

The Defective Male: What Aquinas Really Said

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In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas discusses the biblical account of Creation and deals at length with the production of the body and soul of the First Man and the First Woman. The soul of each, being immaterial, was created by God.¹ But whereas the human body is normally produced by parents from the substance of their own bodies, God himself produced both the body of Adam² and the body of Eve.³ He produced the body of Adam from earth, the body of Eve from the body of Adam.⁴ The matter used may have been different, but Adam and Eve were equally God's own handiwork and Eve was not a child of (and hence not a dependent of) Adam.⁵

He asks himself why God followed this (asexual) method of production and replies that it was to show that reproduction is a relatively peripheral activity in the life of the human being. The specific goal of human existence is to understand.⁶ He uses the word *homo*: the activities of mind are the central work of the human being *qua* human being, of woman therefore as of man.

In accordance with medieval practice, he states objections to his own position and seeks to refute them. Perhaps God should not have made woman at the beginning of the world? The suggestion by a theologian that God should not have done something he actually did is obviously academic. But Aquinas *was* an academic, and academics of all centuries find that the discussion of highly theoretical issues assists them to clarify their understanding of the real world.

One objection derives from Aristotle, whose biological writings deal extensively with reproduction and embryology.⁷ Aristotle believes that the entire substance of a child develops from highly complex material fashioned by the mother. The male semen contributes nothing to the substance of the offspring,⁸ but simply triggers the workings of this complex female element which, stage by stage, becomes a child.⁹

He wonders how it is that the outcome of the reproductive process is sometimes male and sometimes female. The natural outcome of the

process, he thinks, is a male. As he sees it, the birth of a female is puzzling, for she is not a replica of her father, who supplies the active element in the reproductive process. This reminds him of other instances where the child is not a replica of its parents — instances of what in modern teratology are termed congenital anomalies.¹⁰ This leads him to a phrase that scholars find difficult to translate, a phrase that has acquired an understandable but unmerited fame, for it fails to catch the sophistication of his own views. It reads:

τὸ γὰρ θῆλυ ὥσπερ ἄρρεν ἐστὶ κεπηρωμένον.¹¹ Πεπηρωμένου

has been variously rendered. William of Moerbeke¹² uses “*orbatus*” (deprived), Bekker says “*laesus*” (injured), and English scholars of the earlier years of this century have used “deformed”, “imperfectly developed”, “underdeveloped”, “malformed”, “mutilated”, and “congenitally disabled”.¹³ In current terminology, as has been seen, one would say “congenitally anomalous”. The phrase, it should be noted, includes ὥσπερ a word that limits or modifies an assertion¹⁴. It reads, therefore, “Congenitally, the female is, as it were, an anomalous male”. One must add that elsewhere Aristotle explicitly distinguishes between the birth of a girl and the birth of teratological offspring¹⁵ (as does Aquinas — see below page 9. It is simply not correct to quote him as saying, *sans phrase*, that the female is a defective male. Nevertheless what Aristotle says provides a problem.

It should be noted that the problem is not one of Aquinas’s making and that it in no way arises from his general philosophy. Nor is it an issue raised generally by medieval theologians. It is not, for instance, found in the *Commentarium in Sententias* of Bonaventure or Duns Scotus, who were less impressed by Aristotle than was Aquinas. Albertus Magnus, a fervent Aristotelean, mentions the phrase *en passant* but makes nothing of it.¹⁶ It may well have been nothing more than an argument *developed* by scholars who wished to embarrass Aquinas’s Aristoteleanism. In any case Aquinas took it seriously enough to argue no fewer than five times¹⁷ that it is a purely biological statement and that it does not imply that woman is defective in any true sense. It is ironic that the reward for this is the allegation that he asserted it.

Aquinas — correctly, it could be argued — concentrates on the process rather than the outcome and expresses Aristotle’s views in the tag *Femina est mas occasionatus*.¹⁸ The verb *occasionare* is not found in classical Latin and was created by medieval scholars. They use it to distinguish between what is directly (or intentionally) caused and indirectly (or unintentionally) caused.¹⁹ For example, a wood fire

indirectly (or unintentionally) caused.¹⁹ For example, a wood fire normally produces flames. But if the wood has stood in the rain, the damp will change the process of combustion and smoke rather than flames will result. The normal outcome has been modified by the damp and the actual outcome is *occasionatum*.

What is occasioned may of course be good or bad. If one is burning the wood on a hearth to warm a house, the smoke is bad. If one is curing bacon, the smoke is just what is needed. But since what is unintentionally or accidentally caused is more often bad than good, *occasioned* does carry the suggestion of deficient, just as accident suggests that something has gone wrong, though there can be happy accidents.

So *Femina est mas occasionatus* means that the male semen always intends to produce a male child, but that its intentions may be frustrated, perhaps by its own weakness, perhaps by extrinsic factors, and then a female child is produced. This *suggests* that the female is somehow deficient. Hence the phrase leads to an objection to the claim that God made woman at the foundation of the world. Aquinas formulates the objection as follows:

It can be argued that woman should not have formed part of the world as it was initially created. For Aristotle says that a female is an occasioned male. But it would be wrong for something occasioned and [hence] deficient to be part of the initial creation. Therefore woman should not have been a part of that world.²⁰

The claim that woman is deficient derives from the assertion that she is occasioned and this, we have seen, means that she is indirectly or unintentionally produced. Accordingly, Aquinas seeks to refute the claim by showing that woman is *intentionally* produced. With this in mind, he advances a number of arguments that, whatever we may think of them now, were plausible enough in his day and served his purpose of refuting the Aristotelean argument.

For one, he suggests that the sex of a child may be determined by psychological factors in the parents.²¹ Now on this view the production of a daughter is directly caused or intended. But if she is directly caused she is not accidentally caused, and if she is not accidentally caused, there are no grounds for saying that she is deficient.

For another, he argues, the sex of the child may be caused by environmental factors.²² For example, the weather associated with the north wind might cause a male to be conceived, while the weather associated with the south wind might cause a female to be conceived. (This suggestion, derived from Aristotle,²³ causes much mockery

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firm evidence has emerged that in some species factors such as temperature do affect sex determination.²⁴)

Again it does not matter whether the explanation is in fact true or false. The point is that it shows once again how Aquinas seeks to prove that the conception of a female is not an accident, and once again seeks to remove the alleged grounds for saying a female is deficient.

Aquinas has a third explanation. He suggests that the sex of children may be due to the influence of the stars. This was a common view among medievals. They did not of course see this as an astrological (in the modern sense) explanation. They thought that the stars affect our world physically, just as we accept that the sun, which is simply one star among many, affects our world physically. So he argues that the heavenly bodies may determine the sex of a child, and he does this precisely because he wants to distinguish between the female, which is intended by some cause, and freaks, which are wholly unintended.²⁵

So for a third time the birth of a female is seen as caused rather than accidental, and for a third time the grounds for saying the female is deficient have been removed.

But Aquinas cannot avoid confronting the Aristotelean claim directly. (To suggest that he should have ruled Aristotle out of court as offering an insult to woman is rather like suggesting that a modern theologian should rule Darwin out of court as offering an insult to the human race.). He lays the foundation for his reply by distinguishing between *natura universalis* and *natura particularis*. *Natura universalis* is the natural world in all its workings, more especially perhaps the world of living things. It is in fact what we mean by the word Nature. *Natura particularis* is the working of an individual animal, or plant, or body system or cell. The semen emitted by the male, or more exactly the action of this semen, is such a *natura particularis*.

He now argues as follows. The male semen (*natura particularis*) may not intend to procreate a female child, but Nature (*natura universalis*) intends that female children should be produced. So the female may be accidentally caused vis-à-vis the male semen, but she is no accident so far as Nature is concerned. On the contrary, she is intended by Nature, and because she is intended rather than *occasionatum* there are no grounds for saying she is deficient. Moreover, since God is the author of Nature, she is intended by God. That is why, he concludes triumphantly, God made woman at the foundation of the world. The text reads:

Vis-à-vis (seen as caused by) the *natura particularis* [i.e., the

action of the male semen], a female is deficient and unintentionally caused. For the active power of the semen always seeks to produce a thing completely like itself, something male. So if a female is produced, this must be because the semen is weak or because the material [provided by the female parent] is unsuitable, or because of the action of some external factor such as the winds from the south which make the atmosphere humid. But vis-à-vis [seen as caused by] *natura universalis* [Nature] the female is not accidentally caused but is intended by Nature for the work of generation. Now the intentions of Nature come from God, who is its author. This is why, when he created Nature, he made not only the male but also the female.²⁶

So woman is not defective, whether she is seen as part of Nature or as part of God's creation.

The point is expressed even more clearly in another passage, this time in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

A whole and a part may have different goals. The parts seeks its own good and works towards it as best it can, but the whole works towards the good of the whole. Thus a particular outcome may be defective so far as the part is concerned, but is not a defect so far as the whole is concerned. It is clear, for instance, that the generation of a female is not intended by the part concerned, that is by the power of this semen. But it is intended by the whole, that is by the overall power that brings about reproduction.²⁷

Some examples from modern biology may illustrate the point Aquinas is making. So far as we know, it is a matter of chance whether on any particular occasion the female ovum accepts a spermatozoon that will trigger the development of a male child, or one that will trigger the development of a female child. The individual act of intercourse, therefore, produces a male or female by accident. But this does lead us to say that Nature produces children accidentally, or that children are accidents. An accidental or random element at the micro level does not mean there is no order at the macro level. Modern science turns on that.

A further illustration comes from the world of insects. Bees are divided into three castes: drones, workers and egg-layers (anthropomorphically called queens). Workers and egg-layers begin their existence with the same genetic endowment. Whether a particular egg develops to be a worker or egg-layer depends on how it is fed. The ovaries of the worker develop only partially, the ovaries of the egg-layer develop fully. Bee society so arranges things that most eggs do

not develop into egg-layers. Nothing could be more disastrous for the community than that they should do so. Now looking at an individual worker, one might possibly say that it is an incompletely developed egg-layer. But this does not justify the assertion that it is defective. For, looking at the hive as a social organisation, one sees that it needs workers quite as much as it needs egg-layers. In the socio-biology of bees, workers are not defective egg-layers. In the socio-biology of humans, women are not defective males.

A word must be said about the most widely used English version of the *Summa Theologiae*²⁸ which translates *per respectum ad naturam particularem femina est aliquid deficiens, et occasionatum* thus: "As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten".

Someone not aware of the meaning of *natura particularis* might well take it that the individual nature referred to is the nature of woman and that it is this nature that is defective. But in fact the individual nature is the male semen — this is explicitly stated in the passage quoted above from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* — and woman can be said to be defective only in the highly technical sense that she is not what the male semen intended to produce. It may be doubted whether many women will find this defect singularly disturbing.

The translation of *occasionatum* as misbegotten is wholly wrong. Had Aquinas wished to use a pejorative word, he had William of Moerbeke's translation *orbatus* (deprived) to hand. His decision to use *occasionatum* was deliberate.

Something must be said about the assertion in the same passage that "woman is directed to the work of generation". This does not mean that she is directed solely or indeed principally to the work of generation. The context here is that of Nature, of the world of plants and animals (including human animals), and in this context it is natural to say that the female is directed to the work of generation, in which she plays the principal part. But we have already seen that for Aquinas the principal work of every human being, male and female, is to understand. In addition, following Aristotle,²⁹ he explicitly states that it is not with husband and wife as it is with animals, where sexual congress is purely for the purpose of having offspring. A wife, he says, does not exist merely for the purpose of having children but is meant to share life with her husband.³⁰

As we have seen, the Aristotelean problem comes up when Aquinas is discussing the creation of the world. It recurs when he discusses what would have happened if Adam had not sinned. Such discussion is not as idle as it may seem: it allows Aquinas to describe his Utopia. In such a world, he thinks, children would be conceived

through sexual intercourse, and as many girls would have been born as boys, so that in adult life everyone would have a partner. (In Utopia, he says, virginity would not be a virtue and all would marry.)²⁵

As usual, he states objections to his own position. One such objection runs:

No females should be born in a perfect world, for, as Aristotle said, the female is an accidentally produced effect, something unintended by Nature. But in a perfect world, nothing unintended by Nature would be found. Hence no females would be born.³¹

He replies as follows:

A female is said to be accidentally produced because her production lies outside the intentions of a particular natural entity, but she does not lie outside the intentions of Nature as a whole.³²

The contention that in a perfect world only males would be born is thus refuted.

The matter comes up a third time when he is discussing the resurrection of the dead. He holds that everyone, male and female, will rise in their own body, and gives his reasons:

Just as individual people differ in stature, so they differ in sex, and this diversity makes for the completeness of the species. So as they will rise in diverse stature, they will also rise in diverse sex.³³

As before, he states objections to his own position. One objection runs:

Anything that is occasioned and is produced beyond the intentions of Nature will not rise again, for in the resurrection all error will be removed. But the female sex is produced against the intentions of Nature, because the weakness of the formative power in the male semen is not able to fashion a male embryo, for, as Aristotle says, the female is an occasioned male. Consequently the female sex will not rise again.³⁴

and he replies:

Although the production of a female is beyond the intention of the *natura particularis* [i.e., the male semen], it is intended by Nature [*natura universalis*], which requires both sexes for the completeness of the species.³⁵

There is therefore nothing imperfect in the female body and hence no reason why women should not rise in their own bodies.

It should now be clear that Aquinas does not say that woman is defective. But it must be added that the entire thrust of Aristoteleanism makes it implausible that he ever would have said such a thing, or, for that matter, that Aristotle said it in the crude sense in which it is often attributed to him. Aristotle's biology is markedly teleological and he sees Nature as normally (though not always) bringing about what is best. His is a biology of final causes. (But it is not open to the criticism that in finding final causes it neglects efficient causes.³⁶ Nothing could be more teleological than the growth of an embryo, yet Aristotle describes the process of development in almost Cartesian terms: A moves B and B moves C, and the whole process is like that of the automatic puppets the Greeks so successfully constructed.³⁷)

What is crucial for Aquinas is Aristotle's distinction, however, between events that happen for the better (*tò béltion*) — i.e., have a function — and those that simply happen (by necessity *ex avágkes*).³⁸ Now Nature is adroit at using events that simply happen in order to serve her purpose, in order to achieve her end.³⁹ An illustration of what he means may be taken from modern biology. In plants the process of photosynthesis produces molecules which store energy. That is a process that has a function in the life of the plant. But the process also produces oxygen for which the plant has no need and which it releases into the atmosphere. Now this oxygen has an essential function in the life of animals. So what is a mere happening when seen from the narrower view has a function when seen from the wider view. It is this distinction which, as has been seen, Aquinas continually employs.

It has already been noted above that both Aristotle and Aquinas distinguish between the birth of a female child and genuinely anomalous births. It may be for this reason that Aquinas keeps to the word *occasionatum*. He cannot have done so because he misunderstood Aristotle's Greek: he had available to him the translation of William of Moerbeke, and as has been seen William uses the word *orbatus* (deprived).⁴⁰ Aquinas is, manifestly, unwilling to use the word of woman. And in a way he captures more accurately the essence of Aristotle's position. It is the reproductive process that is defective, not the outcome of the process.

One can only be surprised that a single phrase has so readily been taken to express the kernel of Aristotle's and Aquinas's thinking. For of all the great philosophers, they believed most strongly that Nature acts

order founded to combat the teaching that the natural world in general and reproduction in particular are evils, creations of a malevolent God. That, he thought, was the worst possible heresy.¹² Neither Aristotle or Aquinas was ever in the least likely to believe that half the human species is defective.

- 1 *Summa Theologiae* 1 qu. 90, ar. 2.
- 2 *Summa Theologiae* 1 qu 92, ar 2.
- 3 *Summa Theologiae* 1 qu 92, ar 4.
- 4 *Summa Theologiae* 1 qu 92, ar 2 & 3. In view of the “spare rib” jibe, it is interesting to note the significance Aquinas sees in the fact that God made the body of Eve from the body of Adam: the man should have a primacy of honour, and he should love his wife the more and cling to her more closely because she was of his own flesh. Eve was made from Adam’s side rather than his head or his feet because woman should not dominate man or be his servant, but should live side by side with him in an alliance (*socialis coniunctio*).
- 5 *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 92, ar 2, ad 3.
- 6 *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 92, ar 2.
- 7 For an account of Aristotle’s embryology see J. Needham, *A History of Embryology*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, University Press, 1959.
- 8 “It is plain then that there is no necessity for any substance to pass from the male”. *De Generatione Animalium*, Bk 1, c 21, 729b19. It may be noted that this feature of Aristotle’s biology was availed of by Aquinas in his account of the conception of Christ. Cf. *In Sententias*, Bk 3, ds 3, qu 5, ar 1.
- 9 Aristotle does indeed talk of the male element as active and the female as passive, but only in the sense in which an enzyme is active and the process it facilitates is passive. “The action of the male in setting the female’s secretion in the uterus is similar to that of rennet upon milk.” *De Generatione Animalium*, Bk 2, c 4, 739b22. Cf. *Job*, 10, 10: “Hast thou not poured me out as milk and curdled me like cheese?”
- 10 Cf. M. V. Barrow, *A Brief History of Teratology to the Early 20th Century*, *Teratology*, 1971, 4: 119–130. Pp.119–122 have interesting comments on Aristotle.
- 11 *De Generatione Animalium*, Bk 2, c 3, 737a27.
- 12 Cf. *Aristoteles Latinus*, XVII 2. *De Generatione Animalium*, Edited by H. J. Drossaart. Desclée de Brouwer :Bruges-Paris, 1966. William translated this from the Greek in or before 1260 and it would have been available to Aquinas when he wrote his *Summa Theologiae*. Cf. *De Generatione Animalium*, translated by A. L. Peck. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990, p.xxi.
- 13 Cf. A. L. Peck, o.c., p. 174, note a.
- 14 Cf. Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon s.v.
- 15 Cf. *Metaphysica*, Bk Z, c 10, 1034a30: “Natural generation is like artificial production: the seed operates as do things that work by art; it contains the form potentially, and its source is something which has the same name, in a sense, as the offspring. But only in a sense, because we cannot expect all instances to have exactly the same name, as in the production of *human being* for a *woman* is produced from a *man*. Unless of course the offspring is a freak — which is why the sire of a mule is not a mule.” Translated by J. Warrington. London: Dent. 1956.
- 16 *Animalium*, Bk 3, c 8.
- 17 *In Sententias*, Bk 2, ds 20, qu 2, ar 1, ra 1; *In Sententias*, Bk 4, ds 44, qu 1, ra 3c; *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 92, ar 2, ra 1; *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 99, ar 2, ra 2; *De Veritate*, qu 5, ar 5, ra 9.
- 18 Following the translation of Michael Scot from the Arabic. Cf. Aristoteles, *De*

Animalibus XVI. Ed. A. Van Oppenraay.

- 19 Cf. *De Malo*, qu 3, ar 5: "Causa alicuius potest aliquid dici dupliciter: uno modo directe, alio modo indirecte. Indirecte quidem, sicut cum aliquod agens causat aliquam dispositionem ad aliquem effectum, dicitur esse occasionaliter et indirecte causa illius effectus; sicut si dicatur quod ille qui seccat ligna est causa combustionis ipsorum."
- 20 *Summa Theologiae* 1 qu 92, ar 1, ag 1.
- 21 *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 99, ar 2, ra 2.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Cf. *De Generatione Animalium*, Bk 4, c 2, 767a10.
- 24 Cf. M. W. J. Ferguson and T. Joanen. "Temperature-dependent sex determination in *Alligator mississippiensis*". *Journal of Zoology* (London), 1983, 200, pp. 143–177.
- 25 *De Veritate* qu 5, ar 9, ra 9.
- 26 *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 92, ar 1, ra 1. The Latin reads: "Dicendum quod per respectum ad naturam particularem femina est aliquidiciens, et occasionatum: quia virtus activa quae est in semine maris intendit producere sibi simile perfectum secundum masculinum sexum: sed quod femina generaretur, hoc est propter virtutis activae debilitatem, vel propter aliquam materiae indispositionem, vel etiam propter aliquam transmutationem ab extrinseco, puta a ventis australibus qui sunt humidi . . . sed per comparisonem ad naturam universalem femina non est aliquid occasionatum, sed est de intentione naturae ad opus generationis ordinata: intentio autem naturae universalis dependet a Deo, qui est universalis auctor naturae, et ideo, instituendo naturam non solum marem sed etiam feminam produxit."
- 27 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk 3, c 94. The Latin reads: "Ad aliud igitur tendit intentio particularis agentis, et universalis: nam particulare agens tendit ad bonum partis absolute, et facit eam quanto meliorem potest; universale autem agens tendit ad bonum totius. Sicut patet quod generatio feminae est praeter intentionem naturae particularis, idest, huius virtutis quae est in hoc semine, quae ad hoc tendit quod perficiat conceptum quanto magis potest: est autem de intentione naturae universalis, idest, virtutis universalis agentis ad generationem inferiorum, quod femina generetur."
- 28 Translated by the Dominican Fathers, London, Burns Oates, 1920.
- 29 *Ethica Nicomachea*, Bk 8, c 12, 1 162a20.
- 30 *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 92, ar 2.
- 31 *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 99, ar 2, ag 1.
- 32 *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu 99, ar 2, ra 1.
- 33 *In Sententias*, Bk 4, ds 44, qu 1, ar 3c.
- 34 Ibid, ag 3.
- 35 Ibid, ra 3.
- 36 Cf. *De Generatione Animalium*, Bk 5, c 8, 789b5. Because of the widespread belief that Aristotle substituted final causes for efficient causes, it is worthwhile quoting the passage in full: "Democritus however omitted to mention the Final Cause, and so all the things which Nature employs he refers to necessity. It is of course true that they are determined by necessity, but at the same time they are for the sake of some purpose, some Final Cause, and for the sake of that which is *better* in each case. And so there is nothing to prevent the teeth being formed and being shed in the way he says; but it is not on that account that it happens, but on account of the Final Cause, the End; those other factors are causes *qua* causing movement, *qua* instruments, and *qua* material, since in fact it is probable that Nature makes the majority of her instruments by means of *pneuma* used as an instrument . . . But to allege that the causes are of the *necessary* type is on a par with supposing that when water has been drawn off a dropsical patient the reason for which it has been drawn off is the lancet, and not the patient's health, *for the sake of which* the lancet made the incision."

(Translated by A. L. Peck, o.c.)

- 37 *De Generatione Animalium*, Bk 2, c 1, 734b10. Cf. Bk 2, c 5, 741 G9.
38 *De Generatione Animalium*, Bk 2, c 1, 731b18.
39 A. L. Peck, o.c., p.xliii, cites nine instances where Aristotle does this: 642a31, 663b13; 663b20; 738a33; 739b28; 743a36, 755a22, 776a15, 776b33.
40 Cf. Note 12.
41 *De Partibus Animalium*, Bk 1, c 5, 645a20.
42 *In Sententias*, Bk 4, ds 26, qu 1, ar 3.

Maurice Wiles and Christian Doctrine

Thomas Weinandy

The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles.

eds. Sarah Coakley and David Pailin (Oxford, 1993)

This festschrift honours the notable theological career of Dr. Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor emeritus of Divinity at Oxford University. In their Preface Drs. Coakley and Pailin state: "Throughout his distinguished career he has been a staunch supporter of a liberal approach to Christian theological understanding" (p. v). The essays in this volume take up a major, if not the major, preoccupation of Professor Wiles' "liberal approach", that of the making of Christian doctrine in the early Church and the remaking of it today.

The majority of the authors endorse, and so champion, in some fashion, Wiles' initiative that Christian doctrine be remade in light of the demands of historical criticism, contemporary philosophy, and cultural experience. Thus J. Barr, J. Hick, M. Hooker, G. Kaufman, R. Lyman, S. McFague, J. Macquarrie, S. Ogden, and D. Pailin argue, in a variety of ways, that the traditional understanding of Christian doctrine,

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