken. Not entirely untypically, however, Aquinas contents himself with only as much from the context and original sense of the 'authority' quoted, as enables him to reply to the question in hand. And since the order imposed by him to integrate the originally disparate questions of the quodlibet demands that 'truth' should be understood as an intellectual, not a moral, virtue, he was either unaware of the sense carried by *veritas* in his 'authority', or chose to disregard it. His opening shot, that 'this question was proposed in Esdras as being suitable to being dissolved by the young', seems to allude to the original young men, only to permit something of a polite deflation of the question put; as though allowing that it is the sort of question suitable for the *iuvenes* of the schools of grammar or sophistry, rather than one to be taken seriously in a quodlibetal disputation in the Theology Faculty. A modern scriptural exegete, and even a modern theologian, would not be expected to handle a text so lightly. Aquinas's weaknesses, by the standards of later times, are also revealed in this little quodlibet.

The notions used are of the sorts used quite generally, even in the weightiest matters. The point about the four things (wine, ... truth) not being in themselves comparable, through being in no one genus, is a commonplace enough aristotelian one. Behind the distinction between things compared in their effects, and things compared in themselves, however, lies a further one, between things considered in themselves and things considered in their effects. And that was a distinction used by Aquinas and others at central points in their philosophical theology. Theologians had been set—by Peter Abelard—the puzzle: Could God do things which he was not doing, or put aside the things he was doing? In Aquinas's day and for long afterwards, academic theologians responded by saying: If your question is about the power of God considered in itself (*potentia absoluta Dei*, they called this), then there is nothing to stop him; if your question is about the power of God in its effect (the created order, which they rather misleadingly called *potentia*

328

ordinata Dei), then only what is in that effect is in it, and that's an end on't. Aquinas, though he too made use of this distinction, and in something of the manner rather crudely indicated, was particularly careful when using the 'considered in its effect' arm, which was liable to be put very misleadingly indeed, by the less careful. But there is no need to go into that here, beyond noting that the distinction behind the one used so lightly in the present quodlibet, can also be seen at work in questions of the very greatest moment to Aquinas. (See, for example, what he has to say in *De potentia* question 1, article 5.)

Aquinas' internal organisation of the question is ingenious enough and elegant enough, though in something of the style of the polished debater, rather than the serious theologian, so this could well represent what he said when the disputation resumed to hear his 'determination' of the questions. The external organisation, however, in which the question is situated in the quodlibet as a whole, is rather forced; and indeed some have suggested that he never quite completed the *ordinatio* of this particular quodlibet.

It would be a mistake, of course, to take the piece too seriously. His own deflation of the question, as being more suited to *iuvenes* than to the greybeards of the Theology Faculty; the hint of irony or self-depreciation in the allusion to *temulentia loqui*; and perhaps a measure of *double entendre* in the passage about subjecting corporeal to animal and to intellectual forms; all suggest as much. And why not? It was no doubt important for disputations *de quolibet* to reinforce the *usus scientiarum* of those taking part. But the occasional lapse from that ultimately dispensable form of seriousness, the reminder that even earnest inquirers after truth should indulge at times in instrumentally indefensible *fun*—the hint that even in a dark world it may be possible to conceive of 'souls on holiday', as Helen Waddell, following Abelard, put it—just could be the most important and ultimately serious thing which a university of students and masters could show us.

Note. The quodlibet containing this question has long been edited: R. Spiazzi, ed., *S. Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, Turin (1949), XXIII + 269pp. is the most recent edn of the Quodlibets as a whole. On quodlibets generally P. Glorieux, *La littérature quodlibétique*, 2 vols (1925, 1935), is still the main starting point, taken in conjunction with the same author's 'L'enseignement au moyen âge. Techniques et méthodes en usage à la Faculté de Théologie de Paris, au XIIIe siècle' in *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 35 (1968) 65—186, esp. 128—34. For further treatments, by Glorieux and others, see J. Wippel, 'The quodlibetal question as a distinctive literary genre', in *Les genres littéraires dans les sources théologiques et philosophiques médiévales. Définition, critique, et exploitation* (Colloquium from Louvain-la-Neuve, pub. 1982, 67—84); especially the valuable bibliographical notes in Wippel's early pages. On Aquinas's Quodlibets, though chiefly on a set of these of rather more practical intent than the present one, see L. Boyle, 'The quodlibets of St Thomas and pastoral care' in *The Thomist* 38 (1974) 232—56. O. Weijers, *Terminologie des universités au XIII^e siècle*, (Rome, 1987), XLII, 437pp. can now be consulted. See especially pp. 335ff.