Introduction

Manuductio

According to one of his earliest biographies, when Thomas Aquinas was a boy of five or so, he would pester his tutor with the question, *quid est Deus*—what is God?[1] Poor tutor. Sooner or later the youth would come to understand that only one man could possibly answer that question satisfactorily: the God-man. But its hold on him never slackened. That is why he became a theologian. He also never lost his readiness to learn from other, merely human persons about the things they were qualified to teach. That may be one reason why he became such a great teacher himself, eventually dubbed Angelic.

A term that Thomas himself often uses to describe the activity of teaching is *manuductio*, leading by the hand. Teachers bring us from familiar truths, truths that we already know, to others hitherto unfamiliar or unknown. It usually takes time, and patience. Thomas thinks angels take in whole fields of knowledge in an instant, but our earthbound, sense-bound mind is made to proceed gradually, step by step.[2] Thomas finds pedagogical *manuductio* practiced in quite a variety of ways and settings, the chief practitioner being God Himself.[3]

1. Petrus Calo, *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, §3, 19.
2. See George, "Mind Forming and *Manuductio*."
3. See, for example, *De ver.*, q. 14, a. 10.

But there is also a kind of *manuductio* into divine matters that is practiced mainly by human teachers, and in which Thomas especially excelled. It is the kind that he ascribes to philosophy when he considers it from the theologian's viewpoint. Philosophy, he says, regards what can be known by man's natural reason. The things proper to theology, by contrast, are above reason (which does not mean contrary to it). The philosophical things, then, are more familiar or better known to us. Indeed, without reason, neither faith nor any other kind of access to divine truth would even be possible for us, any more than it is for beasts. So the human mind, Thomas judges, "is more easily led by the hand" from philosophical things into the things of theology.[4] Later we will look at his conception of philosophical *manuductio* in more detail. But for a testimony to his own proficiency at it, let us fast-forward to a few weeks after his death.

Thomas died before reaching fifty. At the time of his demise he was traveling in southern Italy, which was the region that had witnessed his birth, his upbringing, and the discovery of his vocation as a Dominican friar. But he had moved extensively over Europe during his short life, and the place where he had spent most time and made most impact, first as a student and then as a theologian, was Paris. So it is not too surprising that authorities at the university of Paris, upon learning of his passing, should have sent the Dominicans a letter of condolence.[5] But the emotion avowed in the letter, even allowing for rhetorical excess, is striking. "For news has come to us which floods us with grief and amazement, bewilders our understanding, transfixes our innermost vitals, and well-nigh breaks our hearts." They went so far as to claim for Paris the right to Thomas's remains.

But two other features of the letter are what interest us most. First, it speaks on behalf of only part of the university's personnel: "the rector and the procurators, and the other Parisian masters presently teaching in the Faculty of Arts." The Faculty of Arts was what we could call the Philosophy Department. Second, other things, besides Thomas's body, were also requested. These included "some writings pertaining to philosophy, begun by him at Paris, left unfinished at his departure, and completed, we believe, in the place to which he had been transferred." Possibly among these was his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.[6]

4. *STh,* I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.
5. See Foster, *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 153–57.
6. See Weisheipl, *Thomas D'Aquino*, 332.

The letter made no reference at all either to the Faculty of Theology or to any of Thomas's own theological works. Of course, the theologians might have reacted separately to the news of his death, leaving no record. Still, the omission does bring to mind the doctrinal tensions that had arisen between Thomas and some of the less Aristotelian-minded, more conservative theologians at Paris, including Stephen Tempier, now the city's Bishop.[7] And there is irony here, because it is not that Thomas's relations with the Arts Faculty were always perfectly smooth. Just four years earlier, he had produced a polemical tract against a position that was being promoted by some of the Arts masters themselves (and was formally condemned by Tempier the same year).[8] Thomas attacked the position as at once contrary to the faith, to Aristotle's views, and to the principles of philosophy. Philosophers are an unpredictable lot. Was the Paris letter written despite that tract, or partly because of it?

The intellectual situation today is rather more complex, of course, but with regard to how Thomas is seen, there do seem to be some similarities. Obviously the proportion of Christians among philosophers is lower now than in the thirteenth century, and so is the interest in theological matters. But is there any other theologian, past *or* present, for whom philosophers show anything like the regard they show for Aquinas? A brilliant contemporary reader of Aristotle, for example, talking about commentaries on the *De anima*, says, "For students the only one I found useful is the one by Aquinas. While I disagree with him about some vital issues, I find him somewhat helpful to first readers at every point. He stretches out what Aristotle compresses."[9] (He leads by the hand.) Nor is the esteem confined to the Aristotle experts. Among the heirs of Frege and Wittgenstein there is a current called analytical Thomism.[10] Some of Husserl's students have gone deeply into Thomas. On the practical side, Thomas is present in action theory, virtue ethics, and legal theory. The Straussians respect him. Even some Heideggerians engage him. (I am thinking of Heidegger's hostility toward Aristotle and of his view of faith and philosophy as mutually inimical.) Some may say that the theological intent underlying Thomas's philosophizing detracts from its strictly philosophical value, or from its intrinsic

7. See below, 10–14.

8. The tract is *On the Unity of the Intellect.*

9. Gendlin, *Line by Line Commentary*, vol. 1, Introduction, 8.

10. See Haldane, *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value*, and Paterson and Pugh (eds.), *Analytical Thomism*.

intelligibility (which is almost the same thing). But surely the broad interest that it generates among philosophers at least suggests otherwise.

As for Thomas's relation to contemporary Catholic theology, this is a topic far exceeding the limits both of these pages and of my competence, but I will hazard a few remarks.[11] He does remain a reference-point, though his views certainly do not have the quasi-canonical status they once had. That was, at best, a mixed blessing anyway, especially as concerned the direct study and assessment of his own works in their own setting. Such study now proliferates. But of course it is mostly confined to specialists. The general attitude among the theologians, in a way reminiscent of his own time, seems to be one of wariness. And even those who are favorable to him seem inclined to discount his philosophical thought and, when they must treat it, to downplay the Aristotelian side. All of this is not explained merely by the burgeoning of scriptural and patristic studies (which Thomas would surely have welcomed). In part, it is a reaction to what are perceived as the rationalistic excesses of the Neo-Scholastic approach that dominated Catholic theology in the first half of the twentieth century. But other factors surely figure in as well; for instance, the influence, direct or indirect, of Martin Heidegger. Perhaps, however, the attitude is less pervasive now than it was two or three decades ago.[12]

I have no wish to promote Thomas's philosophical thought to the detriment of his theology. That would be silly. Thomas was a theologian. Period. And he himself denies that theology absolutely needs philosophy.[13] Nevertheless he just happened to find philosophy useful in theology. He also just happened to think that, in order to use it, one first had to master it. And to me it seems undeniable that, in his particular case, the quality of the theology produced was very much a function of the philosophical mastery achieved. Of course, it depended on many other things too, things

11. My acquaintance with Protestant theology is very partial, but my impression is that, within it, Thomas is being read more than ever, and with excellent results. For instance, there is the study by Princeton theologian John Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, and also that of his student David Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity*.

12. See, for example, Reinhard Hütter's *Dust Bound for Heaven* and Matthew Levering's *Scripture and Metaphysics*. Both theologians have also produced several other fine works. A strong resurgence of high-quality Thomistic theology has been taking place for some time now within the Dominican order, both in North America and in Europe; currently prominent names include Serge-Thomas Bonino, Gilles Emery, Michael Sherwin, and Thomas Joseph White. Very interesting theological studies, mostly in English, are also coming out of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht in the Netherlands.

13. *STh*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

shared by Thomas and other great theologians: a profound acquaintance with Scripture and the Fathers, personal holiness, a keen mind, taste for study, writing skills, and so forth. But I think that a Thomas without his philosophy would have been rather like a young David without his sling.