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The Problem of Measure in the Eternity of God

In his *Cursus theologicus* John of St. Thomas[1] shows that the Angelic Doctor held Eternity to be a measure in the strict sense of the word, not only as compared with created durations, but even more profoundly and more perfectly as considered in itself. His discussion of this doctrine brings out very sharply that the main objections to it arise from an inadequate understanding of the notion of measure itself. Let us consider this notion to show what particular aspects John of St. Thomas has stressed in defending his Master's position.

In Book X of the *Metaphysics*, Chapter 1, Aristotle defines measure thus:

> ...That by which quantity is known; and quantity *qua* quantity is known either by a 'one' or by a number, and all number is known by a 'one'. ...And hence in the other classes too 'measure' means that by which each is first known, and the measure of each is a unit in length,... in weight, in speed.[2]

Obviously, when we consider measure as it is found in predicamental quantity, it implies many imperfections which would make it wholly inapplicable to God. Yet the idea at once suggests itself that these imperfections are not inherent in the notion of measure as such but derive merely from its application to quantity. If measure is confined to the domain of predicamental quantity, and such quantity is intrinsically imperfect, measure cannot be predicated of God except in a metaphorical sense. That predicamental quantity is intrinsically imperfect is obvious from its very definition: "The quantum is that which is divisible into the parts which are in it, each of which may then exist as a 'one' and a 'this'."[3] But, as St. Thomas explains, there are two kinds of quantity:

> Quantity is twofold. There is quantity of bulk or dimensive quantity, which is to be found only in corporeal things, and has, therefore, no place in God. There is also quantity of virtue, which is measured according to some nature or form: It is this sort of quantity which is designated when we speak of something being more, or less, hot, in as much as it is more, or less, perfect in heat. Now this virtual quantity is measured firstly by its root — that is, by the very perfection of the form or of the nature: such is the greatness of spiritual things; just as we speak of great heat because of its intensity and perfection. And so Augustine says that in things which are great, but not in bulk, to be greater is to be better,[4] for the more perfect a thing is, the better it is. Secondly, virtual quantity is measured by the effects of the form. Now the first effect of form is being, for every thing has being by reason of its form. The second effect is operation, for every agent acts through its form. Consequently, virtual quantity is measured both in regard to being and in regard to action: in regard to being, in as much as things of a more perfect nature are of longer duration; and in regard to action, in as much as things of a more perfect nature are more powerful to act.[5]

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1 *Cursus theologicus* (ed. Solesmes), T.II, disp.9, a.1.

2 1052b20 (Oxford translation).

3 Aristotle, *Metaph.*, V, chap.13, 1020a7.

4 *De Trinitate*, VI, 8, PL 42, 929.

5 *Ia*, q.42, a.1, ad 1 (Random House transl.).

We take for granted here that virtual quantity implies no imperfection. It is therefore plain that if the notion of measure did not apply to such quantity, the cause of this limitation could be no other than the nature of measure itself. Yet, even if measure implied no imperfection on the part of measure itself, it might bespeak imperfection on the part of the measured, as in the case of creation: for creation designates perfection pure and simple on the part of the Creator, but it does imply imperfection on the part of the creature. If, then, the notion of measure applies to Eternity with respect to itself, to be measured must not imply any imperfection. And this is precisely the point John of St. Thomas brings out so forcefully.

That measure as such connotes no imperfection on the part of the measure itself is clear even in the case of predicamental quantity. For to be one and indivisible, to be uniform and manifestative involves only perfection. Yet, that is what is essential to the measure:

> For everywhere we seek as the measure something one and indivisible... Now where it is thought impossible to take away or to add, there the measure is exact (hence that of number is most exact; for we posit the unit as indivisible in every respect); but in all other cases we imitate this sort of measure... so that the first thing from which, as far as our perception goes, nothing can be subtracted, all men make the measure.[1]

Hence the real problem we are faced with is whether measure supposes imperfection on the part of the measured.

Saying, as we well may, that Eternity is the uniformity of divine duration, we suppose that duration is essential to Eternity and that the uniformity in question will be a uniformity of duration. That duration as such connotes no imperfection we implicitly acknowledge by admitting that Eternity measures all created durations. For the measure must be of the genus of the measured, as St. Thomas explains: "Since to each thing corresponds a proper measure, it is necessary that the essential difference of the measure itself be received according to the condition of the act of the measured."[2] Thus, when we say that Eternity is infinitely greater than any created duration we suppose that there is a comparability between Eternity and created durations. This comparability supposes in turn a unity of genus.

But it will become even clearer to us that duration as such implies no imperfection if we recall that a being is said to be perfect and to have being to the extent that it endures. As John of St. Thomas says:

> ...Duration, in virtue of its proper and precise formal notion does not formally imply succession and quantity. Rather formal succession diminishes the perfection of duration. A thing is said to endure as long as it remains in being; when it loses being it loses duration. Therefore, the less being it loses the more perfectly it endures. Succession, however, implies a certain loss of being in so far as something does not persist in the same manner, and is not in act but passes from potency to act. Therefore, succession does not belong to the concept of duration, but rather diminishes the notion of duration and makes it less perfect.[3]

It follows that if measure were to be excluded from Eternity considered in itself, this could not be because it is measure in the genus of duration, but because measure would connote a potentiality on the part of the measur-

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1 ARISTOTLE, *Metaph.*, X, chap.1, 1052b34 (Oxford transl.).

2 *In I Sententiarum*, d.19, q.2, a.1.

3 *Op. cit.*, T.II, d.9, a.1, n.12.

ed. We are thus confronted with the nature of the distinction between measure and measured. Since measure is defined as "that by which quantity is known," it seems that that which is made known by it must involve some potentiality, at least in the order of knowability. But divine duration implies no potentiality; indeed, it is identical with its uniformity: wherefore the distinction which is essential to the very notion of measure would seem to be superfluous.

It is in this context that John of St. Thomas makes a distinct contribution to the analysis of the concept of measure itself. First, he brings out the distinction found in St. Thomas between intrinsic and extrinsic measure:

> Measure is twofold: one is intrinsic, which is in the measured as an accident is in its subject; this is multiplied according to the multiplicity of the things measured, just as there are many lines which measure the length of many equal bodies. There is also an extrinsic measure, and this is not necessarily multiplied according to the multiplicity of the things measured, but is in one thing as in a subject according to which many other things are measured, just as many pieces of cloth are measured according to the length of one ell...[1]
>
> A body... is measured by an intrinsic measure, such as a line, a surface, or a depth; and by an extrinsic measure, as the thing located is measured by place, movement by time, and cloth by the ell.[2]

This distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic measure is further developed by John of St. Thomas in the following passage:

> *Extrinsic* measure is that which measures something outside itself; and hence it is said to measure by an application to, or by containing that which is measured, as the duration and movement of the heaven measures inferior movements as their extrinsic measure, and as the inch measures a length, and the pound a weight. Hence, such a measure terminates the real relation of the thing measured. *Intrinsic* measure is that measure which is inherent in the thing measured: it does not measure by application but by information. It has, therefore, the perfection of measure although it does not have the real relation and imperfection of dependence in virtue of which the measured thing depends upon its measure. Time is one example of this: although it is an extrinsic measure in regard to us, nevertheless it measures intrinsically the movement of the heaven; nor is there a superior time by which this time is measured. For, in every genus, the most perfect is the measure both of itself and of the other things in that genus — the intrinsic measure of itself, and the extrinsic measure of the other things.[3]

If Eternity is the measure of divine duration, it can only be intrinsic measure. But intrinsic measure is still formally distinct from the intrinsically measured. Hence it remains to be shown that even the intrinsically "measured" involves no imperfection. This John of St. Thomas achieves by the following demonstration. The measurable is measurable to the extent of its assimilability to the measure. But if the measurable is perfectly assimilable to the measure it is so precisely because of its perfection. Again, the essence of measure does not consist in making known that which in itself is only imperfectly knowable but simply in making

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[1] *In II Sent.*, d.2, q.1, a.2, ad 1.

[2] *Quaestio disputata de Veritate*, q.1, a.5, c.

[3] *Op. cit.*, disp. 9, a.1, n.14 — Time is that movement in the universe, which is the measure of all other movements by reason of its speed and uniformity. The Ancients identified time with the "diurnal movement of the outer sphere." Our practical standard for measuring time is actually still the same: the sidereal day based upon the rotation of the earth with respect to the sphere of stars. This, however, is only an approximation of natural time. The identification of a known constant of nature — such as the speed of light — with natural time, will probably never be more than a hypothesis.

known by virtue of indivisibility and uniformity. Indeed, mensuration consists most formally in making known the perfection of the measurable; hence, if the measured is wholly perfect, it will be perfectly made known. There is no imperfection, either in manifesting perfection, or in one's perfection being manifested.

> ...It must be noted that although measure is by its very nature ordered to manifest the formal or virtual quantity of the measured, nevertheless it is not of the nature of measure to do this in an imperfect way, that is, in the mode of our knowledge which goes from the imperfect to the perfect; on the contrary, the very nature of mensuration demands that the measure make known the measured in a perfect way, that is, by proceeding from the more perfect to the less perfect or less known by us.[1]

In other words, a measure is measure only in so far as it is actual, and it can manifest only by reason of its actuality and determination. On the other hand, the measured itself is perfect according as it is more assimilated to the measure. Now, it is not essential to the nature of the measured that it be something imperfectly knowable, whose manifestation requires a passage from potency to act. The measured is actually measured and manifested only to the extent that it is actually assimilated to the measure. Yet, this actual assimilation, this being conjoined and united to the measure, suppresses neither the concept of measure nor the concept of measured. This is the reason why the notions of measure and measured are compatible with the perfection of Eternity. Indeed, in the latter case, the measured is so perfectly assimilated to its measure that they are identical. "The more perfect is the measure, the more it is joined to the measured in a perfect way, drawing it to itself as much as possible. Now, since Eternity is the most perfect measure, it is most perfectly joined to that which it properly measures, so much so that it is identical with it."[2]

Of course, the "ratio mensurae" and the "ratio mensurati" remain distinct within the identity: otherwise, this identity of perfect assimilation would be devoid of meaning. The main difficulty in this matter arises from the fact that we attribute to the concept of measure and measured as such the imperfections which adhere to them at the level of things first known and most known by us. Mensuration by application is the one with which we are most familiar, as in the case of measuring the length of some body, or the measure of time; and though we implicitly assume the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic measure, it becomes explicit and obvious only after mature consideration.

A further difficulty is raised against measure in Eternity, whose solution is helpful in bringing out the absolute formality of measure as such. Because measure is manifestative, because the application of measure involves relation, and more particularly because time is complete only by an operation of the intellect, it seems that measure as such — and perhaps even more patently measure in duration — depends in some sense on an act or product of reason. This objection is all the more worthy of consideration since, as St. Thomas says: "...The nature of Eternity consists in the apprehension ["in apprehensione"] of the uniformity of that which

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1 *Op. cit.*, disp.9, a.1, n.15.
2 *Ibid.*, n.22.

is absolutely outside of movement."[1] Now, although it is true that manifestation is essential to measure, yet, that by reason of which measure is manifestative, is not something of reason but rather the very unity, indivisibility, uniformity and determination, by virtue of which it makes known and certifies.

Relation is believed to be essential to measure by such as fail to distinguish between internal and external measure. As John of St. Thomas explains:

> Formally, measure is not a relation but the foundation of a relation; for some relations are founded in measure, as is said in V *Metaph.*,[2] just as others are founded in action and passion. And just as an action is not constituted formally nor completively by a relation, so neither is measure, although it is the foundation of a relation. Now the difference is that — even antecedently to the relation — a distinction between the action and the term produced by it, is of the very nature of action, so that the same agent cannot both act and produce itself. If, therefore, the Father were identified with the Son, the very concept of Father would be destroyed, not only as to the relation but even as to the action which is the foundation of that relation. On the other hand, measure does not — not even as previous to the relation — imply an action emitting or producing the measured; actually it involves two things only: that it be what is most perfect and most uniform in its genus, and that it can be applied and conjoined to, or identified with, the measured by being adequate to it. This gives rise to a relation of the measured to the measure "fundata ex parte mensurati ad mensuram" only when the measure is inferior to, and depends upon the measured. Now the first thing — namely to be what is most perfect and most uniform — is quite essential to every measure, whereas the second — the application and conjunction to the measured — is not found in the same way in all measures. For some measure by enumeration and succession; others by the highest unity and permanence; some by extrinsic application, others by intrinsic information. And the more perfect the measure, the more perfectly it will be joined to the measured and draw it to itself as far as possible. And thus, since Eternity is the most perfect measure, it is joined to its own measured so completely that it has identity with it.[3]

The difficulty arising from time, the completion of which depends upon intellect, is more easily disposed of. Intellect is required here as a necessary condition, as St. Thomas shows in Book IV of the *Physics*,[4] because of the 'before' and 'after' in time. Unlike the *aevum* or Eternity, time is the measure of a successive, not of a simultaneous, duration: of the 'before' and 'after' in movement. To be adequate to the measure, the 'before' and 'after' must be taken as one. This is achieved only by the intellect; in the thing several parts of time cannot be one and simultaneous. And so to measure the whole, some unification and enumeration must be made by the intellect. Eternity, on the contrary, is simultaneously whole, it has all the perfection of measure, and requires no completion by the intellect. In fact, St. Thomas states plainly that both eviternity and Eternity are complete in the indivisible unity which is their measure and

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1 "...Sicut in cognitionem simplicium oportet nos venire per composita, ita in cognitionem aeternitatis oportet nos venire per tempus; quod nihil aliud est quam *numerus motus secundum prius et posterius*. Cum enim in quolibet motu sit successio, et una pars post alteram, ex hoc quod numeramus prius et posterius in motu, apprehendimus tempus; quod nihil aliud est quam numerus prioris et posterioris in motu. In eo autem quod caret motu, et semper eodem modo se habet, non est accipere prius et posterius. Sicut igitur ratio temporis consistit in numeratione prioris et posterioris in motu, ita in apprehensione uniformitatis eius quod est omnino extra motum, consistit ratio aeternitatis."—*Ia*, q.10, a.1.

2 Chap.15, 1020b31; 1021a29.

3 *Op. cit.*, disp.9, a.1, n.22.

4 *In IV Phys.*, lect.23 (ed. LEON.), n.5.

which corresponds to the numbered 'before' and 'after' of time. "Just as the before and after of time complete the notion of time when they are understood as numbered, so does the permanence of the act, when it is understood according to the formality of a one which has the nature of measure, complete the notion of *aevum* and of Eternity."[1] Thus St. Thomas says that Eternity is permanence by way of unity, but time by way of enumeration. Hence Eternity does not, as does time, need to be completed by the intellect. John of St. Thomas again develops this at length:

> ...The complete nature of the perfection of measure is found in divine Eternity prior to anything wrought by the intellect... The perfection of measure consists in the uniformity and simplicity by which something is of itself capable of making known a certain quantity, for this is essential to the nature of measure on the part of its perfection, for the most perfect in every genus is the measure of all else in that genus. Likewise, there is mensuration only on condition that the measure be adequate to its measured and be simultaneous with it. This is not achieved in time (nor in other measures which measure by numbering) except through the aid of reason, for the parts of measure cannot be joined and numbered except by an act of the intellect. In Eternity, however, this is not required, for it does not measure by enumeration and succession, but by possession and by permanent indivisibility in virtue of which it is wholly simultaneous. The full perfection of measure, therefore, is found in Eternity as something real, but the limitation and imperfection of the measured (which are due to its dependence on, and distinction from, the measure) are not found there. Rather the perfection of measure is plain from the fact that the measured is not only adequate to the measure but is identical with it.[2]

As for the passage which some quote from St. Thomas so as to prove that Eternity consists in apprehension and therefore involves something on the part of the intellect, we reply by pointing to the solution of Cajetan: this is not meant in the sense that Eternity consists in knowing, as if Eternity had its completion from the soul as does time. He explains more fully by saying that the unity of uniformity is actually given without the act of the soul, and that thus the uniformity does not depend on an act of reason but is something real. According to this interpretation, the passage: "ratio aeternitatis consistit in apprehensione uniformitatis ejus quod est omnino extra motum," could be translated as follows: "the nature of Eternity consists in the very concept (or notion) of the uniformity of that which is absolutely outside of movement." In other words: the notion of Eternity, and the notion of "the uniformity of that which"..., etc., are identical.[3]

Thus the concept of measure must be purified of any limitation attaching to measure as far as it is realized in inferior things. Impelled to formulate more expressly the doctrine of Eternity by the objections and difficulties

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1 *In I Sent.*, d.19, q.2, a.1.

2 *Op. cit.*, disp.9, a.1, n.20.

3 "Adverte hic, quod haec propositio in littera posita, scilicet *ratio aeternitatis consistit in apprehensione uniformitatis*, potest dupliciter exponi, quoad ly *in apprehensione*. Uno modo, quod significet illam consistere in apprehendi seu cognosci: ita quod aeternitas sit completive ab anima, sicut de tempore dicitur. Et sic, iudicio meo, non intelligitur: eo quod unitas uniformitatis perennis actu est absque actu animae, non minus quam unitas essentiae divinae. Alio modo, quod significet idem quod *in conceptione obiectiva*, quam frequenti usu vocamus *rationem;* ac si dixisset: ratio aeternitatis consistit in *apprehensione*, idest in *ratione* uniformitatis. Et hic est sensus intentus."—CAJETAN, *In Iam*, q.10, a.1 (ed. LEON.), n.4.

brought forward by the later Scholastics, John of St. Thomas has set into clear relief the inmost essence of measure and expressed it in its formal purity. In so doing, he has thrown light on the proper nature of Eternity.

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