THE IMPACT OF ARISTOTLE ON MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

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AS a philosopher St Thomas had very little to say that was his own, and I suspect he would have looked askance at anyone who might have suggested that he was an original philosopher. If you try the experiment of dipping into one of his commentaries on Aristotle, I think you will get a vivid illustration of what I have in mind. Take any of his commentaries—on the *Metaphysics* or the *Ethics*, the *de Anima* or the logical works—open it at random, and what you will find is something like this: first you will have reproduced the Latin version which he used; this will normally be the word-by-word translation prepared by William of Moerbeke. This is practically incomprehensible, unless you go through the labour of turning it back into Greek first. Then the commentary. The standard pattern of this is to begin by relating the passage to be considered in each particular lecture to what has gone before: 'having dealt with so-and-so, the Philosopher now discusses . . .'. The problem under discussion is stated, the reason why it is necessary to discuss this problem and discuss it at this stage; then you have the steps in the argument distinguished and their logical structure displayed, the various reasons given by Aristotle for holding a view tabulated, and so on. Within each of the closely mapped out divisions the text of Aristotle is paraphrased, usually in a slightly extended form. Criticism or disagreement is almost totally absent; the nearest we get to that is in the occasional hints in the interpretations adopted by St Thomas, the shifts of emphasis, the unobtrusive play of overtones. An example of the way in which divergences are masked by this approach can be seen in the comment Aquinas makes on Aristotle's readiness to seek the supreme aim of human life in this world: 'For the Philosopher speaks of happiness only in so far as it can be had in this life. For the happiness of the other life altogether exceeds the range of rational investigation' (*In. Eth. Nic.* I, lect. 9, 113). True as such a remark may be, it pushes the differences between Aristotle and St Thomas, by a sort of methodological necessity, beyond the range of the discussion within the adopted framework. The whole thing is almost completely bound to the text of Aristotle, and unoriginal except perhaps in the astonishing success with which it manages, in general, to penetrate the meaning of the apparently meaningless Latin version.

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In so far as St Thomas 'had' a philosophy—and this is, I think, a bad way to talk—it was simply Aristotle's. In so far as he thought philosophically, his thought moved in Aristotelian grooves. The adventure of discovering what Aristotle thought, and of disentangling it from the distortions of his various Arabic interpreters was exciting enough; there was no need to add to it, to criticize it or to develop it in any major way. I hope it will become clear that it was precisely that this kind of thing became possible which was the great novelty of the thirteenth century. But in order to see how this came about, one must go back in time, well behind the time of St Thomas.

The title of M. Gilson's book, *History of Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages*, spotlights the peculiarity of philosophical thought, at any rate in the earlier Middle Ages. What is peculiar about medieval philosophy in the West—leaving aside Jewish and Arabic thought—is that it is Christian in quite a radical sense. The rubric unanimously prefixed to one's reflection was that one was reflecting within the framework and upon the data of one's faith. It has been customary to call this attitude the 'Augustinian tradition', and the label is justified in so far as Augustine was certainly one of the outstanding thinkers to practise this kind of reflection, and to formulate its procedures. He was, however, neither the first to engage in it, nor would it be true to say that all the medieval thinkers who followed him in this procedure can be called 'Augustinians' in other important respects. A philosopher who stands as far aside from—and I should like to allow myself to say, as far above—the main stream of Western thought as John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century, stands well within this tradition. His *De divisione naturae* has been described—perhaps with less than justice—as 'nothing else than a rational interpretation of biblical texts pursued by a reader of St Ambrose and of St Augustine among the Latins, or Origen, the two Gregories, Denis and Maximus Confessor among the Greeks'.[1] For Eriugena, as for St Anselm, two centuries later, philosophy, the quest of wisdom, was a matter of *intellectus fidei*, of understanding the faith. *Credo ut intelligam* was Anselm's watchword—I believe in order that I might understand; belief was the first step on the way to truth, right faith the condition of true philosophy. Philosophical thinking as we know it had its place in the work of deepening men's insight into the divine revelation which they accepted in faith. But it was secondary to faith, both logically and in temporal sequence. Logically, philosophical analysis remained a means of interpreting, clarifying and systematizing the content of the Christian faith, and temporally, of course,

[1] Gilson, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

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one had first to believe, before philosophy offered one the possibility of understanding.

All this men as outstanding as Eriugena and Anselm shared with the philosophically less distinguished succession of thinkers between Augustine and Aquinas. As for the philosophical equipment itself, which they utilized in this way in the service of their faith, as a means to elucidate its meaning, that was meagre enough. Leaving aside Eriugena's deep indebtedness to Greek writers, especially to the late neo-Platonism of the pseudo-Dionysius, and Anselm's dialectical originality, they had little to draw on other than what they could find already utilized in the writings of Augustine. Augustine, as is well known, found in the philosophical works of those whom he calls 'the platonists' the most congenial means of developing and expounding a Christian vision of God, of man and of the world. His theology, as a consequence, is saturated with neo-Platonic ways of thinking. Through the enormous authority of his name throughout the Middle Ages, such ways of thinking got themselves generally established and, indeed, came practically to exhaust the stock of philosophical ideas current in Western Europe up to the second half of the twelfth century. The only notable addition to them is to be found in the few logical works of Aristotle (and Porphyry's introduction), knowledge of which the Latin West owed to Boethius; and in utilizing Aristotelian logic in the service of theological reflection, Augustine, again, had already shown the way. The result of all this was that in so far as men thought philosophically at all, they tended to see the world in terms of the conceptual structures derived, through Augustine, in the main from neo-Platonic sources. It is difficult to appreciate the full extent to which these ideas passed into the general stock of current thought; even when obscured in detail by newly acquired dialectical expertise, by the rediscovery of other ancient sources and by pre-occupation with other interests, again and again one is reminded of the sway they exercised over people's minds in often quite unobtrusive ways.

When the rediscovery in the West of Aristotle burst upon this intellectual world in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it inevitably precipitated a crisis while enlarging the mental horizon. The intellectual climate was already seething with a questioning of current notions and the rediscovery of other and older views. The receding tide of Islam left behind it a debris, among which Greek scientific and philosophical works take an important place. Here, Latin-speaking Christians found these treasures of the Greek world surrounded by a living tradition of thought, whereas the

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unbroken tradition of learning carried on in the Byzantine Empire, remote and strange to them, seems for long to have remained more or less without influence on the West. The Byzantines have been called Europe's librarians in the Middle Ages. And certainly, not only did they preserve, among other things, the Aristotelian corpus, but they added to it, generation by generation, that interminable series of commentaries which you can find gathering dust on the shelves of our University libraries. (Somehow, in spite of the fact that many of the Greek Fathers had used Platonic ways of thought no less than had Augustine in the West, the study of Plato himself seems to have been regarded with more suspicion in Constantinople than the study of Aristotle.) But Byzantium remained, in Western eyes, for a long time, a rich store of gold and relics; its intellectual wealth remained untapped. Hence the apparently disproportionate effort which we find being spent by the earliest Aristotelians in the Latin West on disentangling the authentic Aristotle from the often diverging interpretations of his Arabic commentators.

By the middle of the thirteenth century this work was well advanced, and even the labour of digestion and assimilation had got under way. This is the moment at which Thomas Aquinas, one of the new type of thinkers, brought up in the midst of this widening of horizons and fascinated by the new vistas which were being opened up, came to face the questions which were beginning to agitate many minds. His own deep loyalty to the teaching of his master, St Augustine, only served to throw them into sharper relief: he had to ask himself seriously about the relation of the new learning to traditional theological teaching. There were several problems: was Aristotelian teaching in itself compatible with the tenets of the Christian faith? Two questions here were of special urgency: that of the eternity of the world and of the non-personal character of the active intellect, the highest and only surviving part of the human mind—both of them views alleged by various expositors to have been Aristotle's. On both these questions, Thomas decided, the authentic Aristotelian teaching was not necessarily in conflict with the Christian doctrines of creation and of personal identity and survival. But the further, and ultimately more important, issue remained: was it possible to import into the body of Christian teaching a new philosophical procedure and to adopt a new language without surrendering the essential substance of that teaching? To theologians of his day the 'Augustinian tradition' was still very much alive; the tendency to think of Christian teaching within its setting, with the utilization of Platonic modes of thinking, was still strong. Was it possible to break with the philosophical

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techniques and the conceptual structures while remaining faithful to the substance of the beliefs in the service of which they had been used? For us, even to state these questions is enough to make it clear that they could be answered in the affirmative. For Thomas the work of answering them involved a re-thinking of what philosophical reflection is, how it is related to faith and the work of the theologian. It is this re-thinking which led him to formulate a view of philosophy as a discipline independent of faith and autonomous on its own ground. In this I should be inclined to see his major achievement, far outweighing in importance any individual piece of new philosophical teaching. It is also perhaps the most difficult for us to appreciate, so much are we the slaves of our own language: we can scarcely conceive of anything we should call philosophical thinking except in terms of a purely rational human activity, subject only to its own criteria, pursuing its own ends in its own ways.

Thomas was before all else a theologian. As such he tried to put the newly acquired Aristotelian learning at the service of the Christian faith, and to work out a theological system with the aid of the Aristotelian conceptual structure. The novelty and the greatness of this achievement must be clear, even to a prejudiced critic; it is in no way to belittle it to stress that it is an achievement which belongs to the realm of theology. I began by remarking on the apparently largely derivative character of his thought in so far as it is philosophical, and to this point I want now to return. For Thomas, Aristotle is, of course, the Philosopher, and philosophy is Aristotelianism. In this respect, his achievement amounts simply to vindicating the right of the Christian thinker to follow Aristotle—or whoever it may be—and to use his ways of thinking in the theological task of elucidating the content of the Christian faith. The apparent conflict between the established and hallowed tradition and the new learning caused Aquinas to be intensely self-conscious about what he was doing. His account of the nature and procedure of theological thinking is one of the classics of what I might perhaps be allowed to call 'meta-theology'; and it is noteworthy that it is itself formulated with the aid of Aristotelian concepts. It is this meta-theology of his that enables him, finally, to take his stand within the old tradition of Christian theology: notwithstanding the new language, the new procedures, the new conceptual scaffolding, he sees himself busy at the same task as Augustine and the rest of them before him. His reverence for Augustine, especially, is unwavering, and he often goes out of his way to sketch the lines along which his views can be reconciled with Augustine's. Time and again he notes that they are really both after

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the same thing, with the only difference that Augustine is unduly influenced by Platonic notions. Notwithstanding this rapprochement which Aquinas undertakes at every step, philosophically the adoption of Aristotle does, however, represent a radical change. I shall conclude by illustrating this radical change by means of two examples.

First, one can look at the contrast between Augustine's (Platonic) and Thomas's (Aristotelian) theories of knowledge. Augustine had adopted the Platonic view. For Plato things were knowable to the mind in the light emanating from the form of the Good; this light illuminates both the mind and the other forms, which become intelligible under such illumination. This scheme only needed slight re-handling by Augustine. The forms were conceived by him as ideas in the divine mind; hence his account of knowledge had inevitably to appeal to a divine illumination of the human mind to render knowledge possible. Now Thomas parts company with the underlying Platonism of this. Following the Aristotelian account, he conceives the process of coming to know as one in which the mind actualizes its own potentialities in the presence of the object known. There is no need here to refer to anything beyond the mind itself and its object, no further illumination is needed from outside. Not that Thomas denies that in knowing the mind is in some sense illuminated by God; on the contrary, he often asserts this. But there is a world of difference, nevertheless, between what he is asserting, and Augustine's theory of knowledge. For Augustine, the reference to divine illumination is a vital link in the account of the process of knowing. Without this, there would be a gap in it which can be filled in no other way. For Aquinas, on the other hand, the theory of knowledge—taken straight from Aristotle—is self-sufficient, without any reference to God. It is of course true, he will insist, that God is at work in our coming to know things just as he is at work in everything that happens; but this is a further metaphysical, or if you like, theological after-thought. It is not an essential link required to make his theory of knowledge coherent. The mind's work in knowing can be described, as Augustine could not describe it, entirely without reference to God.

This concern to describe things in their own terms is part of the great shift of intellectual perspective which is so characteristic of this time, and which the Aristotelian philosophy strongly encouraged. I shall conclude by looking at a second example of such a shift, one which is philosophically perhaps less central, but historically of enormous significance, taken from the field of political thought. This is possibly the richest and most varied field of medieval

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thought; men at no stage ceased to reflect on the social nature of their existence. And yet, I would be prepared to say that in an important sense no medieval thinker before Aquinas developed a political theory. A great deal had, of course, been written on various aspects of political life: 'mirrors for princes', commentaries on legal collections, a vast output of pamphleteering in the course of the great debates about the proper relation of popes and emperors; sometimes even fairly general discussions of society, sacred and secular. But what the earlier Middle Ages had lacked—and this was a lack Augustine could not be invoked to supply—was the foundation for a theory of secular society, of the state, formulated in its own terms; a theory of a *civitas terrena* which did not depend on a contrast with a *civitas Dei*, of a *regnum* which could be defined without reference to a *sacerdotium*. The greatest political thinker between Augustine and Aquinas, John of Salisbury, was in this respect typically pre-Aristotelian. I say pre-Aristotelian, because I have no doubt that it was the availability of the complete *Nicomachaean Ethics* and of the *Politics*, from the 40's and 60's of the thirteenth century, which was the decisive turning point. The ground had been prepared gradually by the renewal of Roman law studies; but only now was there a theoretical foundation for a view which it had hitherto not been possible to state with theoretical adequacy within the framework of ideas largely borrowed from Augustine and misunderstood, developed or exploited for polemical purposes in a large variety of ways. Although Aquinas stands much closer to John of Salisbury in the attitude he takes to the great political questions of his day about the Papacy and the Empire than he does to Dante a little later, the political alignments here mask a deeper division which does not coincide with them. As far as political theory is concerned, the gulf is between John of Salisbury on the one side, and Thomas and Dante on the other. This gulf is perhaps the truest measure of the impact of Aristotle on medieval thought.

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