

ST. THOMAS AND HUMANISM

II

ST. THOMAS'S originality lies in the fact that he made his philosophy a welded, organic whole including and co-ordinating in the sweep of its horizon the entire panorama of being. To understand the humanism which is one facet of his philosophy we must understand his *Weltanschauung*: his vision of the world, of reality, as a whole. It is the aim of this essay simply to set forth St. Thomas's teaching, hoping thereby to shew that his philosophy is humanist in what has been submitted in the preceding pages to be the true meaning of humanism.

Man is not to be studied as an isolated phenomenon: he is part of a design infinitely vaster than himself. It is of importance to realise that St. Thomas's metaphysic, like Aristotle's, is teleological. *In exitu creaturarum a primo principio*, he says in the Sentences,¹ *attenditur quaedam circulatio vel regiratio, eo quod omnia, revertuntur sicut in finem in id a quo sicut a principio prodierunt*. He sees the birth of worlds, the march of centuries, as an emanation from the infinite, which in a vast sweep runs its course back to the abyss of energy from which it sprang. The Aristotelean idea of potentiality applies to the universe as a whole: each entity aspiring towards its proper actualization, the cosmos itself is viewed as 'yearning,' in the Aristotelean phrase, for its fulfilment. The desire of the soul for assimilation with the godhead is the supreme human example of this general trend. Man's fulfilment is his divinization—his becoming divine in a human mode—for in St. Thomas one may not separate the philosopher from the theologian: he views man as revelation has shewn him to be, called by God's mercy to the fulfilment not only of his natural potentialities but of his obediencial potentialities.

¹ Commentary on I Sentences, Dist. xiv. Qu. 2. art. 2.

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ties also, in the way of grace. Pico della Mirandola lauded St. Thomas for his perfect balance. It is seen in its fullest expression in this outlook which embraces all reality and in which nothing is overstressed, nothing is ignored. Thomism is far removed from pseudo-mysticism, from manichæism, equally far from hedonism and materialism. Truth, beauty are given their due on every plane; matter and spirit are co-ordinated and subordinated. The contemplation of the things which God has made is good. For 'this consideration bestows on man a certain likeness to the divine perfection. For it was shewn . . . that God by knowing Himself beholds all other things in Himself. Since then the Christian faith teaches man chiefly about God, and makes him to know creatures by the light of divine revelation, there results in man a certain likeness to the divine wisdom.'² The works which God has made are certainly not to be loved or worshipped as absolute perfection: the love we give them, the perfection we see in them, is relative to the infinite love we owe and the infinite perfection we see in God. Yet they are not, and this is capital, they are not mere means to the love of God. St. Thomas contrasts the taking of a disagreeable medicine which we swallow merely to cure ourselves of a malady with the taking of a tasty medicine which we may well swallow for its own sake, for the pleasure it gives us, as well as for the sake of our health: the first motive makes the medicine not merely a means but an end in itself albeit subordinate to the principal end which is health. The creatures of God are in this category. We shall see later how in the high mystical vision of the world creatures become transparent of God. But they do not thereby lose their outline or their substance. On the contrary, these stand out more clearly.

² *II Contra Gentiles* 2.

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Creatures are a means to be used in attaining the true end of man, which is God Himself. But they are not mere means. They are end-means. They have their own inherent goodness, their own inherent loveliness. *Omnia sunt bona bonitate creata formaliter sicut forma inhaerente.*³ By raising them to this dignity St. Thomas freed his philosophy from the danger of that pseudo-mysticism which despises creatures and treats them as mere utilities. But at the same time his balance of mind found for them their true level. He was very far from deifying them; the hierarchy of beings is clearly defined. *Duo fecisti Domine, said Augustine, unum prope te, aliud prope nihil.* Pure spirit is superior to creatures of spirit and matter; these are superior to the merely material. The cosmic hierarchy itself is intelligible only when viewed in its relation to the Creator. 'The central idea, which makes intelligible the thought, the *Weltanschauung*, the philosophy, of the Middle Ages,' says P. L. Landsberg, 'is that the world is a "cosmos," a Whole, co-ordinated, full of significance and beauty, moving serenely according to eternal laws and decrees which came in the beginning from God and which have in God their ultimate goal.'

The microcosm which is man corresponds in its make-up and in its workings to this conception of the cosmos. Man is himself a hierarchy of powers, each important, yet subordinated one to another and ultimately to the whole personality. If man is to be a 'Whole, co-ordinated, full of significance and beauty' his powers must be correlated, must be subordinated, for every co-ordination presupposes a subordination.

Man is made up of body and soul, of senses, mind and will. Each is set in its proper place in the hierarchy of the personality. 'The body was made for

³ *Quaest. Disp. De Veritate, Qu. xxi, art. 4.*

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the soul and not the soul for the body.⁴ Thomism is equally far removed from manichaeism and from materialism, from an exaggerated spiritualism, from the cartesian dichotomy. The body is made for the soul. But it is far from being a mere instrument, a means. It is an end-means. Platonism makes man fundamentally the soul alone; the body is but its instrument. For St. Thomas each is an essential element. The Pythagorean idea of the body being a prison which only hampers the soul is discarded. Man is not man without the body. Even after death, when the soul attains its beatitude in the vision of God, 'it is not fully set at rest'⁵: it longs for reunion with the body as partner in its glory.

On the principle of the *primauté du spirituel* the operative powers find their just place. The senses are made for the soul. But since once again the distinction between means and end-means must be borne in mind, the senses are for the soul not inasmuch as all sense-knowledge, sense-realization, is to be regarded as a mere instrument to intellectual knowledge, but inasmuch as sense-realization is subordinated to intellect-realization, just as this realization is subordinated to the strictly spiritual or supernatural. It is man's great glory that the object of his knowledge includes the whole sweep of the universe. The senses have as their object the realm of sensuous things; the mind with its transcendental relation to being as such has as its object all being, the capacity also (and above all) of being elevated to the vision of Being Itself. The Thomist conception of knowledge is to be correlated once again with the world-vision: the personality is to be put into relation by *all* its powers with *all* being. Hence to concentrate on any one sort or kind of knowledge is to be incomplete, imperfect. Sensationalism

⁴ Commentary on Epistle to Ephesians i, 23.

⁵ *Summa Theologica*, Ia.—IIae., Qu. iv, art. 5, ad. 5.

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is an error because it is incomplete : it makes man a mere animal instead of a rational animal. An intellectualism which despises the senses is an error because it is incomplete : it tries to make man an angel. Sense-knowledge itself, purely as such, is incomplete : it must be perfected, fulfilled, by the spirit. Segregated it is bestial. Love which is confined to the senses is bestial and is called lust. Lust is imperfect because it is not personal, it concerns only one part of the personality. Love on the contrary is a personal affair, demanding the play of all the powers. Sense-knowledge then must be fulfilled in the spirit : by reason, as in the abstractive processes ; by intuition, as in aesthetic perception or the 'connaturality' of love and friendship.

But the human mind itself is incomplete ; human knowledge as such is impersonal. It must be completed by the will, in love. 'All that we know,' writes Maritain, 'must pass into our power of affection by love, there only finding its resting place.' For St. Thomas, all things participate in the goodness and the beauty of God. As the mind therefore learns of this goodness and beauty the will is drawn to love them. And not until this love is born is the relationship of the *ego* to the object complete. Sense-perception is completed by the reason ; rational knowledge is completed in love.

In intuition the personality avails itself of a short cut. It dispenses with the toilsome business of reasoning : it attains the end immediately. 'I am convinced, Yorick . . . that there is a north-west passage to the intellectual world ; and that the soul of man has shorter ways of going to work in furnishing itself with knowledge than we generally take with it.' The beauty of nature, of art, for example, seized through and in the senses, necessarily draws the will. True aesthetic perception is impossible without the will, for

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beauty is a species of good. Sense-perception therefore, as such, is not a personal affair; aesthetic perception is. The same is true of course *eminenter* of the beatific vision. The same north-west passage is taken, too, in the knowledge called connatural: the knowledge of sympathy such as exists in friendship. Analogously it recurs on the higher plane of the supernatural world. It must be noted at once that St. Thomas's theory of the supernatural is diametrically opposed to those which consider the supernatural life as destructive of the natural. For him it is precisely the perfecting and fulfilment of the natural. Keeping the two in their right subordination he views them as perfectly harmonious: the supernaturalized man is the perfected natural man raised to a higher plane not by isolation from, but by building upon, the lower. His personality is realized to the fullest extent of what are called his obediential potentialities.

Mystical knowledge is the personal contact with God within the soul; an inner life at the opposite pole from introspection which, as will be seen later, is entirely inhumanist because entirely self-centred, centripetal. The treatise on the gifts of the Holy Ghost in the *Summa Theologica* describes this mystical life in its true breadth of outline. For as it is the supreme actualization of the spirit, set above all other actualizations, so it includes them, it 'informs' them and gives them their true orientation. The gift of knowledge, for example, is concerned with our judgment of creatures. Man begins to see things now as God Himself sees them, his perception of their beauty and their worth naturally enhanced by that fact. Christian asceticism, the true subordination of creatures to Creator, finds here its fulfilment. For the end of asceticism is unity, unity of knowledge and love. That unity is found, achieved, in the gifts; above all, in the gift of wisdom. The soul's vision, as it becomes more

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and more like God's vision, becomes more and more simple, more and more clear. All created being, everything which is included in the *totius creaturae amplissima . . . immensaue republica*, is seen in a clarity of vision which comes only of unity of vision—a unity attained through love.

And so the Thomist synthesis of human nature is completed. Man stands forth in his relationship with the cosmos of which he is a part: all his powers of senses and mind and will in commerce with all being created and uncreated; the whole of his personality informed, alive, with charity, which, while it achieves for him union, contact, with the Godhead, shows him also creatures in the light of God's eyes, transparent of God yet losing nothing of their own beauty, gaining, on the contrary, infinitely, since some measure of God's appraisal of their value is given to man's. We shall see later the still wider scope of this working of charity in its social application, in the City of God.⁶

From the life of the spirit, the life of contemplation, flows the life of action. The perfect life is made up of the co-ordination of these two, the active flowing from the 'superabundance' of the contemplative. Art is born of a necessity in the soul of the artist to express the fruit of his contemplation: life, which must be a

⁶ We must note how for St. Thomas all the moral life, the virtues, mortification, asceticism, are part of the general scheme of completion. The virtues tend to make man habitually what is potentially best in him; mortification precisely to bring out what is best and, above all, to avoid the over-development of a part at the expense of the whole. The Thomist view of chastity, for example, is significant: the virtue which tends to the perfecting of the mind, for the mind is dulled, becomes obfuscated, by excess of sensual indulgence. And it must be emphasized too that the negative character of asceticism is fully recognized. Mortification, precisely because it is negative, is a means merely and not an end: it must never be sought for its own sake but only as an instrument.

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work of art, must be the outcome of the life of the spirit. Charity in action must flow from charity in contemplation. Where the active life, however good in appearance, is not the fruit of contemplation it is not perfect. Again, mortification, the whole life of asceticism, must be prompted, necessitated, by the inner exigencies of charity. *Causae sunt sibi invicem causae.* While charity commands and prompts the due degree of asceticism, asceticism fans and cleanses the flame of love. But it is asceticism which is the subordinate, charity which reigns supreme.

We have lost sight in our days of this idea of the contemplative life as the source of action. Man is becoming the victim of activity, an extrinsic tyrant. He is becoming mastered, for example, by his machinery. We can hurtle through space at the marvellous speed which modern machinery has made possible, a glorious and vivid achievement. But we are allowing ourselves to be hurtled always, to be hustled through life, at that speed. We are not keeping our achievements in their place, an asset, a servant, to be used. They are autocrats which are using us. Action does not flow from the superabundance of contemplation; contemplation is made impossible by a superabundance of action.

We have lost sight too, the vast majority of us, of the idea of art as the fruit of contemplation. If art does not flow from contemplation, from the intuition which begets love, it is not art.

C'est peu d'être poète, il faut être amoureux.

Boileau's words are wiser than he knew. We like to have our art ready-made. Our cinema has given us glorious artistic achievements: yet instead of using it, a mode of aesthetic contemplation, side by side with creative activity, we allow it to take the place of creative activity. One has only to compare the creative

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incapacity of the modern multitude with, for example, the creative vigour of the Elizabethans. To be able to sing in a round or a canon is regarded now as an unusual and outstanding accomplishment; the Elizabethan who could not take his part in a madrigal was regarded as an unusual and outstanding ignoramus.

Action and contemplation then must go together. The life of man is imperfect if either of them be lacking and imperfect because incomplete. Again and again one is brought back to that central idea of fullness and completeness, of the richness which demands the fulfilment of every potentiality, which is the heart of humanism.

It is worthy of note that for St. Thomas the active life, the life of the moral virtues, is under the sway of the virtue of religion. Every good act a man performs is to be imperated as he says by religion. It acquires a new significance, a greater value, by becoming an act of the worship of God. St. Thomas would welcome, while rectifying it, the old Greek idea of physical love as an act of religion, for fundamentally the Greek idea was true; it was imperfect because incomplete.

In a yet higher synthesis this full-blooded life is established in the vaster concept of society. Man, for St. Thomas as for Aristotle, is essentially a social animal. Man therefore for St. Thomas completing Aristotle's principle is, even on the supernatural plane, social. Hence the social character of religion. Hence the view of culture as in relation to civilisation. Civilisation will mean the complete conception of the City of God: will demand a culture of the mind and of the body informed by charity in the soul. It is, in other words, not a pagan civilisation, for a pagan civilisation is incomplete. Isolated culture of the intellect whether in the individual or in the society, isolated that is from the life of the soul, is eventually suicidal. The age

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which ended with Metastasio was an age of intellectual refinement and artistic activity, it was not an example of civilization in the Thomistic sense.

Hence in fine the Thomist idea of personality as centrifugal and not centripetal. Friendship, that great centrifugal force, is for St. Thomas a virtue. Man in the Thomist scheme of things must always be in love : with God and man and nature, with the beauty of the world and of heaven. Hedonism, the philosophy of the selfish, is by that very title the reverse of Thomism. The hedonist personality is a dolefully Copernican microcosm. Charity here again is at the root of the thing, charity which like God Himself is *diffusivum sui*.

The Thomist thesis does not envisage this world alone : it opens to the soul an infinite panorama ; it connotes in the soul a corresponding depth and breadth of vitality. Man is then at his fullest culminating perfection short of the final perfection of Paradise. Every potentiality is engaged, is actualized, is perfected, in and by his relation to, his knowledge and love of, the universe of being, finite and infinite : the personality is not shut up within itself, not destroying one part of itself to perfect another ; but flowing always out from itself to God who is the centre and the circumference, and in Him to all the creatures He has made ; answering every appeal of beauty, appraising with justice and greeting with love every manifestation of goodness, seeking and welcoming every manifestation of truth, uniting itself in human love and divine charity with the vast chorus of creation, angels and men and the whole litany of beauty which the *Benedicite* sings, and marching with them bravely in that long, glad return of creation to the infinite principle from which in the beginning they sprang.

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