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ST. THOMAS, THE PHILOSOPHERS AND FELICITY

SOME REFLECTIONS ON «SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES» III, 63 (10)

O.J. BROWN

AT the very end of the first part of Book III¹ and as the culmination of his consideration of human finality, St. Thomas tells us that "the philosophers... were not able to get full knowledge of this ultimate happiness..." Why not? Professor A. C. Pegis has provided the following explanation:²

But what is it for the philosophers not to have had a *plenam notitiam* of ultimate felicity? It is surely not that they did not have a full knowledge of the beatific vision, since they did not know it, nor could they have known it, at all. Nor is it that they knew the imperfect or merely human felicity of this life: to know the felicity of this life is to know something that is not ultimate; it is not to have a less than *plenam notitiam* of what is ultimate. Had the philosophers known the immortality of the soul, which was perfectly possible for them, they would have taken the one step that was absolutely necessary to a proper realization of ultimate felicity, namely, the step of locating it beyond the limits of this life.

It is the purpose of this paper to contest — without purporting to overthrow definitively — the three major contentions of Dr. Pegis's interpretation. The three points he raises are obviously interrelated, but I propose for the sake of analytical clarity to treat the issues discretely: (1) Whether the pagan philosophers *could* have known the beatific vision *at all*? (2) Whether to know the felicity of this life is to know something that is *in no sense* ultimate? (3) Whether the knowledge of immortality was *the one step* that was absolutely necessary to a proper realization of ultimate felicity?

1. SCG III, 63 (10).

2. A. C. PEGIS, "St Thomas and the Nicomachean Ethics: Some Reflections on "Summa Contra Gentiles" III, 44 (5)," *Mediaeval Studies* 25 (1963) 10.

I

That the pagans *did* not know *at all* the possibility of the beatific vision is historically certain. That they *could* not have known the possibility *in any sense* is hardly certain — unless one is prepared to make of the doctrine of the beatific vision a mystery of dogma which is knowable *exclusively* as revealed. That St. Thomas refused to take so drastic a view of the doctrine is evident from his contention³ that “... homo est capax visionis divinae essentiae... in qua quidem visione perfectam hominis beatitudinem consistere diximus.” This view is confirmed by a look at the *Prima pars*, 12,1 ad 4^m, where, in response to the objection of an utter lack of proportion of the creaturely intellect to God, St. Thomas states:

... quaelibet habitudo unius ad alterum proportio dicitur. Et sic potest esse proportio creaturae ad Deum, in quantum se habet ad ipsum ut effectus ad causam, et ut potentia ad actum. Et secundum hoc, intellectus creatus proportionatus esse potest ad cognoscendum Deum.⁴

If one were to disallow the very possibility of any man's seeing God “face to face,” it would inevitably follow that man could never attain true happiness — since, as a matter of fact, all other possible locations for his beatitude have been systematically eliminated as a result of a (strictly rational) course of negative induction. The further conclusion ensues: man's natural desire for perfect happiness must be futile. Aquinas is very far from allowing that possibility:

Vanum enim est quod est ad finem quem non potest consequi. Cum igitur finis hominis sit felicitas, in quam tendit naturale ipsius desiderium, non potest poni felicitas hominis in eo ad quod homo pervenire non potest: alioquin sequeretur quod homo esset in vanum, et naturale eius desiderium esset inane, quod est impossibile.⁵ ...Cum autem impossibile sit naturale desiderium esse inane, quod quidem esset si non esset possibile pervenire ad divinam substantiam intelligendam, quod naturaliter omnes mentes desiderant; necesse est dicere quod possibile sit substantiam Dei videri per intellectum, et a substantiis intellectualibus separatis, et ab animabus nostris.⁶

Up to this point and even beyond, e.g. in his consideration of the *mode* of the beatific vision,⁷ St. Thomas's argumentation is materially philosophical in character.

3. *ST* I-II, 5,1c. See also I, 12,1. I-II, 3,8.

4. *ST* I, 12,1 ad 4^m. See also *corp. art.*: “Dicendum quod, cum unumquodque sit cognoscibile secundum quod est in actu, Deus, qui est actus purus absque omni permixtione potentiae, quantum in se est, maxime cognoscibilis est. Sed quod est maxime cognoscibile in se, alicui intellectui cognoscibile non est, propter excessum intelligibilis supra intellectum... Hoc igitur attendentes quidam posuerunt quod nullus intellectus creatus essentiam Dei videre potest.

Sed hoc inconvenienter dicitur. Cum enim ultima hominis beatitudo in altissima eius operatione consistat, quae est operatio intellectus, si nunquam essentiam Dei videre potest intellectus creatus, vel nunquam beatitudinem obtinebit, vel in alio eius beatitudo consistet quam in Deo. Quod est alienum a fide. In ipso enim est ultima perfectio rationalis creaturae, quod est ei principium essendi; intantum enim unumquodque perfectum est, in quantum ad suum principium attingit. — Similiter etiam est praeter rationem. Inest enim homini naturale desiderium cognoscendi causam, cum intuetur effectum; et ex hoc admiratio in hominibus consurgit. Si igitur intellectus rationalis creaturae pertingere non possit ad primam causam rerum, remanebit inane desiderium naturae. Unde simpliciter concedendum est quod beati Dei essentiam videant.”

5. *SCG* III, 44 (2)

6. *SCG* III, 51 (1).

7. *SCG* III, 51 et seq.

There are two facts, in particular, which convince him of the spiritual creature's proportion to the vision of God: "Quod autem homo perfecti boni sit capax ex hoc apparet, quia et eius intellectus apprehendere potest universale et perfectum bonum, et eius voluntas appetere illud."⁸ These data were equally available to the pagan philosophers. Indeed, Aristotle himself felt the weight of such considerations in distinguishing perfect happiness from human happiness and then suggesting that, under appropriate conditions, the latter might approach the former.⁹ That he dared not project the possibility of a true and perfect human happiness was not due to any lack of the requisite natural evidences. After all, Aristotle himself formulated the twin dicta¹⁰ so much relied upon by Aquinas in the elaboration of his own argumentations: (1) A natural desire cannot be futile. (2) Nature is not lacking in necessary things.

What Aristotle did not see but could have seen was the telic "openness" of spiritual creatures. He could have seen it because, as Dr. Pegis aptly points out,¹¹ his doctrine of natures does not *de iure* exclude the possibility — however much *de facto* his psychology be grounded in a biological perspective. In the Thomistic perspective, on the other hand, human teleology is caught up almost as a matter of course in the vital matrix of a divine creative causality that is gracious from beginning to end.¹² This fact of creation, of which human beatitude is but the final moment, *could* have been known to the pagans. So too, the beatific vision in which that beatitude truly and perfectly consists could have been known — not indeed as a possibility *of* human nature (that would be impossible) but as a possibility *for* that nature and only in co-operation with the same creative decision which brought it out of nothing into *first* act: "... ita nec deficit (natura) homini in necessariis, quamvis non daret sibi aliquod principium quo posset beatitudinem consequi; hoc enim erat impossibile. Sed dedit ei liberum arbitrium, quo possit converti ad Deum, qui eum faceret beatum."¹³ Of course, it remains inescapably the fact that neither Aristotle nor any other pagan *did* envision even in the most remote and "negative" sense the possibility of any friendship of man with God, of man as an open *imago Dei*, of God as freely creating man out of nothing for His (and man's) own Good.

The philosophical question involved here is, radically considered, one concerning the power of God — and, it need hardly be said, the Greeks at their best had but an impoverished natural theology, a woefully inadequate metaphysics (albeit they *could* have had much better even without positive revelation). Yes, the problem of the possibility of the beatific vision is at bottom a question of the divine omnipotence

8. *ST* I-II, 5,1c.

9. *EN* I,10 (1101a18-20); X,7 (1177a18).

10. See, e.g., *De Caelo* II, 11 (291b13): "Nature does nothing in vain." *De Anima* III, 9 (432b21): "Nature is not defective in regard to necessary things."

11. A. C. PEGIS, "Nature and Spirit: Some Reflections on the Problem of the End of Man," *PACPA* 23 (1949) 68.

12. See, e.g., *SCG* III, 1; *ST* I, 2 (prologus). See also: A. C. PEGIS, "Creation and Beatitude in the Summa Contra Gentiles of St. Thomas Aquinas," *PACPA* 29 (1955) 52-62.

13. *ST* I-II, 5,5 ad 1^m. See also I-II, 5,7c: "... rectitudo voluntatis,... requiritur ad beatitudinem, cum nihil aliud sit quam debitus ordo voluntatis ad ultimum finem."

vis-à-vis His creation. Man's perfect happiness, the perfect happiness of all spiritual creatures, is the central aspect of the providential moment of that creation-and-return, but, and this bears emphasis, that aspect is not a miraculous interruption of natural finality; it does not contradict but, rather, complements natural causality. In a marvelous passage¹⁴ St. Thomas has linked together with his customary succinctness all the key notions — divine omnipotence, creation, providence, nature, miracle, man made in the image of God, and beatitude:

Dicendum quod in operibus miraculosis tria consueverunt inveniri. Quorum unum est ex parte potentiae agentis, quia sola divina virtute fieri possunt. Et ideo sunt simpliciter mira, quasi habentia causam occultam... Et secundum hoc, tam iustificatio impii quam creatio mundi et universaliter omne opus quod a solo Deo fieri potest, miraculosum dici potest. — Secundo, in quibusdam miraculosis operibus invenitur quod forma inducta est supra naturalem potentiam talis materiae... Et quantum ad hoc, iustificatio impii non est miraculosa, quia naturaliter anima est gratiae capax; "eo enim ipso quod facta est ad imaginem Dei, capax est Dei per gratiam," ut Augustinus dicit.

Nevertheless, the comparison with the potentiality of matter should not be pushed beyond its analogical utility. St. Thomas is quite clear that the natural desire to see the essence of God is not in spiritual creatures either a material (passive) potency or an operative (active) power. Rather, the *imago Dei* that is the spiritual creature is *ipso facto* capable of seeing God in virtue of the infinite openness of its natural appetite. The "natural desire" is the very capacity of the nature, *capax naturae*. The natural "power," if any, involved here is *sui generis*. It may with some justification be termed *potentia susceptiva naturae*:¹⁵

Dicendum quod impossibile est quod per peccatum tollatur totaliter bonum naturae quod est aptitudo vel habilitas naturae rationalis ad gratiam... Manifestum est autem quod habilitas naturae rationalis ad gratiam est sicut potentiae susceptivae et quod talis habilitas naturam rationalem consequitur *in quantum huiusmodi*.

Of course, this openness of the very nature is not without a concomitant redundancy into the intellectual powers themselves — as characteristic of the nature. It was this intellectual transcendence that the pagan philosophers *could* have recognized were it not for their narrowly biological view of the soul and, again, were it not for an entirely inadequate metaphysics. Aquinas admirably brings out the intimate nexus between the transcendence of the created intellect and the metaphysics of existence:

Dicendum quod sensus visus, quia omnino materialis est, nullo modo elevari potest ad aliquid immateriale. Sed intellectus noster vel angelicus, quia secundum naturam a materia aliquid elevatus est, potest ultra suam naturam per gratiam ad aliquid altius elevari. Et huius signum est, quia visus nullo modo potest in abstractione cognoscere id quod in concrectione cognoscit; nullo enim modo potest percipere naturam, nisi ut hanc. Sed intellectus noster potest in abstractione considerare quod in concrectione cognoscit. Etsi enim cognoscat res

14. *ST* I-II, 113,10c.

15. *Q. de Malo* 2,12c.

habentes formam in materia, tamen resolvit compositum in utrumque, et considerat ipsam formam per se. Et similiter intellectus angeli, licet connaturale sit ei cognoscere esse concretum in aliqua natura, tamen potest ipsum esse secernere per intellectum, dum cognoscit quod aliud est ipse, et aliud est suum esse. Et ideo cum intellectus creatus per suam naturam natus sit apprehendere formam concretam et esse concretum in abstractione per modum resolutionis cuiusdam, potest per gratiam elevari ut cognoscat substantiam separatam subsistentem, et esse separatam subsistens.¹⁶

Just as concerning God the philosophers could have known on the basis of natural reason alone *that* he is but not *what* he is, so too could they have known the beatific vision but not *what* it is — since that is irreducible mystery, even to those walking in faith. But before considering this issue further, let us pause to consider certain “inklings” of beatific vision thinking in Aristotelean doctrine.

II

The second prong of Prof. Pegis’s argument involves the assertion that knowing the happiness of this life is knowing something that is *in no sense* ultimate. It seems to me that, as an interpretation of Thomistic teaching on the subject in general, that assertion is too extreme. In fact, in the very passage¹⁷ under consideration, Aquinas makes two statements serving to picture a sort of incipient *beatitudo perfecta*, which the divine generosity may lead eventually into the perfect fruition and lasting enjoyment of the beatific vision:

Huius autem ultimae et perfectae felicitatis in hac vita nihil est adeo simile sicut vita contemplantium veritatem, secundum quod est possibile in hac vita... Incipit enim contemplatio veritatis in hac vita, sed in futura consummatur: activa vero et civilis vita huius vitae terminos non transcendit.

The image presented, at least as regards the life of contemplation, is clearly one of continuation into consummation rather than abrupt disjunction. — This latter characterization is reserved for the active life, which is indeed contrasted starkly not only with the ultimate happiness *in patria* but also with its foretaste, the *vita contemplativa*. This basic theme is deeply characteristic of Thomistic intellectualism

16. *ST* I, 12,4 ad 3^m. See also *SCG* III, 54 (8,9): “... non difficile est solvere. Divina enim substantia non sic est extra facultatem creati intellectus quasi aliquid omnino extraneum ab ipso, sicut est sonus a visu, vel substantia immaterialis a sensu, nam divina substantia est primum intelligibile, et totius intellectualis cognitionis principium: sed est extra facultatem intellectus creati sicut excedens virtutem eius, sicut excellentia sensibilibus sunt extra facultatem sensus... Indiget igitur confortari intellectus creatus aliquo divino lumine ad hoc quod divinam essentiam videre possit. Huiusmodi autem lumen intellectum creatum ad Dei visionem exultat, non propter eius indistantiam a divina substantia, sed propter virtutem quam a Deo sortitur ad talem effectum: licet secundum suum esse a Deo in infinitum distet... Non enim hoc lumen intellectum creatum Deo coniungit secundum esse, sed secundum intelligere solum.”

Vide c.53 (6): “Illa igitur dispositio qua intellectus creatus ad intellectualem divinae substantiae visionem extollitur, congrue “lux gloriae” dicitur: non propter hoc quod faciat intelligibile in actu, sicut lux intellectus agentis; sed per hoc quod facit intellectum potentem actu intelligere.”

Especially suggestive in this regard is the following addition to Aristotle: “Solem etsi non videat oculus nicticoracis, videt tamen eum oculus aquilae.” *In Metaph.* 11,1 no. 286.

17. *SCG* III, 63 (10).

18. *ST* I-II, 69,3c. Cf. *EN* 1,5 (1095b16). *In Eth.* I,V.

and variations on it could be cited almost without limit. For present purposes let it suffice to note the following text¹⁸ as express authority, in the Thomistic scheme of things but with implicit reference to Aristotle, for an earthly beatitude that is in some sense ultimate:

... triplicem beatitudinem aliqui posuerunt: quidam enim posuerunt beatitudinem in vita voluptuosa, quidam in vita activa, quidam vero in vita contemplativa. Hae autem tres beatitudines diversimode se habent ad beatitudinem futuram, cuius spe dicimur hic beati. Nam beatitudo voluptuosa, quia falsa est et rationi contraria, impedimentum est beatitudinis futurae. Beatitudo vero activae vitae dispositiva est ad beatitudinem futuram. Beatitudo autem contemplativa, si sit perfecta, est essentialiter ipsa futura beatitudo; si autem est imperfecta, est quaedam inchoatio eius.

How, indeed, could St. Thomas have regarded it as a handicap to the philosophers *vis-à-vis* the Christians that they were unable to secure a full knowledge of *perfect* happiness? — For not even Christians have a full knowledge of that sort, *ex parte obiecti*:

... participatio beatitudinis potest esse imperfecta dupliciter. Uno modo, ex parte ipsius obiecti beatitudinis, quod quidem secundum sui essentiam non videtur. Et talis imperfectio tollit rationem verae beatitudinis... quia, cum beatitudo sit operatio quaedam,... vera ratio beatitudinis consideratur ex obiecto, quod dat speciem actui, non autem ex subiecto.¹⁹

The disparity envisaged by Aquinas as between pagans and Christians with regard to ultimate perfect happiness is therefore a disparity *ex parte subiecti*. Even here below, that is, Christians have more fully “touched” that beatitude since they journey in hope — “*cuius spe dicimur hic beati.*”²⁰

Even if one were to restrict one’s efforts to the first three books of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, any attempt at disengagement of a pure philosophy of human finality must appear as problematic at best, an artificial and arbitrary truncation of theology at worst. That would be true not only with reference to the problems or subjects treated and their systematic unfolding by St. Thomas, but also with reference to the very *modus procedendi* of the *Summa* — a method which is consciously and pervasively theological, even in its use of the most profoundly rational philosophical tools. The insight afforded by faith, and the appetitive rectification wrought by hope and charity, are inextricably interwoven in the very texture of the rationally elaborated argumentations for both immortality and, especially, the beatific vision as the *one* end for man.

Natural knowledge and philosophy may afford us one view (*quia*) of this one end — in the sense of the pure or “negative” possibility of its accomplishment:

Sed Aristoteles expressit ipsam essentiam beatitudinis, ostendens per quid homo sit in huiusmodi statu, quia per operationem quandam. Et ideo in *Ethic.*, ipse etiam ostendit quod beatitudo est bonum perfectum.²¹

19. *ST* I-II, 5,3 ad 2^m.

20. *ST* I-II, 69, 3c.

21. *ST* I-II, 3,2 ad 2^m, Cf. *EN* I,7 (1097a29); I,13 (1102a5) — cf. 1098a16.

But it is only the knowledge of faith which provides us with any sure sense of its real, positive, existential possibility — along with some limited, enigmatic, sense of its content: “Unde Philosophus, ponens beatitudinem in hac vita, dicit eam imperfectam, post multa concludens, “Beatos autem dicimus ut homines”. Sed *promittitur nobis a Deo beatitudo perfecta...*”²²

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* St. Thomas has expressed the idea more fully:

Fides autem, quae causatur ex gratia, declarat possibilem esse unionem ad Deum secundum perfectam fruitionem, in qua beatitudo consistit. Huius igitur fruitionis desiderium (voluntatis) in homine consequitur ex Dei dilectione. Sed desiderium rei alicuius molestat animam desiderantis nisi adsit spes de consequendo. Conveniens igitur fuit ut in hominibus in quibus Dei dilectio et fides causatur per gratiam, quod etiam causetur *spes futurae beatitudinis adipiscendae*.²³

The Christian has not, then, a full knowledge of that ultimate happiness as it will be experienced *in patria*; but what he does have, and what the philosophers neither had nor could have had, is a *plenam notitiam in via* born of charity, faith and hope. So the radical disparity as between pagan and believer on this point is not a disparity as between the Christian's full grasp of perfect happiness and the philosopher's less than full notice of same. Rather, the distinction intended is one between natural knowledge (*speculatio*) and supernatural knowledge (*fides* and/or *contemplatio supernaturalis*) — both of which are productive of the fullest knowledge possible in this life in their respective domains. But only the latter knowledge is fully capable of galvanizing the whole person for action directed to the attainment of the one true End.

III

In the light of our answers to the first two issues raised by Prof. Pegis's interpretation, the answer to the final issue, which constitutes the gist of his interpretation, becomes clear. The knowledge of immortality was neither the sole step nor even the major step that was absolutely necessary for the philosophers to have had a *plenam notitiam* of ultimate felicity. Indeed, Dr. Pegis's own remarks would seem to indicate certain reservations about such an exclusivist interpretation. He writes:²⁴

The philosophers would still not have known the mystery of the beatific vision, and they would then have been faced with an awesome and almost impenetrable problem, the destiny of an intellectual substance in the afterlife...

I venture to suggest that it may well have been precisely to avoid such an awesome problem that Aristotle contented himself with a consideration of terrestrial beatitude exclusively. We have seen that, as to natural knowledge, he had no metaphysics of existence and divine power sufficient to the establishment of the

22. *ST* I-II, 3,2 ad 4^m. Cf. *EN* I,10 (1101a20).

23. *SCG* III, 153 (3).

24. “St Thomas and the Nicomachean Ethics,” p. 10.

(negative) possibility of the elevation of man, *imago et capax Dei*, under the aegis of God's omnipotence. Man was not viewed, as it were, *sub ratione Dei*. Further, and far more decisively, Aristotle had no access to the supernatural knowledge of faith that would have allowed him to see the gracious supernatural complement and fulfillment of man's naturally infinite spiritual openness. This, indeed, is what no mere philosopher could have seen in any event — the aspects of positive promise and real hope that lift man's insatiable natural desire up out of the area of terrible liberty, emptiness and despair.

Yet despite its supernatural fulfillment, the natural dimension is not impaired or overridden:

In operibus Dei non est aliquid frustra, sicut nec in operibus naturae: hoc enim et natura habet a Deo. Frustra autem aliquid moveretur, nisi posset pervenire ad finem motus. Necessarium est ergo quod id quod natum est moveri ad aliquem finem, sit possibile venire in finem illum. Sed homo postquam in peccatum cecidit, quandiu status huius vitae durat, remanet in eo aptitudo ut moveatur ad bonum: cuius signa sunt desiderium de bono, et dolor de malo, quae adhuc remanet in homine post peccatum. Est igitur possibile hominem post peccatum iterum redire ad bonum quod gratia in homine operatur.²⁵

Amplius. Nulla potentia passiva invenitur in rerum natura quae non possit reduci in actum per aliquam potentiam activam naturalem. Multo igitur minus est aliqua potentia in anima humana quae non sit reducibilis in actum per potentiam activam divinam. Manet autem in anima humana, etiam post peccatum potentia ad bonum: quia per peccatum non tolluntur potentiae naturales, quibus anima ordinatur ad suum bonum. Potest igitur per divinam potentiam reparari in bono.²⁶

Here, then, is ample evidence of the perfect reciprocity of natural power and divine power. The problem is not to adduce their metaphysical reconcilability. That the philosophers could have done (but did not). No, the problem in terms of the real attainability of beatitude is to locate spiritual natures in the telic economy of grace. Do the natural powers have any office of their own in the drama of personal conversion? The answer can only be that, just as the creature *ex se* is nothing as to "its" being (first act), so too the causality of its operation (second act) is strictly an instrumental efficiency *vis-à-vis* the principal efficient causality of the divine omnipotence. "In Him we live and move and have our being." Our productivity, stemming as it does from our having-been-produced *ex nihilo in esse*, is but the result of the *continuing* graciousness of that initial gift. What does pertain to human free judgment, however, is the decision to attempt to belong to oneself — to attempt to extract oneself from that unitary order of creation, beatitude and grace. Our resistance, our sins, we *can* call our own:

... licet aliquis per motum liberi arbitrii divinam gratiam nec promereri nec advocari possit, potest tamen seipsum impedire ne eam recipiat... Et cum hoc sit in potestate liberi arbitrii, impedire divinae gratiae receptionem vel non

25. SCG III, 156 (6).

26. SCG III, 156 (7).

impedire, non immerito in culpam imputatur ei qui impedimentum praestat gratiae receptioni.²⁷

This indictment applies even to those in the state of sin — *because* of their very sin :

Quamvis autem illi qui in peccato sunt, vitare non possint per propriam potestatem quin impedimentum gratiae ponant, ut ostensum est, nisi auxilio gratiae praeviantur; nihilominus tamen hoc eis imputatur ad culpam, quia hic defectus ex culpa praecedente in eis relinquitur...²⁸

But why, after all, should this dependence in the moral order surprise us any more than the utter dependence of man in the order of being? They are, indeed, correlatives :

... non est ratio inquirenda quare hos convertat et non illos. Hoc enim ex simplici voluntate eius dependet: sicut ex simplici eius voluntate processit quod, cum omnia fierent ex nihilo, quaedam facta sunt aliis digniora... Cum ergo haec auxilia aliquibus subtrahit, pro merito suae actionis, secundum quod eius iustitia exigit, dicitur eos "obdurare" vel "excaecare"... Divina voluntas et providentia est prima causa eorum quae fiunt, nil autem potest esse causa voluntatis et providentiae divinae...²⁹

There is about both creation and perfect beatitude (the beatific vision) an irreducible dimension of mystery. The notions are at best only partially rationalizable. Indeed, they are the two terms, ultimately one and the same term, of the continuing creation cycle. Within faith, within theology, it is in fact possible to achieve a more profound understanding, even in strictly philosophical terms, of these mysteries than was available to Aristotle and the pagan philosophers. But the aspect of mystery remains — accessible to knowledge only through faith. If a pagan might know (but won't) that man *can* be immediately united to God as the first intelligible by his own intellect *if* God so provide, what no pagan can know is that God has in fact so provided. "The foolishness of God is wiser than men" in this respect. The believer is instructed now by faith to hope for what he never would have dared hope — even on the firmest metaphysical foundation — since only presumption could have crossed the infinite chasm between the possible and the actual, between the delirious dream and the revealed promise.

... duplex est Dei visio. Una quidem perfecta, per quam videtur Dei essentia. Alia vero imperfecta, per quam, etsi non videamus de Deo quid est, videmus tamen quid non est; et tanto in hac vita Deum perfectius cognoscimus quanto magis intelligimus eum excedere quidquid intellectu comprehenditur. *Et utraque Dei visio pertinet ad donum intellectus*, prima quidem ad donum intellectus consummatum, secundum quod erit in patria; secunda vero ad donum intellectus

27. SCG III, 159 (2).

28. SCG III, 160 (5).

29. SCG III, 161 (2); 162 (8); 163 (3). Note the parallelism between God as creative cause of being and gracious cause of conversion. The plain implication is that both are infinitely free, equally inscrutable and, in that way, reducible to the same ultimate unity. See also in this regard ST I-II, 5,7 ad 2^m: "... primas creaturas statim Deus perfectas produxit... quia sic instituit prima individua specierum, ut per ea natura propagaretur ad posteros. Et similiter, quia per Christum, qui est Deus et homo, beatitudo erat ad alios derivanda..."

inchoatum, secundum quod habetur in via... dona autem et huiusmodi nos perficiunt secundum quandam inchoationem, et in futuro implebuntur...³⁰

Thus, far more than a knowledge of immortality and far more than even the most satisfactory metaphysics would have been absolutely necessary to the philosophers' *plenam notitiam* of ultimate felicity. As pagans without the faith that is the *sine qua non* of hope in the positive possibility of eternal life, they could not (*non potuerunt*) have had that full notice.

Dicendum quod fides absolute praecedit spem. Obiectum enim spei est bonum futurum arduum possibile haberi. Ad hoc ergo quod aliquis speret, requiritur quod obiectum spei proponatur ei ut possibile. Obiectum autem spei est uno modo beatitudo aeterna, et alio modo divinum auxilium. ... Et utrumque eorum proponitur nobis per fidem, per quam nobis innotescit quod ad vitam aeternam possumus pervenire, et quod ad hoc paratum est nobis divinum auxilium...³¹

Without such a *plenam notitiam* of ultimate happiness Aristotle would have had two fundamental options: (1) He could have considered the "life" of the separated soul in a condition which, on the premisses of his biological psychology, would very probably have seemed much less inviting than the imperfect happiness of this life — if not indeed utterly to be eschewed. (2) He could have concentrated his attention on the *human* happiness of this life — whether or not he deemed the soul immortal (prescinding from the problem). The latter alternative seems in any case to be closer to St. Thomas's interpretation of Aristotelean teaching on this point:

Unde nec felicitas, secundum suam perfectam rationem, potest hominibus adesse: sed aliquid ipsius participant, etiam in hac vita. Et haec videtur fuisse sententia Aristotelis de felicitate. Unde in I *Ethicorum*... concludit illos quibus talis perfectio in hac vita adest, esse beatos "ut homines," quasi non simpliciter ad felicitatem pertinentes, sed modo humano.³²

It is noteworthy that just prior to this exegesis³³ St. Thomas alludes to the possibility of someone (?) saying that, since happiness is the good for intellectual natures, "perfecta et vera felicitas est illorum in quibus natura intellectualis perfecta invenitur, idest in substantiis separatis..." This remark, and the immediately ensuing exegesis of Aristotle in the same light, provide, I submit, the key to the interpretation of Aquinas's celebrated statement³⁴ on the narrow perspective of those "*praeclara ingenia*," i.e. the same pagan philosophers who were unable to have full notice of man's ultimate happiness.

Prof. Pegis has interpreted that passage, too, in the sense of a *sub rosa* ascription of a definite doctrine of personal mortality to Aristotle by St. Thomas.³⁵ I disagree with that exegesis for the following reasons. First, even as to the unaided natural reason, the "narrowness" of the philosophers' perspective consisted, in Aquinas's

30. *ST* II-II, 8,7c. et ad 3^m.

31. *ST* II-II, 17,7c.

32. *SCG* III, 48 (9). *EN* I,10 (1101a18).

33. *Ibid.*

34. *SCG* III, 48 (15).

35. "St Thomas and the Nicomachean Ethics," pp. 8-9.

judgment, rather in their failure to see that the human intellect *precisely as intellect* is not limited to one mode of knowing than in their failure to envision personal immortality. That the former was, in St. Thomas's view, the *major* metaphysical shortcoming of the philosophers is borne out by a consideration of what he has to say on the matter of the perfect intellectual mode of cognition as it exists both in angels and separated souls (SCG II,81); and also, and even more decisively, by a consideration of what he says in regard to that astounding fact: the quasi-proportionality of created intellect to the divine essence as its prime intelligible. Aquinas's description of the mode of this cognitional union in the beatific vision, and the distinction of existential modes that enables him to reconcile it with the divine transcendence, represents a metaphysical elaboration of the first water — typically Thomistic and entirely foreign to the narrow "substantialist" perspective of the Aristoteleans:

Cum autem impossibile sit naturale desiderium esse inane... necesse est dicere quod possibile sit substantiam Dei videri per intellectum, et a substantiis intellectualibus separatis, et ab animabus nostris... (Sed) divina substantia non potest videri per intellectum aliqua specie creata. Unde oportet, si Dei essentia videatur, quod per ipsammet essentiam divinam intellectus ipsam videat: ut sit in tali visione divina essentia et quod videtur et quo videtur... Cum enim intellectus perfectio sit verum, illud intelligibile erit ut forma tantum in genere intelligibilium quod est veritas ipsa. Quod convenit soli Deo... Manifestum est igitur quod essentia divina potest comparari ad intellectum creatum ut species intelligibilis qua intelligit: quod non contingit de essentia alicuius alterius substantiae separatae. Nec tamen potest esse forma alterius rei secundum esse naturale: sequeretur enim quod, simul cum alio iuncta, constitueret unam naturam; quod esse non potest, cum essentia divina in se perfecta sit in sui natura. Species autem intelligibilis, unita intellectui, non constituit aliquam naturam, sed perficit ipsum ad intelligendum: quod perfectioni divinae essentiae non repugnat.

— Haec igitur visio immediata Dei repromittitur nobis in Scriptura, I *Cor.* 13,12: "Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem." ... Secundum autem hanc visionem maxime Deo assimilamur, et huius beatitudinis participes sumus: nam ipse Deus per suam essentiam suam substantiam intelligit, et haec est eius felicitas.³⁶

I have quoted from this chapter at length since, as I believe, it provides at once the clues necessary to the correct exegesis of chapters 48 (15) and 63 (10) as well as an excellent overall synopsis of Thomistic doctrine on the beatific vision as investigable by speculative theology. But from these and yet another key passage in chapter 51, it becomes plain in just what the "narrowness" of the philosophers consisted (still on the plane of the unaided natural reason). — Their intellectual penetration was pulled up short by an epistemological failure of nerve imputable, as we have said, to a certain metaphysical blindness to the existential dimension:

Cum autem intellectus substantiam aliquam intelligere non possit nisi fiat actu secundum aliquam speciem informantem ipsum quae sit similitudo rei intellectae, *impossibile videri potest alicui* quod per essentiam divinam intellectus creatus possit videre ipsam Dei substantiam quasi per quandam speciem

36. SCG III, 51 (1-2,4-6).

intelligibilem: cum divina essentia sit quiddam per seipsum subsistens; et in Primo ostensum sit quod Deus nullius potest esse forma.³⁷

But it is precisely this epistemological narrowness which, under the aegis of Christian faith and hope, one may dare to overcome:

... perfecta beatitudo hominis in immediata Dei visione consistit. *Posset autem alicui videri* quod homo ad hunc statum nunquam possit pertingere quod intellectus humanus immediate ipsi divinae essentiae uniretur ut intellectus intelligibili, propter immensam distantiam naturarum; et sic circa inquisitionem beatitudinis homo tepesceret, ipsa desperatione detentus...³⁸

Non enim est contrarium ordini rerum Deum hominem fieri... Quia quamvis natura divina in infinitum naturam humanam excedat, tamen homo secundum ordinem suae naturae habet ipsum Deum pro fine, et natus est ei per intellectum uniri; cuius unionis exemplum et documentum quoddam fuit unio Dei ad hominem in persona; servata tamen proprietate utriusque naturae, ut nec excellentiae divinae naturae aliquid deperiret, nec humana natura per exaltationem aliquam extra terminos suae speciei traheretur.³⁹

Again, a most valuable conspectus of Aquinas's teaching on the completion of the natural human order via its assumption into, and utter transfiguration by, the supernatural order — which order is, indeed, natural to God and, by the mercy of his grace, rendered natural to man *ex via cognitionis*. The knowledge of faith, with the Incarnation serving as a sort of exemplar thereunto, not only supplies the deficiency in a pagan metaphysics unable to see the passive possibility of the beatific vision *ex parte hominis*, but it also attests directly that gracious divine condescension that confers the active possibility (power) *ex parte Dei gratiae*. The first possibility the philosophers but for their narrow viewpoint could have known; of the second possibility they could *not* in any case have had full notice. But, in fact, they would not have approached even the first outside of the fortifying context of the second: the realm of The Revelation and of real hope based on the promise. Psychologically speaking, the *plenam notitiam* found in that matrix alone could have dispelled the *ipsa desperatione detentus*.⁴⁰ Instead, their metaphysics foundered, and rationality, left to itself, fell short of its own possibilities (*tepesceret*). In this sense their very paganism was the ultimate dispositive cause of the philosophers' metaphysical narrowness.

It has been my objective in this paper to try to indicate that a supposed underlying disagreement on immortality is neither the only nor indeed the best hypothesis for explaining Aquinas's imputation of "narrowness" and a lack of "full notice" to Aristotle and the pagan philosophers. That St. Thomas may in fact have thought that there was no doctrine of personal immortality in Aristotle I have no wish to dispute. — Much less, then, do I desire to enter into the vexed problem of the Aristotelean teaching itself. My purpose has been a less ambitious one: to offer an alternative interpretative approach to those key Thomistic texts which Prof. Pegis so

37. SCG III, 51 (3).

38. SCG IV, 54 (2).

39. SCG IV, 55 (2).

40. SCG IV, 54 (2).

construes as to contain an implicit ascription to Aristotle of a definite doctrine of personal mortality.

I have tried to show that Aquinas may, in those texts, have been concerned with quite other (and perhaps in his mind even more fundamental) deficiencies of Aristotelean doctrine — on both the philosophical and the theological level. I have endeavored also to point out how the failure on the latter plane, which was the controlling perspective in St. Thomas's view (*consideratio theologi*), inevitably redounded into the philosophical sphere proper — to the detriment and narrowing down of metaphysical vision itself. And even on this level of natural reason, I have questioned the exegesis of Aquinas that would have him regarding (assuming that he did so *at all*) the lack of a doctrine of immortality as the really *fundamental* shortcoming of the Aristotelean psychology. The more basic problem for St. Thomas may well have been: What epistemological shortsightedness, say, could have precipitated a mortalistic ethics; could have provided its near "occasion," as it were?

And, of course, aside from their metaphysical narrowness Aristotle and the philosophers suffered from an even more lethal debilitation. Not having The Revelation, they could not have got "full notice" of that ultimate happiness of the immediate vision of God *as it is promised us* and, precisely as so promised by the God-man himself, present to the eyes of faith *in aenigmate* but known with unshakeable certitude. This *inchoatio beatitudinis* was beyond the ken of the pagans not only *de facto* but *de iure* — and that despite the taste of ultimacy provided by the life of contemplation *pure naturalis* — since, precisely, the pagans were prevented from experiencing that life in the supernatural setting which begins to complete it, even here below, by hope.

It is important to realize, and I have sought to emphasize, the large role played by the virtues of faith and hope in St. Thomas's thinking on the knowledge (*notitia*) of the supernatural end. The knowledge of that end as something positively attainable must condition *de facto* the appreciation of man's intellect (and will) as *capax Dei* in its very nature. Given an adequate metaphysics of existence, of knowledge, and of intellect as such, natural reason alone *might* establish the capacity of man to see God *provided* that God were prepared to fortify man's mind to the task. But even with the *best* metaphysics that conditional proposition must strike the unaided natural reason as so extreme as to be stupefying — to throw reason immediately into retreat, seeking shelter in the imperfect beatitude of this earthly life, "held back by very desperation." Only the believer can approach such possibilities, now become promises, with confidence.

It is my contention, therefore, that the pervasive *consideratio theologi* of Aquinas accounts for his remarks about "the philosophers" in a more economical and coherent fashion than does the immortality hypothesis of Dr. Pegis. However that may be, nevertheless, it is undeniably the case that St. Thomas *did* intend to tax the pagans, including Aristotle, with certain metaphysical shortcomings of a purely philosophical order. I have *not* intended to maintain that Aquinas interpreted Aristotle as holding a clear-cut doctrine of personal immortality. Rather, it is a

question of metaphysical priorities. In fact, St. Thomas may well have intended, at the least, to present Aristotle as not having taken a position on the matter, as having restricted his inquiry in the *Ethics* to the happiness of the present life. The question then is to know why and how Aquinas, given his statements in chapters 48 and 63 of *SCG* III, could have interpreted Aristotle in such a light. I hope I have succeeded in indicating the *more probable* grounds, metaphysical and ultimately theological, for such an interpretation by St. Thomas.

As to the metaphysics involved, Aquinas's emphasis on distinctions of an existential order, and especially his careful epistemological delineation of the beatific vision's constitution, seem to me to militate against the possibility of his having accorded any absolute decisiveness to immortality doctrine by itself. Is it not more likely that he would have seen the "awesome and almost impenetrable problem (of) the destiny of an intellectual substance in the afterlife" as conducing to a certain "posture" *vis-à-vis* the problem of immortality — rather than *vice versa*?