

THE ANALYTICO-SYNTHETIC METHOD IN THE THEODICY OF ST. THOMAS

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IN the study of every science, it is of primary importance to understand and appreciate at the very outset the method that is to be used. The reason is evident. Method is the "way followed to arrive at an end." For the philosopher, it is the way leading to knowledge. Now when a traveler begins his journey, he chooses the way to his destination that is safest and surest. So too does the master in his quest of knowledge and thus while we admire the content of the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas, we must not overlook the excellence of the scientific method upon which his works are built.

The two principal kinds of method are known as the analytic and the synthetic. Many, starting with false principles of ideology, have confused these two and for that reason it is well to explain immediately just what we understand by them. The analytic method is that mode of reasoning which proceeds from effects to cause, from sensible facts to the laws governing these facts, from the complex to the simple, from the particular to the universal. The synthetic method, on the other hand, proceeds from cause to effect, from the universal to the particular, from the simple to the complex. Thus on the one hand we have analysis or induction, on the other synthesis or deduction. That this is the sense of St. Thomas is clear from the *Summa*, Ia IIae, q. 14, a. 5: "In every inquiry one must begin from some principle. And if this principle precedes both in knowledge and in being, the process is not analytic, but synthetic: because to proceed from cause to effect is to proceed synthetically since causes are more simple than effects. But if that which precedes in knowledge is later in the order of being, the process is one of analysis, as when our judgment deals with effects, which by analysis we trace to their simple causes." Both these methods are effective and necessary, but the really scientific method is a combination of the two and is known as the analytico-synthetic. It is the method that St. Thomas has used to such great advantage in his works.

Rejecting the doctrine of innate ideas, the Scholastics held that the intellect is in the beginning a *tabula rasa*. We bring no knowledge with us into this world and whatever we can know during the course of our mortal existence must have its origin in sense perception which places us in direct communication with the outside world. We have by nature only the seeds or principles of knowledge, not knowledge itself, and it is by the light of these principles that the intellect by its own activity erects within itself the edifice of science from the data furnished by the senses. In the analytic method or the *via inventionis*, as St. Thomas calls it, we start out from a sensible fact and trace that fact to its ultimate explanation in the world of reality. That St. Thomas should have made this analysis or induction so integral a part of his method is the more noteworthy in view of the fact that the earlier teachers of his age, as Professor De Wulf says, had been "smitten with an overweening attachment to the deductive or synthetic method."¹ Placed between the devotion to the deductive method noted in Erigena, Alan of Lille, St. Anselm and Descartes and the sweeping rejection of it by Roger Bacon, the position of St. Thomas is but another manifestation of the "golden mean" of the great Doctor and his followers.

Having reasoned up to the simple, universal truths by analysis, the intellect uses them as principles of a synthesis working downward to ultimate effects, reasoning from the universal to the singular, from antecedent to consequent, from the simple to the complex so that the *terminus ad quem* of the analytic method becomes the *terminus a quo* of the synthetic.

By way of illustration, Cardinal Zigliara shows the application of the two methods to the art of the eloquence. Before there were any rules of eloquence, there were men recognized as orators. By observing them, by analyzing their speeches and methods, by comparing them with men not so gifted and noticing what the former possessed that the latter did not possess, it was possible to lay down general rules of eloquence. This was by means of analysis, working up from facts to general laws. On the other hand, once these laws were discovered, a speech could be pronounced perfect or imperfect by comparing it with them, by using them as a sort of measuring rod just as we judge a syllogism good or faulty by applying the laws of right reasoning.

It is not difficult to see how insufficient for the philosopher would be either of these methods taken by itself and it is in their intimate

¹ M. De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New* (New York, 1907), p. 19.

union that the perfection of the method of St. Thomas is manifest. As a philosopher, he sought a knowledge of things through their highest causes, but in order to reach these causes he passed through the lower ones with which the particular sciences are concerned. He did indeed set out from analysis but, like all sound philosophy, his ended in synthesis as its natural complement. As Doctor Grabmann says: "He strikes a middle course between a one-sided emphasis on the factual at the expense of ideal truth, and a one-sided emphasis of the ideal at the expense of the factual—between a positivistic empiricism and an exaggerated realism."² And for the Scholastic of today, as for the great master, the analytico-synthetic method is the foundation of the entire structure of philosophy.

Nowhere have we a more striking example of the use that St. Thomas made of the analytico-synthetic method than in his theodicy, in which he reasons up from the world to God and then back again from God as a first principle to determine His attributes and establish His relations with the world of creatures. He thus molds together analysis and synthesis into one integral science embracing everything that can be known of God by the light of reason alone.

The importance of theodicy in the mind of St. Thomas is evident from the place of honor he accorded it in his two immortal Summae, where it serves as a foundation for all that follows. In answering the objection that the existence of God is an object of faith and consequently cannot be demonstrated, he says: "The existence of God and other like truths which can be known by natural reason are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith supposes natural knowledge, even as grace supposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected."³ The Church has time and time again insisted upon this important truth, that reason precedes faith, not faith reason, and the Vatican Council teaches that "Right reason demonstrates the foundation of faith and illumined by it perfects the knowledge of divine things."

Canon Law prescribes that philosophy and theology be taught according to the method, the doctrine and the principles of St. Thomas⁴ and if this be necessary in other branches of philosophy, how much more important is it in theodicy which must lay deep and strong the foundation of faith and all subsequent theology. In his encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*, in which he condemned Modern-

² Martin Grabmann, *Thomas Aquinas His Personality and Thought*, (New York, 1928), p. 37.

³ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, a. 2, ad Iam.

⁴ *Codex Juris Canonici*, Canon 1366, § 2.

ism, Pope Pius X declared that it is dangerous to depart from St. Thomas especially in metaphysics. Knowing this, how careful we should be to follow closely in the footsteps of the Angelic Doctor when we venture to touch the highest points of metaphysical inquiry, the crown of all philosophy, as we do when we seek to know God as far as we can by natural reason, to know what He is and what are His relations with us. In St. Thomas we shall find a sure guide to lead us up to the summit of the wisdom he has attained whence we can look down to behold as a mighty panorama the work of God in His creatures.

The first step in the upward way, in his analysis, is to demonstrate the existence of God and in setting forth the classic five ways of proving it, St. Thomas begins with a sensible fact, which he analyzes in the light of a self-evident rational principle to reduce it finally to the cause it necessarily postulates. What are the facts? In the world, as St. Thomas says, we perceive movement, dependent efficient causality, contingent beings, different degrees of perfection in beings and, finally, order. He then proceeds to the analysis of these facts by the principle of sufficient reason—everything must have a sufficient reason for that which it is, and if this sufficient reason cannot be found in the facts themselves, it must be found outside them in a cause, and here the principle of causality comes into play which will not permit reason to stop until it has found a cause capable of explaining itself and everything else in the same line; for what cannot explain itself can never be the ultimate explanation of anything else.

Let us now examine the facts. Movement is defined as the passage from potency to act. Since, then, nothing can be at the same time in potency and act, nothing can move itself; it must be moved by another, and in following the links of the chain of moved movers we must necessarily arrive at a first immovable mover, without which there would be no movement at all. The procedure is practically the same in the other four proofs. Dependent efficient causes, the one acting only in so far as acted upon by another, requires a first uncaused cause. Contingent beings have not existence by nature; they must have received it and, in the ultimate analysis, from a necessary being, a being in whom essence and existence are identified. Different degrees of perfection not by nature limited to this or that degree, can find their sufficient reason only in a being which is that perfection in its plenitude. Order cannot explain itself; it cannot come from the nature of the beings that go to constitute the order; its cause must be an intelligence which conceived the plan of which order is the

execution. There must then exist, says St. Thomas, an immovable mover, a first efficient cause, a necessary being, an all-perfect being, a supreme governor of the universe; and since the term of any one of these proofs contains virtually the other four, there must exist a being in which these five prerogatives are verified, and that being we call God.

Let us now with St. Thomas push the analysis a step further. What is it that constitutes the nature of God as knowable by the light of reason alone, that makes God what He is and different from every other being? Evidently this must be the divine perfection which is conceived by us as the foundation and ultimate explanation of all the others, even though in God they are all identical. It cannot then be anything pertaining to action, since action supposes being, and in the order of being we can go no higher than St. Thomas leads us in his third proof. Hence it is here that we shall find the perfection which we seek. When we have reached the existence of a necessary being, a being in whom essence and existence are identified, being pure and simple in all its plenitude, reason has made its supreme effort in its quest of God. Even the genius of the Angelic Doctor can lead us no higher. Here at the apex of the analytic way, faith and reason meet; we have been able to discover by reason alone the definition which God gave of Himself when He said to Moses: "I am who am; thou shalt say to the people of Israel: He Who is hath sent me to you."⁵

By a rigorous application of the analytic method, St. Thomas led us from the world of sense to the existence of God as a self-subsistent being, in Whom alone we can find the ultimate explanation of the facts of daily experience. And here where analysis ends, the application of the synthetic method begins; the rest of theodicy is but a reasoning from antecedent to consequent, the gradual unfolding of what a self-subsistent being necessarily implies both as regards attributes and relations with the outside world. We may not here go into detail in this marvellously logical synthesis, but lest we fail to appreciate the completeness of St. Thomas' work, let us touch the principal points of his deduction.

First he discusses the absolute attributes of God, the divine simplicity, infinity, immensity, immutability, eternity and unicity; notions, as he clearly shows, intimately connected with the idea of a self-subsistent Being, all logically deduced from the basic principle from which we started. Next he considers those attributes which we

⁵ Exodus III, 14.

conceive as principles of immanent action, namely, intellect and will. God must have both, for He Who is Being cannot lack any of its perfections. By His intellect God knows all things possible, but it is in the decree of His will, which determines the choice of possibles, that He knows things past, present and future. After the intellect has conceived a work and the will has judged it good, there remains the actual carrying out of the work. This, then, leads us logically to the power of God or His omnipotence and here we turn to the works of God *ad extra* and consider His relations with the world of creatures.

We saw that God is self-subsistent Being, that in Him there is no distinction between essence and existence. It is manifest that there can be but one such Being and from this fact, by means of the principle that whatever is in a being by participation is caused by a being in whom it is essentially, St. Thomas deduces the fact of creation. All beings must come from God, not by any mode of emanation but as a creation out of nothing. This dependence on the Creator does not end with the beginning of the creature's existence. The existence once received must be continued and this is accomplished by a prolongation of the act of creation, for just as all are created by God, so all must be preserved in being by Him "by Whom everything exists, without Whom everything would cease and in Whom all things live and move and have their being."

With relentless logic, the Angelic Doctor goes on to deduce his last and, in a manner, most important consequence since it brings into full light our utter dependence upon God. Not only are creatures brought into being and preserved in being by God, but from Him also must come all their activity; of not even the slightest action can the creature be the primary source. The self-subsistent Being alone has within Himself the reason of His being and activity. He must of necessity be the ultimate reason of being and activity in everything else. "God," says St. Thomas, "is the cause of action in every agent."⁶ "He not only gives things their forms which are the proximate principles of action, He also preserves them in existence and applies them to action."⁷

By the analytic method St. Thomas led us from the world to God, and by the synthetic method he has led us back again from God to the world. By the first he reasoned up from the world to the ultimate principle it necessarily requires; by the second he reasoned

⁶ *op. cit.*, Ia, q. 105, a. 5.

⁷ *loc. cit.*, ad 3am.

down from the notion of the first principle to its ultimate consequences. This is the whole theodicy of St. Thomas, from beginning to end a classical example of the application of the analytico-synthetic method and of what reason can accomplish when faithful to it. We marvel at the breadth of vision of St. Thomas, but in viewing the doctrine, we should not fail to appreciate the excellence of the method by which the architect constructed his magnificent edifice. And as a result of it all, he places before us no anthropomorphic ideal, no great unknown, but the God Whom he sought from his childhood, the God Whom the great saints of the Church have known and loved and knowing the more, have loved the more intensely.

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