

## THOMIST APOCALYPTIC

"LE Silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie," wrote Pascal.

Around us the miracle of nature towers heavenward under the huge pyramid of subordinated and interlocked beings. "Combien de royaumes nous ignorent!" But ourselves are introverted, egocentric. Even our earth readily becomes for us the core of the world about which the stars circle in a vast illusion.

It is the biggest contribution of Thomism to our life-thought that it tears us away from that little shrunken vision. We lift up our eyes to the eternal hills which surround us everywhere. Every rock, crystal, tree, flower, bird, is an "eternal hill" for those in whom the light of the vision has dawned. It towers upwards till it touches God and tells us of God.

Spinning electron hung over the void, electron supports atom and atom molecule; molecule supports tissue and tissue the rhythm of life. Through the wonders of science we learn to reconstruct in its richness the nature divided up by our analysis. Through division we reach a deeper unity; through the splitting up of the rainbow we know the inner richness of undivided light. As Goethe knew the beauty of holiness and adoration through the incense ascending from his childish pyramid of minerals, so we know the glory of God englobing us as we ascend the mountain of created being. "Un monde nouveau, comme si nous avions colloque avec les naturels d'une autre planète," wrote Fabre of his insects. Every nook and corner of nature is such a new world. The enriching knowledge that science (viewed synthetically) gives of any one such little world explains and again enriches the worlds which are above it and below it, and each sphere of being gives new meaning to all the others. The dust on the butterfly's wing, the harmoniously waving hairs of an infusorian, the splitting of a flame by the spectroscope, the unplumbed abyss of the

Unconscious, the fantasies of children and the fables of nations, folklore and legend and myths, are all mutually enriching and productive of synthetic vision for the synthetic mind. The perfect synthesis ends in God.

The wondrous mystic emanation of all things from God; the subsisting solidarity which pervades the whole in virtue of the common quality of *being* and its analogical oneness; and the final curving back of all things in a vast circle towards God, especially in and through man who by spirit and will has dominion over his own acts and is thus made more perfectly in the image of God than all the lower beings, being at the same time an epitome of all degrees in the pyramid of beings below him—such is the cosmic circle which is St. Thomas's plan for the *Summa Theologica*. The rest of his work fills in some of the details. Albert the Great had already filled in some more. The great scholastic commentators, like Cajetan, John of St. Thomas and the Salmanticenses, did the same. And every true philosopher can be made to contribute something new, precious and fulfilling to the detail of the cartoon of nature outlined by the hand of Aquinas.

Emanation, unfolding, evolutionary co-working, and the return to the infinite Source—the Thomist world-view is a single vision, so exceedingly simple for the reason, yet somehow profound and enriching for the imagination, feeling and will that many philosophers otherwise unsympathetic with mediæval and patristic thought have found in its unity of vision a peculiar fruitfulness and grandeur. And for those who grasp the validity of Thomism in its other aspects, this general apprehension is the real beginning of their completely human and affective apprehension of those other aspects taken piece-meal. Theodicy, apologetics, moral theology, all the departments of Thomism, are valid by their dependence upon that total unifying truth. The meaning and value of the proofs of God's existence and the nature of His perfections, the discussion of man's natural desire for God, the apologetic of the Church (what we are proving, why, and by what means), all are obscured, rendered thin

and academic, if taken piece-meal and outside the general rhythm of the universe. So too for the basic moral theses, the ultimate character and sanction of human acts, habits and virtues, of law operating in its legitimate sphere, "cases of conscience" and manual exactitudes, all are most important but yet dead, doctrinaire, invalid unless set in their natural place in the world order as fragmentary cross-sections of the all-pervading emanation of life and its vigorous affirmation.

To see mankind as of a piece with the many-coloured pattern of the universe drags us out of our poky introspections and artificial gradings of human endeavour. Around us all nature moves while we are static, shut inside our hermitage of pride. In the lake out there uncounted thousands of minute organisms were born but yesterday. Each is in movement, following the immanent lust for life; through action it grows, not in quantity merely but in inner richness, value and subsistence; the creative overflow of Divine Goodness has touched its tiny essence and drawn it out of nothingness; according to its measure it pants after the eternal waters of the Source whence it came and whither it will somehow return. The unicellular sphere rolling majestically across the field of the microscope, the black mass of wriggling tadpoles seething in the pond, the green shoots seeking the south, and the blazing parabola of the meteor curving earthwards—the mind of man is made to know these things with a thousand others; his will is made to glow from his apprehension of their glory. This living fusion of matter and spirit is marvellously fitted to catch the divine meaning in the spinning cell, to enter into the growth of the spawn, to shoot up with the green branches, to break into flame as the mass of star-dust hurries on its way.

The human mind and will are made to embrace all things in their core. But the human being is also free. We can look and we can look away. We can gaze frankly at God's reality or we can blink and look down in embarrassment. The soul can expand indefinitely and it can shrink to a point. It is free; and its freedom is at once its glory and its tragedy.

We can focus our eyes on our own minute selves or on the cosmic drama going on above. The archangel raises his voice and the thunders answer; the devils are said to spend their futile existence trembling. In nature both are like, but one has opened and the other shut; one has looked and the other would not look. It is so with men; if our study of the moral aspect of Thomism has not taught us that, it has not yet taught us anything, certainly not Thomism nor Christianity.

We are sceptical because we do not will changeless truth. Those who refuse to accept the religion of Jesus Christ love darkness rather than the light; their works are evil and they prefer to look another way. And we who accept it often refuse to allow it to grow because of our pusillanimous pride and monstrous self-sufficiency. The glory of the sunshine and the miracles of nature and mankind are all around us, and we will not go forth. We somehow hate the idea of the oneness of all truth, dreading its implications because if we admitted them we should have to go out of our paltry littleness, the minuteness of our ideas about our own Faith, the narrow complacency within which we have barricaded ourselves, and visualize the contrast with its inexhaustible reality.

Lift up your eyes and see the harvest. The Kingdom of God is nigh, even at the doors. It is not found by an academic enquiry. It is not spread abroad by human shrewdness and the jingle of a religious press which talks of little but politics. It suffers spiritual violence. It is the pearl for which we must sell all and risk all—even our salvation to secure our salvation. Dull human "prudence" is so transformed by supernatural Prudence as to be barely recognizable. The infinite Spirit often drives us on to risk all by apprehending and willing all. There is no greater danger of death to a Christian soul and extinction to the Christian Church than the danger of shutting our eyes. Oh yes, many saints and mystics have shut their eyes—but because they have had something else to look at! They have

## BLACKFRIARS

walled themselves up in cells and perched on the tops of pillars and followed all kinds of disconcerting whims, under the impetus of one idea. But their one idea was an idea worth having, and involved a "vocation." They made no mistake. Only the insane make a mistake in choosing one idea. The saint chooses a tremendous idea and the lunatic chooses a minute idea which he thinks tremendous—chiefly because it is the only idea that occurs to him. To choose one idea and motive is perhaps the most dangerous business in the world. It can lead to Hell and also to Heaven, but not so often as we might believe. There is a place between, and that is mediocrity, opaque vision, listless willing, and, at its worst, lunacy.

Just because we are travelling to God and can be perfectly fulfilled by nothing but God, our souls can and must in this world pass from thing to thing, from essence to essence, as a bee passes from flower to flower, gathering honey and bread for the future.

No finite idea is self-closed. That would be ghastly. There is in its pattern always some unwoven thread whereby the human spirit can escape. And through that unwoven thread one idea is linked with all other realities. All things overlap and inter-penetrate, and if we wish to appreciate one entity richly we must learn to see all other entities in it, and it in all other entities. *Ens est analogum*. "Being is analogical." One thing is not quite another thing, but they assuredly overlap. A flower is not I; I am not God; yet the being of the flower, of me, of God, is somehow alike in each of us. Thomism, it is said, is nearly pantheism; it is certainly not quite pantheism. A fragile rampart separates us from one another and from the englobing Ocean of the Infinite. It is enough, and more would be too much.

And in this apprehension of overlapping and inter-penetrating realities all things are seen (and only thus able to be seen) as one whole. The cosmic procession of all things from the Absolute and to the Absolute is a seemingly infinite river whose direction, however it winds this way and that, is ever towards the Ocean of Being.

Human activity is but a cross-section of this universal stream of action and life. Its direction is the same although it possesses its own unique qualities. Indeed, until the general direction is seized by the mind and the imagination those unique qualities are dead and dry, not being immersed in the waters of life pressing inwards to pervade all things.

Man is a surface-current on the onward-sweeping river of life, and life's river has its course among the rocks whose measure is geological time. You cannot understand the current until you understand the river, and you cannot understand the river's course until you understand the primeval lie and circumstances of those rocks. It is useless to enquire why man should go this way and not that way, and ask him to fulfil this law and that counsel and this and that unintelligible legal application to the minutiae of his life, until the tremendous fact of his continuity with the vast circle of creation is apprehended and held as his own.

The mediæval world-view in which the gigantic religious-philosophical traditions of Greece and Israel, Rome and Islam and Christendom, intermingled and momentarily fused, was itself the zenith of a world-wide curve of life, the crest of its wave. Its beginnings lie intertwined with the superstitions of primitive peoples, and perhaps behind them and beneath them among the twin evolutionary processes of instinctive and rational life.

If the whole can be created by the successive evolution of its parts, the parts can only be richly visualized by a synthesis into its whole.

Through this search for re-synthesis the bare skeleton of an abstract moral system will take flesh and move. The moral law will then be seen not as an arbitrary burden imposed from without, but as an expression of man's natural and imminent aptitudes, needs, and genius, recreated on a divine plan. And Moral Theology will be appreciated as no intolerable Judaistic interference with those inward sanctities, but their supernatural yet never unnatural extension to another sphere of being, life, and creative action. "La vertu est . . . l'authentique prolongement de nos instincts,"

says Père Sertillanges, "à condition que ces instincts soient authentiques eux-mêmes, c'est à dire, qu'ils représentent, aux yeux de la raison, les volontés de la *nature naturante*, la génie de l'espèce."

This way of man to God is therefore world-wide and founded upon a capacity and a will to know, experience, and love all reality in its mystery and wonder. That authentic path across the infinite abyss separating creature and Creator knows no constraint by arbitrary law and conviction, in so far as there is one entirely external to it. Yet it implies self-discipline and self-renouncing willingness to go out and seek, to leave the self-life far behind and follow the Christ-life in its selfless grandeur, to admit the sunlit radiance of all truth into our hearts, and to renounce our petty complacencies about the illusory completion of our own ideas, that it must still be said: "Narrow is the way, and few there are who find it." To go out in a tiny boat under a lowering sky requires more courage than to sit at home in self-sufficient security. To battle with the elements on the open sea, to know the dangers, the inward and outward agonies, and the ever-renewed longings of men—to feel the keen wind and to taste the salt of the sea—is costly and dangerous, while it may merit reward. And so long as storms rage outside and human beings are perishing and crying for help, the academic theory that there is safety in seeking safety readily becomes an illusion, perhaps a diabolical illusion.

The path of divine love (and that is all Christian morality means) is a strait way and hard to find, because it is a path of courage and selfless generosity of mind and will.

We begin to appreciate this when we see man's life as a thread in the pattern of the world, as a tiny stream swept on with the wide river of life. Until that vision is taught us by St. Thomas, the rest of his work is for us worthless.

Until we take our lives in our hands and roam out in quest of divine truth and creative action we can never touch the prizes of divine love, or guess at the infinitudes of the Spirit impelling us to create. We can never know the mean-

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ing of the endless forms and transformations of the cosmos in its million material expressions of immanent life. We can never experience any of that temporal yet divine restlessness which is the greatest human manifestation of the eternal peace and unity, nor understand the magic of those mystic words of Jalal Al-Din:

“In pursuit of love we wander restlessly hither and thither,  
At last love sinks into the depths of God.  
Whatsoe'er I devised in praise of love  
Fell dumb when Love itself began.”

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