

Retrieving the Tradition

ON THE THOMISTIC PROBLEM OF THE BEATIFIC VISION

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“The beatific vision crowns the natural desire to see God as the most noble of our natural desires. By supernaturalizing it, it does not change its nature.”



The most serious of the difficulties to overcome within Thomistic studies is the rediscovery of the problems specific to St. Thomas Aquinas. What problems, exactly, did he propose to resolve? Because we do not know, we interpret his responses in terms of more or less different problems and, in the end, we impose on him doctrines that he has not professed, while those that he has professed are denied or fade from view and finally are forgotten.¹

1. Although the French in this text is not too difficult, and although the argument in the text is clear enough, the text itself presents some difficulties, leading one to speculate whether Professor Gilson used an assistant to compile the text from a lecture, or whether the editor was inattentive, or some such other circumstance. There are a few places in the text where it seems there is either a typo or a word missing. In footnotes, I will point these out and explain what I think is missing.

Also, some of the Latin of St. Thomas is translated into French in the article and some is left in the original. I will translate everything into English and

The damage is inevitable. We do not approach St. Thomas himself directly. Between him and us is interposed, first of all, religious orthodoxy, whose language is not always identical to that of St. Thomas. The least difference between formulas leads to a revision for which, of course, the language of St. Thomas pays the price. We speak here of orthodoxy in order to simplify, because theologians, even those who consider themselves Thomists, are capable of mistaking what is the orthodoxy of the Church and what is only theirs. We have seen some of them combine arbitrary and dogmatic intransigence with a surprising naivety. The theological schools, whether favorable or hostile to Thomism, not to mention the countless historical works and commentaries published on his doctrine, fit like so many veils between the thought of St. Thomas and ours. Our own thought, finally, burdened with the memory of so many efforts to understand his doctrine accumulated since we first opened one of his works, becomes somewhat blind. Each particular text read, re-read, copied, and meditated upon obstructs the doctrinal perspectives outside of which its meaning changes. In the end, there is great need for simplification.

This is particularly the case with regard to the problem of the beatific vision. It is a central problem and in every sense crucial since what is at stake is the very notion of Christian salvation, with all the conditions required for the great work of Redemption to be accomplished. Heavenly beatitude is man's ultimate end; the entire study of man is at stake, beyond the knowledge of his nature, to the question of the why of his existence. Inasmuch as man is the purpose of creation, the whole of creation is interested in the problem. Summarizing it with a view to the whole,

supply the Latin in footnotes, even for the cases where French (not Latin) was provided in the text of the article. When the citation for the quotation is not immediately obvious from the article itself, I have added it to the Latin in the footnote. Any of Aquinas's words within the article are placed in italics for emphasis and clarity. I generally use the Vernon Bourke translation of the *Summa contra gentiles* and the Fathers of the English Dominican Province translation of the *Summa theologiae*; and I have made changes to these translations where I saw fit. In order to differentiate the footnotes of the author, Gilson, from my footnotes as the translator, I have placed Gilson's name at the beginning of footnotes that are his and present in the original article. Footnotes without Gilson's name were not present in the original article and were added by me.

I want to thank Dr. Joseph Meaney and Dr. Anne Hilmy for reading my translation and making helpful suggestions. — Matthew Moore

one can say that Thomistic theology essentially proposes to show that the work of creation and re-creation finds its meaning and its possibility in the existence of intellectual substances capable of participating in divine beatitude. If there is a master plan of creation, it is this: to create a universe in order to be able to place intelligent beings there, to create intelligent beings in order to be able to associate them with the divine beatitude by allowing them to see God.

This overview emerges without any possible misunderstanding from the whole of chapters 24–64, book III, *Summa contra gentiles*. It is enough to understand its plan to discover the Thomistic problematic of the beatific vision, but it is necessary to have the docility to submit entirely to their requests and to accept them as they are, without adding or subtracting anything. We will content ourselves here with bringing out the articulations of the Thomistic dialectic, noting only in passing certain characteristics or particularly expressive formulas. We will not even do this without scruples, because the mere fact of extracting from a continuous development a few characteristic formulas is enough to modify the balance of the whole and of their very meaning. The inconvenience of this is all the more serious in a presentation such as ours, the object of which is to show that the characteristic of the doctrine in question is that there is nothing to emphasize in it.

We will start from *Contra gentiles*, III, 24, “How even beings without knowledge desire the good.”² We join here from the outset the essential thesis that we highlighted in a previous work on the problematic of the proof of the existence of God from movement:³ “every working of nature is a work of an

2. “*Quomodo appetunt bonum etiam quae cognitione carent.*”

3. Gilson: “Prolegomena to the *Prima via*,” AHDLMA, 30 (1963) 53–70; on the notion of *causa principalis*, pp. 62–65. The *Summa contra gentiles* will be cited by Book, chapter and paragraph. The numbering in paragraphs is the one given in the English translation of the *Contra gentiles* published under the direction of A. C. Pegis, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, 5 vols. (Doubleday & Co, 1956–57). This numbering, which follows exactly the division into paragraphs adopted for the Leonine edition, greatly facilitates the task of locating a text within the writing. It is to be hoped that the initiative of Professor A. C. Pegis will be followed generally.

intelligent substance” (SCG III, 24, 5).⁴ The operations of nature tend to the good as to their end because every corporeal creature is moved by some cause endowed with knowledge as by its principal motive cause. Let us note the general scope of the proposition: moved by intelligent substances with a view to good,

even things which lack knowledge can be made to work for an end, and to seek the good by a natural appetite, and to seek the divine likeness and their own perfection. And there is no difference between saying one of these things or the other. For, by the fact that they tend to their own perfection they tend to the good. . . . Moreover, by virtue of tending to be good it tends to the divine likeness, for a thing is made like unto God in so far as it is good. And this or that particular good thing becomes an object of desire according as it is a likeness of prime goodness. So, too, for this reason it tends to its own good, because it tends to the divine likeness, and not conversely. Hence, it is clear that all things desire the divine likeness as an ultimate end. (SCG III, 24, 6)⁵

Note the universal character of the proposition. It applies to all natural things as such. Even for those devoid of knowledge, a natural thing operates with a view to realizing in itself the divine resemblance: if man did not do this, he would be the only being not to desire it.

This manner of posing the problem determines in advance the framework within which one will have to offer its solution. Commentators are often concerned whether the desire to resemble God, which is here in question, should be understood as natural or supernatural. By beginning with beings devoid of knowledge, Thomas makes it clear that the question is posed at the level of nature. Even bodies operate in view of this sublime

4. “[Q]uodlibet opus naturae est opus substantiae intelligentis.”

5. “[E]a etiam quae cognitione carent, possunt operari propter finem; et appetere bonum naturali appetitu; et appetere divinam similitudinem; et propriam perfectionem. Non est autem differentia sive hoc sive illud dicatur. Nam per hoc quod tendunt in suam perfectionem, tendunt ad bonum. . . . Secundum vero quod tendit ad hoc quod sit bonum, tendit in divinam similitudinem: Deo enim assimilatur aliquid in quantum bonum est. Bonum autem hoc vel illud particulare habet quod sit appetibile in quantum est similitudo primae bonitatis. Propter hoc igitur tendit in proprium bonum, quia tendit in divinam similitudinem, et non e converso. Unde patet quod omnia appetunt divinam similitudinem quasi ultimum finem.”

and properly divine end. In what manner beings tend to divine resemblance as to their end depends on their nature; but it is truly their natures that are in question. Just how far these beings will be able to carry out their effort of assimilation to the Sovereign Good remains to be seen, but supposing that some of them, or even all of them, are condemned to stop on the way, this indeed would not prevent such from being their goal. To attain it is that to which their natures tend, according to what they are, but as they are.⁶

Let us move to the second moment of this progression: “that to understand God is the end of every intellectual substance” (SCG III, 25).⁷ A decisive movement—and yet barely perceptible, because it was made in advance. If we admit that creatures desire the divine likeness each in its own manner and according to its nature, intellectual substances naturally desire to attain this end by knowing God. By strongly linking this conclusion to that which he has just established for bodies, Thomas Aquinas engages in an induction that does not depart for a moment from the order of nature as God created it in view of its end. Anything that would be added here to the text would only obscure it: “Since all creatures, even those devoid of understanding, are ordered to God as to an ultimate end, all achieve this end to the extent that they participate somewhat in his likeness. Intellectual creatures attain it in a more special way, that is, through their proper operation of understanding him. Hence, this must be the end of the intellectual creature, namely, to understand God” (SCG III, 25, 1).⁸

6. I believe there is a word missing, a typo, in the original text and the word “non” is missing. I think this sentence should read: “To attain it is that to which their natures tend, *not* according to what they are but as they are.” — Trans.

7. “*Quod intelligere Deum est finis omnis intellectualis substantiae.*” SCG III, 25, title.

8. “*Cum autem omnes creaturae, etiam intellectu carentes, ordinentur in Deum sicut in finem ultimum; ad hunc autem finem pertingunt omnia inquantum de similitudine eius aliquid participant: intellectuales creaturae aliquo specialiori modo ad ipsum pertinent, scilicet per propriam operationem intelligendo ipsum. Unde oportet quod hoc sit finis intellectualis creaturae, scilicet intelligere Deum.*”

Scholastic Latin fares better here than French. We have no verb *intelliger*⁹ doubtless being too rationalistic to be intellectual, but speaking of the proper operation of an intellectual substance, which is understanding, St. Thomas, of course, says that it consists in understanding. Hence the conclusion we have just seen: *this is the final end of the intellectual creature, that is to understand God*. The nature of this act of intellection is not specified. Indeed, an intellectual creature can be a man or an angel; the way of understanding God is not the same in the two cases. Sticking to man himself, his intellection of God differs according to whether it is a question of man in this life or in the next; his intellect operates differently in the two cases. Finally, within the limits of the present life, the fact that most of the great philosophies situate theology at the end of their research attests that the intellectual substance that is man does indeed place the knowledge of God well within the end of his operations. However and to whatever degree man knows God, the end of the intellect is indeed to understand God.

At this point in his analysis of the problem, St. Thomas highlights only this single point, and he particularly insists on the fact that his conclusion is valid for every intellectual substance, even the lowest, which is man: “the end of any intellectual substance, even the lowest, is to understand God.”¹⁰ Indeed, since all other creatures, even those devoid of knowledge, tend toward God, man would be inferior to them if he did not also tend toward God (SCG III, 25, 5). This constant reference to the finality of nonrational beings, in order to establish with all the more reason that the finality of man, as intellectual substance, leads him to know God, guarantees as strongly as possible that it is not a question here of the supernatural order or beatific vision. Even for a man to whom notions of this kind would offer no meaning, as for Aristotle in fact, it is true to say that the intellection of God was his final end. Knowing no other happiness than that of

9. Here, Gilson plays on the absence in French of a verb corresponding exactly to the Scholastic Latin *intelligere* (“to understand intellectually”). He offers the hypothetical but non-existent French word *intelliger* to illustrate this lack. — Trans.

10. “[F]inis cujuslibet substantiae intellectualis, etiam infimae, est intelligere Deum” (SCG III, 25, 5).

this life, he knew at least that its summit consists in philosophical knowledge. Indeed, for any being, happiness is to reach its end; ignoring any other knowledge of God than that of philosophical speculation, Aristotle therefore correctly located the supreme beatitude of man in the knowledge of the most perfect intelligible, which is God (SCG III, 25, 16).¹¹

Thomas does not ask himself what the end of man is for Aristotle, but for man. The Philosopher had this admirable intuition that the natural desire of man tended, as to its final end, to the knowledge of the “highest knowable, which is God.”¹² For Aristotle himself this could only be philosophical knowledge and the temporal bliss it brings; but at the same time that he quotes the word of the philosopher Aristotle, the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas recalls the words from Scripture that affirm the same truth in a sense and at a level unattainable by reason alone: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8); and, “This is eternal life, to know you, the true God” (Jn 17:3). St. Thomas then adds that the teaching of the *Nicomachean Ethics* agrees with these words of the Gospel, but he does not pretend that they say the same thing. Indeed, Aristotle does not speak of “eternal life”; even less does he speak of “seeing God.” However, if it is possible to see God, and if the supreme happiness of man consists in understanding him, what understanding of God other than the vision of him can be conferred upon us? It is from there that, continuing his work as a theologian, St. Thomas wonders if the final end of man is not only to know God but to see him.

Let us review. St. Thomas knows the true answer that philosophical reason is capable of giving to the problem of the final end of man; this is Aristotle’s answer in his *Ethics*, VII, 2, where the ultimate happiness of man is said to be speculative, inasmuch as the speculative is most knowable. But the *Contra gentiles* is a theological writing; its object is that which he defined at the beginning of the book (SCG I, 2, 4): “by examining any truth whatever, to show what errors it excludes and how the truth demonstrated agrees with the faith of the Christian

11. Gilson: See the well-known text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7, 1177 a18.

12. “[N]obilissimum scibile, quod Deus est” (SCG III, 25, 13).

religion.”¹³ Chapters 26–50 fill the first part of this program: they show what the final end of man is not. This negative criticism of the various solutions already proposed necessarily implies a positive criterion. To decide what happiness is not, one must have some notion of what it is. Indeed, as a philosopher, Thomas knows that to know a thing perfectly is to know its substance and to know it with direct knowledge. Philosophy only affirms God as the cause of his effects, but it yields no immediate knowledge of God’s substance. Since the demonstration of St. Thomas is valid for all intellectual substances, angels and men, he is careful to establish that even separate substances do not find in their natural knowledge of God the full satisfaction of their desire. Separate substances know him better than we do; because they know his causality better than we do, but to know the causality of God is not yet to know his substance. It is therefore not yet the kind of knowledge that will be able to satisfy the natural desire of separate substances.

Let us pause for a moment to assimilate the meaning of this formula, for it contains the entire doctrine. First, it is indeed a natural desire: “However, it is impossible for the natural desire in separate substances to come to rest in such a knowledge of God” (SCG III, 50, 1).¹⁴ Then, and as an immediate consequence, there is in the separate intellectual substance a natural desire to know God, which it is not able to satisfy by its own natural means. What is valid for the angel is with all the more reason valid for man, an intellectual substance inferior to the spiritual substance which is the separate substance. It is therefore certain that man experiences a *natural* desire to know God that he cannot satisfy *naturally*: that of seeing God in his essence. From this point on, the perspective widens and deepens; it is no longer simply a question of knowing God but of seeing him. We will, therefore, first ask in what such a vision of the divine substance consists: “How God may be seen in His Essence.”¹⁵

13. “[A]utem veritatem aliquam investigantes ostendemus qui errores per eam excludantur: et quomodo demonstrativa veritas, fidei Christianae religionis concordet.”

14. “Non potest autem esse quod in tali Dei cognitione quiescat naturale desiderium substantiae separatae.”

15. “Quomodo Deus per essentiam videatur” (SCG III, 51, title).

Here is the decisive step for the interpreter of the doctrine. Because the object of the search will henceforth be located beyond the grasp of nature, and therefore be supernatural, many conclude that this object ceases to be that of a *natural* desire. Among so many arguments invoked to this end, the main one is that, according to Aristotle, a natural desire cannot be in vain. In more technical terms: to any desire born of a passive power there always corresponds an active power capable of satisfying it; man cannot therefore have the natural desire to know an object that he does not have the natural means of knowing. We would only obscure matters by discussing the meaning of the single Aristotelian text invoked in support of this thesis. It will perhaps suffice to observe that, from Aristotle's point of view, the Thomistic question has no meaning. He could ask himself if a certain knowledge was divine or human, but the relation of the necessary world of Aristotle to the Prime Mover is not that of the created world to the Christian God. The latter can very well itself actualize potentialities that do not have, in nature, corresponding acts. To the objection that man cannot have the natural desire to see God, since he does not have the natural means of satisfying it, St. Thomas objects, in a powerful dialectical reversal:

Since it is impossible for a natural desire to be incapable of fulfillment, and since it would be so, if it were not possible to reach an understanding of divine substance such as all minds naturally desire, we must say that it is possible for the substance of God to be seen intellectually, both by separate intellectual substances and by our souls. (*SCG* III, 51, 1)¹⁶

This single text should suffice to settle the controversy, at least insofar as the authentic meaning of the Thomistic doctrine is here in question. It is indeed a natural desire to see the divine substance (*naturale desiderium*), which all intellects (*mentes*) naturally desire to see (*quod naturaliter omnes mentes desiderant*); and it is indeed a question of showing why this natural desire is not vain, though it is incapable of satisfying itself by natural means. Thus, the massive argument of the Aristotelians against the possibility

16. "*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.*"

of such a natural desire is, in St. Thomas, the very proof that this desire must be possible. Since our natural desire to see the divine substance cannot be in vain, then it is not.

In what does this possibility consist? All possibility is that of being led from potency to act. This is at least what it is on the side of possibility as such, whatever the cause that can actualize it. In the case in question, the nature of the intellectual substance (*mens*) cannot be such that the beatific vision is impossible for it; it is contradictory to think so, because as soon as we say “intellect,” or thought, we are talking about a subject capable of becoming everything by mode of knowledge, provided only that the conditions of its actualization be given. A stone, a plant, an animal devoid of reason are not in a state of possibility with regard to the beatific vision; nothing can raise them there, not even God, since to do so He would first have to change miraculously these non-thinking substances into thinking substances, that is, to substitute for them other substances, specifically different from what they are. On the contrary, the very nature of the intellect is such that to posit it is at the same time to posit this possibility.

This articulation of the doctrine is a definitive achievement, and the one that follows must not cause us to lose sight of it: no created substance can achieve, by its natural forces, the vision of God in his essence (SCG III, 52). Yet this is how he must be seen if his substance is truly to be seen; but he alone is capable of this, for he alone exists such that his substance and his essence are his being. He is also the only being whose intellect is the divine essence, by which alone the substance of God can be seen. Any created essence, on the contrary, not being the divine essence, can only see the divine essence through something other than itself. The sight of the divine substance can therefore only come to the created intellect by the action of God. This is what Chapter 52 affirms by virtue of arguments varying in form, but all inspired by the same principle: “*to see the Divine Substance transcends the limits of all created substance*” (SCG III, 52, 6).¹⁷

Here, then, is a natural desire of the intellectual creature that no creature is capable of satisfying by its own resources. What are we to make of such a situation? How do we speak of the relation of a potential nature to a certain end that it is not

17. “*Videre autem Dei substantiam transcendit limites omnis naturae creatae.*”

capable of attaining? What name should be given to the cause that, transcending nature, nevertheless leads it to its act and to its perfection? In good Thomistic theology, it is grace. We are tempted, following certain doctrinal developments between St. Thomas and us, to conceive first of all within grace the aspect of gratuity that elevates it above nature and distinguishes it radically. Grace thus understood is that of which nature is of itself incapable; nature can neither give it to itself, nor even merit it. This view is correct. But let us not forget the other aspect, no less essential and necessary, by which grace and nature are turned toward each other, nature being there in view of grace and grace having the end of leading nature to its own perfection. This notion of grace is entirely religious and even Christian; it is in any case Thomistic, for St. Thomas always taught that faith presupposes natural knowledge as grace presupposes nature and perfection the perfectible;¹⁸ their relationship cannot therefore be of opposition but of complementarity in the distinction: since indeed grace does not elevate nature but perfects it.¹⁹ This is why the grace of the beatific vision, which is the grace of graces,²⁰ far from suppressing the natural character of the desire to see God, supernaturally fulfills this desire. Thomas expressly confirms that we are here in the order of grace in concluding his proof of the impossibility of any created nature arriving alone at the beatific vision: for it is said in Romans 6:23, “the grace of God is life eternal.” Eternal life is beatitude, and it is in the vision of God that beatitude consists; “and we are said to attain it by God’s grace alone, because such a vision exceeds all the capacity of a creature, and it is not possible to reach it without divine assistance. Now, when such things happen to a creature, they are attributed to God’s grace” (SCG III, q. 52, a. 7).²¹ The chapter

18. Gilson: *Summa theologiae*, I, 2, 2, ad 1 m.

19. Gilson: *Summa theologiae*, I, 1, 8, ad 2 m. “*Cum enim gratia non tollat naturam, sed perficiat.*”

20. Gilson: This is the sense in which the beatific vision is the ultimate positive effect of grace. *Summa theologiae*, III, 70, 4.

21. “[A]d quam sola Dei gratia dicimur pervenire, quia talis visio omnem creaturae facultatem excedit, nec est possibile ad eam pervenire nisi divino munere; quae autem sic adveniunt creaturae, Dei gratiae deputantur.”

concludes with the royal word of God himself (Jn 14:21): I will manifest myself to him.²²

It is easy to see how such a position on the problem has given rise to numerous controversies, and each of them for good reason. St. Thomas constantly refers to Aristotle, but he knows well that Aristotle speaks nowhere of an eternal beatitude obtained from God by the grace of the beatific vision. The Aristotelians therefore have an easy time saying that he betrays Aristotle—or even trying to force him back into Aristotle's position. Thomas still wants the beatific vision to be the crowning of man's natural desire; but noting that this natural power is without any corresponding act in nature, he insists at the same time on the impossibility, for created nature, of reaching this end without grace. This leads to many questions: What is a natural desire that cannot even, without a supernatural revelation, attain its object? What is a natural desire that, even supernaturally informed of its object, does not have the natural force to attain it? Many theologians are so concerned with preserving the supernatural and gratuitous character of the beatific vision that they prefer to deny that it is the crowning of a natural human desire, because, they think, if the desire is natural, how could the vision that crowns it not be so?

Such aporia are insoluble, because all arise from a point of view other than that of St. Thomas Aquinas. I do not believe that he ever used the now classical expression of harmony of nature and grace; and yet it is this that comes irresistibly to mind when one tries to understand his doctrine for what it is. It is not the doctrine of Aristotle, where man is a purely natural man, but Thomas sees in the man of the philosophers, who is a man of nature, possibilities of development that Scripture alone reveals to him and by which alone he discovers the means of attaining these possibilities. The nature he sees is a nature willed by God in view of grace. How could it be otherwise? Since God is the end of all things, he has done everything for himself; he is the end of all things. It is therefore necessary that all things reach God, each in its own way and according to its kind. If he has created intellects, these must be capable of reaching him through knowledge; God has therefore created a hierarchical world whose structure

22. "[E]go manifestabo ei meipsum."

leads by degrees to the knowledge of its cause and, at the same time, intellectual substances capable of ascending by degrees to the knowledge of the first cause from its effects. This is what angels and men do, and we see that philosophies are naturally ordered to the knowledge of God as their end. Man is therefore in fact capable through his intellect of reaching the God whom he naturally desires to know. Man was created capable of naturally attaining his ultimate end as far as a created intellect is able. This is no small thing. From the language in which Aristotle describes the happiness of philosophical contemplation accessible in this life, the only one of which he speaks, it is clear that the destiny of the wise man has never seemed to him that of a frustrated man. What does Christian revelation add? That the natural desire to know God, imperfectly satisfied in this life, can be perfectly satisfied in the life to come; and Christian revelation provides the means for this fulfillment. These means belong to the order of grace; they are therefore supernatural. Yet they are supernatural means that do not change the natural character of the desire of God that they fulfill. That desire was already there before these means; the means of grace bring it to perfection. Since it is a question of a natural desire that finds its gratuitous fulfillment in a divine and supernatural object, the means of satisfying it must necessarily transcend nature—unless, according to a supposition that is a discredit to his wisdom, God deliberately created intelligent beings incapable of achieving their end.

We thus deform the Thomistic problematic when we transpose in terms of necessity a problem that pertains to the order of the good, of the final cause and of the reciprocal adaptation of means to ends. The fear seems to be that, in this view, the beatific vision may become something that is due to the creature, which, given the nature of man, God would be bound to grant him. It is not so; human nature necessarily requires intellectual knowledge, but it is clear that it does not require the sight of God, which no man has in this life. As St. Thomas precisely says: “any created intellect may be understood to enjoy complete existence in the species proper to its nature, without seeing the substance of God.”²³ This is the reason why, whether from the beginning (as

23. “[P]otest intelligi quivis intellectus creatus in specie suae naturae consistere absque hoc quod Dei substantiam videat.”

with angels) or later (as with man), something must be added to the nature of the created intellect if it is to be able at some time to begin to see God (SCG III, 53, 4). It is not therefore contradictory or impossible that God created man incapable of seeing him, but it is solely a matter of knowing if this hypothesis accords with what we know of the nature of man and of the designs of God.

It is impossible to doubt that, according to St. Thomas, the beatific vision is a grace freely given by God to human nature, or [to doubt] that the effect of this grace is to satisfy the natural desire of the intellectual substance entirely: "the natural appetite of an intellectual substance must come to rest completely when it sees the divine substance" (SCG III, 59, 1).²⁴ Let us understand well in what sense this is true. The sight of God does not fulfill the desire of the intellect to the exclusion of others; rather, the beatific vision leads man to his perfection by fulfilling all his natural desires and bringing all his virtues to their point of perfection. Man loves action, command, authority, honor, fame, riches, pleasures, security. He will have all of these fully and perfectly, in a much purer form than in life here below where the body maintains everything at the level of animality. How does one conceive this? "In this life, nothing resembles this supreme and perfect beatitude like the life of those who contemplate the truth as far as possible here below. This is why the philosophers, who have not been able to have full knowledge of this supreme felicity, have situated that of man in the contemplation which is accessible to him in this life" (SCG III, 63, 10).²⁵ The beatific vision crowns the natural desire to see God as the most noble of our natural desires. By supernaturalizing it, it does not change its nature: "the contemplation of truth begins in this life, but reaches its climax in the future."²⁶

Such, it seems, is the real problem of the vision of God in the *Contra gentiles*, reduced to its essentials and pruned of parasitic

24. "[O]portet quod appetitus naturalis substantiae intellectualis divinam substantiam videntis omnino quiescat."

25. "Huius autem ultimae et perfectae felicitatis in hac vita nihil est adeo simile sicut vita contemplantium veritatem, secundum quod est possibile in hac vita. Et ideo philosophi, qui de illa felicitate ultima plenam notitiam habere non potuerunt, in contemplatione quae est possibilis in hac vita, ultimam felicitatem hominis posuerunt."

26. "Incipit enim contemplatio veritatis in hac vita, sed in futura consummatur."

vegetation that ties it into innumerable other problems but hides somewhat the broad outlines. We are a little surprised to discover this formulation, because we find nothing there that evokes all of the many controversies under which it disappears today—nothing, neither their problems nor even their language. Unless I am mistaken, the words “obediential potency” are not found there. Whereas some hold them to be the perfect and necessary expression of St. Thomas’s position, he can develop his doctrine of the beatific vision from beginning to end without once making use of this formula. From this it seems legitimate to conclude at least that it is not necessary to him and to infer also that the formula figures there as an adventitious element, probably linked to so-called Thomistic problematics, perhaps legitimate in themselves, but nonetheless different from the concerns of St. Thomas.

The Common Doctor, who has never focused on a point less than on this, will never again find this perfect freedom of stride, this superb indifference with regard to possible misunderstandings and this same disdain for eventual objections against which one cannot defend oneself in advance without drowning the truth in the precautions placed around it. The plan of the *Contra gentiles*, moreover, required him to situate the problem within the main line of its development. The plan of the *Summa theologiae* (quite different because the end of the work is different) had nevertheless to encounter somewhere this master problem of Christian theology. How is it treated there?

The *Summa* is really a summary. St. Thomas places there, according to the order of subject matter rather than that of research, the conclusions to which a life of theological reflections has led him. He formulates them soberly, accompanying them with the minimum necessary demonstration. As usual, the objections and responses serve to indicate what could be called the ins and outs of the doctrine. Each theological conclusion communicates secretly with many others, such that one would not know it well in itself if one did not know, at least summarily, how it behaves with regard to other questions and other ways to respond.

The problem of the beatific vision is approached for the first time very close to the beginning of the *Summa* I, 1, 12. It is introduced there in all simplicity: “As hitherto we have considered God as he is in himself, we now go on to consider in

what manner he is in the knowledge of creatures.”²⁷ Whereupon, without further precaution, St. Thomas asks himself “if any created intellect can see the essence of God.”²⁸ He goes straight to the point—and not without reason, because his thesis can be developed in several chapters, but can also be expressed in a few words. To know a thing is to know what it is; it is therefore to know its essence, and the only way to really know it is to see it. One therefore directly asks if the essence of God can be seen by a created intellect. Answer: yes; indeed, it is written in 1 John 3:2, “We will see him as he is.”²⁹ Let us take from the answer what concerns our own problem. Some say that God is invisible to us because the intelligibility of his essence is too perfect, but we have just seen that this position is not that of faith, because if the created intellect cannot see the essence of God, which is his highest operation and therefore his beatitude, he will not attain the end which Scripture promises him. Contrary to faith, this position is also against reason:

For there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain vain. Hence it must simply be granted that the blessed see the essence of God. (*ST I*, q. 12)³⁰

That is all, but the very density of this text makes it valuable. However one reads it, it is impossible to misunderstand what it is saying: the possibility of seeing the essence of God, in which the beatitude of man consists, is required by reason, so that man’s natural desire cannot be frustrated. Were we to have only this single text, it would establish without any possible discussion that the beatific vision is the ultimate perfection of a desire of a nature based in the intellect.

27. “*Quia in superioribus consideravimus qualiter Deus sit secundum seipsum, restat considerandum qualiter sit in cognitione nostra, idest quomodo cognoscatur a creaturis*”

28. “[U]trum aliquis intellectus creatus possit videre essentiam Dei.”

29. “[V]idebimus eum sicuti est” (*ST I*, 12, sed contra).

30. “*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.*”

That said, what follows can only be something additional. The supernatural character of this vision is beyond doubt, since it is the work of “the light of glory which fortifies the intellect to see God.”³¹ It is this light of which it is said: “in your light we see light” (Ps 35:10 (36:9)). God can only be seen in the light of God. We are here at the height of the supernatural and of grace: “to see the essence of God is possible to the created intellect by grace, and not by nature” (*ST I*, q. 12, s.c.).³² For this view to be possible, God must unite himself by his grace with the created intellect, and thus make himself intelligible to it. This light is not a species through which the intellect sees God; it is a created light

which perfects the intellect and gives it strength to see God; it is not a means in which God would be seen, but by which (*sub quo*) he is seen, so that the immediacy of the vision of God remains intact. How would this light of glory be natural to the creature? For that, the creature would have to be of divine nature, whereas the effect of this light is precisely to make it “deiform,” as are the blessed who see God (*ST I*, q. 12, ad 2 and 3).

They indeed see him by the very essence of God united to their intellect (*ST I*, q. 12, a. 9). This view of God is impossible in this life, except perhaps by miracle; what man can do in this life is to know God as he can be known by reason from creatures, but grace makes it possible to reach a knowledge of God higher than that of natural reason alone, either by strengthening the natural light of the intellect by an infusion of gratuitous light, or even by forming in the imagination images which express divine things better than those which we naturally receive from natural things (*ST I*, q. 12, a. 13). It would be difficult more clearly to make the distinction between the natural knowledge of God and what grace adds to it, initially by perfecting as much as is natural in this life, then by crowning it with the supernatural sight of God.

31. “[S]cilicet lumen gloriae, confortans intellectum ad videndum Deum.”

32. “[V]idere Dei essentiam convenit intellectui creato per gratiam, et non per naturam.”

Having spoken in Part One of God, who is the model, St. Thomas speaks in Part Two of man, who is the image. On the authority of John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* II, 12, Thomas affirms that man is said to be made in the image of God, and this in a threefold way: as intelligent, free, and acting. Immediately, the theologian wonders about the final end of man, which is beatitude. It is this that all men agree in desiring, but they do not agree about what it is; so this is what we must search for first.

This problem takes us back, in the *Summa theologiae*, *Prima secundae*, question 2, to the series of those problems that we have seen dealt with in *Contra gentiles*, III, 24–64. Pedagogical concerns broke the flow and suggested changes in the order; but the doctrine did not change. Beatitude does not consist in riches, in honors, in fame or glory, in power, in any good of the body, in pleasure, in any good of the soul, nor, generally speaking, in any created good. The only object that can satisfy the desire of the will, the object of which is the good in general, is the absolute good, who is God. The doctrine therefore remains the same; ultimate and perfect beatitude can only consist in the vision of the divine essence, for it is the essence, or *quod quid est*, that is the object of the intellect, and the desire of man will rest only in the essence of the supreme intelligible (*ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8). Once again, the union of man with God through knowledge is given as the fulfillment of a natural desire. This result is possible, because any being capable of the perfect good is at the same time capable of attaining beatitude; yet St. Thomas does not doubt that man is capable of it, for no reservation or condition appears in the reasons that he gives for it: “Now, that man is capable of the perfect good, is proved both because his intellect can apprehend the universal and perfect good, and because his will can desire it. And therefore man can attain beatitude.”³³ Let us observe the completely unconditional formula: *and therefore man can attain beatitude*. Since his intellect is able to know its object and his will to desire it, man is able to reach it: *man is capable of the vision of the divine essence* (*ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 1). St. Thomas refers to the proof he gave of it previously, in the *Prima*

33. “*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. Et ideo homo potest beatitudinem adipisci.*”

pars, question 12, article 1; and that, as we have seen, was based on the impossibility of the natural desire being frustrated. And yet, he will make it clear once again that man cannot achieve this end of his nature by natural means. Why this contradiction? Because it is inscribed in the nature of things. A created intellect as intellect is naturally capable of God, but as created it is naturally incapable of reaching him. It is God himself who posed the problem by creating intellects, but he only posed it because at the same time he created the solution.

This aspect of the doctrine, which is fundamental, appears in the response of St. Thomas to an objection. According to this objection, man should be able to attain beatitude by his natural means (*per sua naturalia*): “For nature does not fail in necessary things. But nothing is so necessary to man as that by which he attains the last end. Therefore this is not lacking to human nature. Therefore man can attain Beatitude by his natural powers” (*ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 5, ad 1). One cannot misunderstand the force of the argument, because if there is a case where nature has not provided man with what is necessary, then there exists a creature incapable of attaining by itself its own end. Why does nature not provide what is necessary? St. Thomas admits that it does not. She [nature] did not give man a principle that enables him to attain beatitude; she did not give it to him—let us note the reason—because, man being finite and God infinite, it was impossible: *hoc enim erat impossibile*. But God has provided another way. Just as, producing man devoid of weapons and clothing, nature provided him with reason and the hands that enabled him to procure them, in the same way, being unable to give him the means to reach by himself his final end, God “gave him free will, whereby he could turn to God who would make him blessed. As Aristotle says,³⁴ what we can do through our friends is a little as if we could do it ourselves” (ad 1).³⁵ It is a response of supreme elegance, which, however, we indicate here only for the light it sheds on the situation. There is certainly in nature a being incapable of reaching his end alone; but it is then a question of an

34. Gilson: *Eth. Nic.*, III, 1112 b 27–28.

35. “*Sed dedit ei liberum arbitrium, quo possit converti ad Deum, qui eum faceret beatum. Quae enim per amicos possumus, per nos aliquantulum possumus, ut dicitur in III Ethic.*”

intellect—a unique case, a unique being whose nature implies precisely this impossibility. One can then only wonder if God did not create this exception to a law of nature that, otherwise, is universal, because he intended to remedy it. The master plan of creation faces a new question. God can only create for himself, but how can creatures relate to him unless they know him? To know him, they must be rational creatures, and those creatures that are not rational exist only with a view to those who are. The beatific vision is not the end of the angel and of man alone but, through them, of all creation. To pose the problem in the order of the creative action that is that of the good and of the final cause, a universe without intellectual substances would be devoid of meaning,³⁶ but, for God himself, to create intellects is to create the impossibility that Thomas recognizes as existing: a nature incapable of naturally reaching its end. This apparent paradox is

36. Gilson: One of the key chapters of the *Contra gentiles* is II, 46: “That the perfection of the universe required the existence of some intellectual creatures” (*Quod oportuit ad perfectionem universi aliquas creaturas intellectuales esse*). *Oportuit* is a strong word, but it does not mean an intrinsic necessity; *oportuit* means that it is suitable, it is necessary, and even if it is absolutely necessary, the necessity is only one of convenience (or suitability) and opportunity. *Non solum oportet, sed etiam necesse est*, says Cicero. The requirement of opportunity can be as absolute as a necessity, but it is not of the same nature. Neither logical nor mechanical, it expresses the fact that, from the point of view of the good, a certain end cannot be attained unless a certain means is implemented. Here, St. Thomas establishes that “as a result of the order established by God’s assigning to creatures the optimum perfection consonant with their manner of being, certain creatures were endowed with an intellectual nature” (*quod ex divina dispositione perfectionem rebus creatis secundum suum modum optimam assignante, consequens fuit quod quaedam creaturae intellectuales fierent a quod ex divina dispositione rebus creatis secundum modum suum optimum assignante, consequens fuit quod quaedam creaturae intellectuales fierent*) (SCG II, 46, 1). The high reason of suitability that justifies this thesis is that it is required by the relationship of resemblance of effect to cause and of image to the model: “Now, the perfection of the universe of creatures consists in its likeness to God, just as the perfection of any effect whatever consists in its likeness to its efficient cause” (*perfectio autem universitatis creaturarum consistit in similitudine ad Deum: sicut etiam perfectio cujuslibet effectus in similitudine ad causam agentem*) (SCG II, 46, 5). From there, it is easy to show that a world created by an intelligent agent must, to resemble it, contain intelligent beings. “Furthermore, the only reason God had to create was to communicate his own goodness to others by creating them like himself. To confer on the universe its supreme perfection (*summa universi perfectio*), there had to be creatures in whom the form of the divine intellect (by which God produces the creature) was expressed according to an intelligible mode of being. And that is to say that there had to be creatures of an intellectual nature” (ibid.).

simply a necessity, for the end of a nature worthy of being created by God can only be supernatural; God would certainly not have created it as such without foreseeing, in creating it, the supernatural means that would enable it to reach its end.

This is the perspective from which the Thomistic universe takes its meaning. Nothing exceeds the consideration that St. Thomas Aquinas gives to this in tranquil assurance, peaceful and sure of itself. There is only one nature, that of philosophy and of Aristotle, or, as we would say today, that of reason and science. In this nature there is man; yet man is a mystery, a fact that astonished St. Thomas, as it did St. Augustine before him and Pascal after him; but this mystery does not disturb him, since he knows that God willed it so. There is necessarily mystery as soon as God wills, for himself, something other than himself. The image of God within the intellect is the answer to this enigma; and it is also the heart of the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas. There is no other conceivable answer to the question: The Lord will give grace and glory (Ps. 83:12 (84:11)).³⁷ Some objected that those who do not know revealed truth do not know true beatitude and, ignorant of it, cannot will it. This is correct, but a contradiction would only exist if man naturally knew true beatitude. However, this beatitude, being God, is supernatural. If philosophy gave him an ultimate answer to the enigma of the world, Thomas would side with the philosophers, and he would not be a theologian.

No more than the *Summa contra gentiles*, the *Summa theologiae* does not take sides in a controversy that it does not seem to have foreseen. Theologians have opposed, contradicted, sometimes condemned each other for having said, or not said, that the beatific vision is, or is not, a case of *obediential power*. Now, nothing is more dangerous than a judgment of nonexistence; let us therefore simply say that we do not remember having encountered a single text in which St. Thomas formulated this very simple proposition: the intellect, angelic or human, is in a state of obediential power to the beatific vision. This does not mean that other theologians were wrong to say so; the historian is not qualified to settle this question, but he has to point out that, to his knowledge, St. Thomas did not say so. Nor did St. Thomas

37. "Gratiam et gloriam dabit Dominus."

say otherwise. I have not come across either in his writings, or in the form of a literal quotation attributed to him, the idea that the beatific vision is a case of mere natural power. The desire to see God is natural to man; beatitude is therefore *the end of his nature*. But St. Thomas does not say, *ipsissimis verbis*, that it is *man's natural end*. Rather, he would say the contrary: "*such beatitude is no part of their nature, but its end*" (ST I, q. 62, a. 1).³⁸ God is the end of all nature, but how would he be *the natural end* of anything? There must, however, be a reason why one or the other of these positions was attributed to him. He himself could not foresee it, so he did not explain himself on it, and we are leaving history here to enter the uncertain field of historical conjecture.

A quite general reason is perhaps that the disciples or commentators need names designating clear positions, but St. Thomas did not make any decision in this direction. Obeying the exigencies of the deepest parts of his spirit, he contents himself, here as often elsewhere, with grasping reality as closely as possible and describing it as he sees it. But it is not simple. His examination leads him into the presence of a natural desire that needs the supernatural help of God in order not to be in vain! No Aristotelian could subscribe to such a thesis. Since things are like this, St. Thomas accepts them, but he has no name for such a situation, which leaves the responsibility of naming it to his successors.

A ready-made expression offered itself to them to designate cases of this kind: *obediential power*. St. Thomas knew it; he used it often enough in other cases where we will see that it raised no objections on his part. Even then he spoke of it as a recognized expression, without claiming to have invented it; besides, the only thing that matters is to know how he himself understood it. I will leave aside the texts, however interesting they often are, of the *Commentary on the Sentences*, in order to avoid the problems of possible evolution that an incompletely fixed terminology sometimes poses in this writing. In fact, I do not believe in any evolution on this point, but I would first like to ascertain what was the maturely considered and surely definitive thought of St. Thomas on the question.

38. "[Q]uia haec beatitudo non est aliquid naturae, sed naturae finis."

Those who maintain that the passive power of the intellect to the beatific vision is a case of obediential power cannot, as I have said, cite any text where this thesis is explicitly formulated, but they can allege at least one instance where, without it being there, it might seem plausible to infer it. It is the answer to the question from *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 11, a. 1: “If Christ himself was infused with all knowledge.” It is therefore not directly about the beatific vision, but obediential power is used to justify the affirmative answer to the question.

Let us begin on the basis of a conclusion already established at the moment it is stated: it was fitting that the soul of Christ was perfect in all respects, because its entire potentiality was reduced to action. St. Thomas continues: “We must consider that in the human soul, as in all creatures, we observe a double passive power, one in relation to the natural agent, the other in relation to the first agent, which can reduce any created being to some higher act, to which it is not reduced by a natural agent, and this is what we customarily call *potentia obedientiae* in the creature.”³⁹ It is tempting to apply this text to the beatific vision. Indeed, the first passive power is the natural power, the one that St. Thomas immediately says, in the response to the first objection, that it is the “natural power of the intellectual soul in comparison to the natural agent, which is the agent intellect.”⁴⁰ If we agree to name “obediential potency” any passive power reduced to a higher act by an unnatural agent,⁴¹ what clearer case can we

39. “*Est autem considerandum quod in anima humana, sicut in qualibet creatura, consideratur duplex potentia passiva, una quidem per comparisonem ad agens naturale; alia vero per comparisonem ad agens primum, qui potest quamlibet creaturam reducere in actum aliquem altiore, in quem non reducitur per agens naturale; et haec consuevit vocari potentia obedientiae in creatura.*”

40. “[A]ctione naturali animae intellectivae, quae scilicet est per comparisonem ad agens naturale, quod est intellectus agens.”

41. Gilson: The most concise definition of the two powers is undoubtedly this one: *Et propter hoc in eis (creaturis) distinguitur potentia duplex: una naturalis ad proprias operationes vel motus; alia quae obedientiae dicitur, ad ea quae a Deo recipiunt* (*De potentia*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1). This passage is well made to invite caution to those who would like to systematize the doctrine. Following Averroes (*In de caelo et mundo*, comm. 20), St. Thomas sees clearly that, even in nature, any movement caused by a superior force is natural to the one who undergoes it; thus water tends downwards, but in the case of tides it becomes natural for it to rise. Much more so with the effects caused by God in nature *quia quidquid in rebus facit, non est contra naturam, sed est eis natura, eo quod ipse est conditor et ordinator*

wish for than the beatific vision, to which the soul is not reduced by its natural agent, the agent intellect, but by God?

But let us note the rest of the text. "Now both powers of Christ's soul were reduced to act by this divinely imprinted knowledge." But it is different in that respect from three different orders of knowledge.

First, the soul of Christ knows everything that can be known to man by virtue of the light of the agent intellect, that is to say, everything that belongs to the human sciences. Secondly, by this (infused) knowledge Christ knew everything that comes to the knowledge of man by divine revelation, whether it comes from the gift of wisdom, from the gift of prophecy or from any other gift of the Holy Spirit, for Christ knew all this more abundantly and fully than others.⁴²

To which Thomas adds this capital remark: "But as for the divine essence, it is not by this knowledge that he knew it, but only by the first, of which we spoke above."⁴³

This text is remarkable, but it needs some commentary. If we are surprised that St. Thomas develops his doctrine of the three kinds of potentiality about the knowledge of Christ, the answer is that the soul of Christ, the God-man, offers the unique case of the copresence of all possible modes of knowledge, human and divine, in their perfection and united in a *single subject*. *One finds there, first, perfect human knowledge*, because nothing natural is lacking in Christ; he therefore had the knowledge of everything naturally knowable, meaning here by knowledge, in the broad

naturae . . . et hoc modo omnes creaturae quasi pro naturali habent quod a Deo in eis fit. From this point of view, it becomes quite difficult to distinguish very precisely a natural power from obediencial potency. See also *De malo*, q. 5, a. 5, ad 4; *De virtutibus in communi*, a. 10, ad 13.

42. "Utraque autem potentia animae Christi fuit reducta in actum secundum hanc scientiam divinitus inditam. Et ideo secundum eam anima Christi primo quidem cognovit quaecumque ab homine cognosci possunt per virtutem luminis intellectus agentis, sicut sunt quaecumque pertinent ad scientias humanas. Secundo vero per hanc scientiam cognovit Christus omnia illa quae per revelationem divinam hominibus innotescunt, sive pertineant ad donum sapientiae, sive ad donum prophetiae, sive ad quodcumque donum spiritus sancti. Omnia enim ista abundantius et plenius ceteris cognovit anima Christi."

43. "Ipsam tamen Dei essentiam per hanc scientiam non cognovit, sed solum per primam, de qua supra dictum est."

sense, *any knowledge of the human intellect* (ST III, q. 9, a. 1). It is the infused natural knowledge to which the intellect of Christ was naturally in potency as any possible intellect is to the agent intellect. However, if we read the passage in question closely (ST III, q. 11, a. 1) we will note that it is only a question of a *passive potency in comparison to the natural agent*. Indeed, in the soul of Christ, the possible intellect is in potency to the agent intellect, which is a natural agent. Yet he does not present this knowledge as merely natural; indeed, the possible intellect of Christ knows everything only because the human nature assumed by the divine Word cannot be imperfect; therefore God has imprinted in it “the totality of the intelligible species of everything to which the possible intellect is in power.” Can we hazard a hypothesis about the reason for the restraint that Thomas shows here in his language? He is describing a possible intellect in a state of natural power with regard to intelligible species infused by God in his agent intellect. Once the species were innate in the intellect of Christ, everything is natural, but they did not come there naturally. Some mathematicians complain today that physicists ask mathematics to express truths for which it has no language; St. Thomas imposes himself here, as he often does, to describe in philosophical terms a situation for which philosophy does not have adequate expressions. How does one find a name for a total human knowledge, both natural and infused?

The second kind of knowledge present in the soul of Christ is easier to name, provided we accept a name unknown to philosophers as is the thing it signifies. This time it is a knowledge actualizing the passive power customarily called “obediential potency”: *this is called obediential potency in the creature*. On rereading the examples given by St. Thomas, we see that they all relate no longer to infused natural knowledge like the preceding ones but to revealed supernatural knowledge, or to infused supernatural knowledge pertaining to the gift of wisdom, the gift of prophecy or any of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Christ had knowledge of all these, the common characteristic of which is that they cannot be caused in the possible intellect by the natural light of the agent intellect but only by the immediate efficacy of God himself. Here the soul can only behave passively and obey the action of a God who can do with his creature whatever he wants, provided only that the effect of God’s action is compatible

with that creature's nature. The miracle, unknown to philosophers, is the very type of obediential power. There is nothing in the subject of the miracle that announces the possibility of it. In the greatest of miracles, transubstantiation, there is nothing in the bread and wine to predict that they can be changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Upon the word of the priest, who speaks for God, the miracle occurs and matter merely obeys. Likewise in the case of the prophet; he has nothing to do with his prophecy.⁴⁴ Every miracle, in whatever order, is a case of obediential potency. All the supernatural knowledge infused into the soul of Christ comes under this order of knowledge.

We come to a brief conclusion of the passage under discussion: "Nevertheless the soul of Christ did not know the very essence of God by this knowledge, but by the first, of which it was spoken above." By "this knowledge," Thomas means the one of which he has just spoken, that is to say, the knowledge received by *potentia obedientiae*. Never was he closer to saying this simple thing: the sight of the divine essence by a created intellect is not a case of obediential potency. It will be answered that what he says amounts to that, and it is almost true; but there are generally reasons why a writer regularly avoids expressing his thought in a form that seems natural to us to the point of being inevitable. If, as it seems, St. Thomas hesitates to use this formula here, or rather abstains from it, it is for considerations that will

44. Gilson: One of the clearest definitions of the two powers is found in the disputed questions *De veritate*, q. 8, art. 12, ad 4: *Ad quartum dicendum est quod duplex est potentia. Una naturalis quae potest per agens naturale in actum reduci; et talis potentia est in angelis totaliter completa per formas innatas; sed secundum talem potentiam intellectus noster non est in potentia ad futura quaelibet cognoscenda. Est autem alia potentia obedientiae, secundum quam in creatura fieri potest quidquid in ea fieri voluerit creator, et sic intellectus possibilis est in potentia ad futura cognoscenda quaelibet, in quantum scilicet ei possunt divinitus revelari. Talis autem potentia intellectus angelici non est totaliter completa per formas innatas.* St. Thomas often thinks of prophecy as an example of intellectual knowledge received by obediential potency. This is because, in prophecy, no natural passive power is at play. It is not in the nature of the intellect to know the future. What makes it a case of obediential power is therefore not so much that its cause is not a natural agent but rather that the intellect is not naturally in power with regard to the prediction of the future. Since the understanding does not naturally have what it takes to prophesy, prophecy is a miracle: *in natura humana est potentia passiva ad recipiendum lumen propheticum, non naturalis, sed tantum potentia obedientiae, sicut est in natura corporali ad ea quae mirabiliter fiunt; unde non oportet quod sit homini naturalis, quando debitum humanae naturae excedit* (*De veritate*, q. 12, a. 3, ad 18).

be found, as he says, “at a higher level,” that is to say, whether in Christ was the knowledge of the blessed or by comprehension (*ST III*, q. 9, a. 2).⁴⁵

The answer is affirmative, of course: “The knowledge of the blessed consists in the sight or knowledge of God. Now Christ fully knew God, even as a man, according to these words of John 8:55: *I know him, and I keep his word*. The knowledge of the blessed was therefore in Christ.”⁴⁶ It becomes necessary here for the theologian to explain himself as clearly as possible, but he is once again at grips with a case beyond categories, since he has to describe a man, Christ, in a state of beatific vision while in this life. Not only does philosophy know nothing of the sort, but theology itself is embarrassed by it. Let us try, however. This beatifying knowledge does not fit into the first case: no creature, even Christ, has a passive power with regard to an agent intellect capable of beatifying it. As St. Thomas told us, even God cannot do it, because it is impossible. Nor does it fit into the second case: the beatific vision does not consist of some supernatural or prophetic knowledge granted by God to the soul; it is a question this time, as was said previously, of a knowledge in which God makes himself seen in his essence, such as he is. Christ is doubly qualified for this view. First, as man, since man is in potency for the knowledge of the blessed that consists in the vision of God, and to which he is ordered as to his end; let us remember that the rational creature is capable of this blessed knowledge insofar as it is in the image of God. Then, in a very special and truly unique way, because it is through Christ, thanks to the sacrifice of Calvary, that the multitude of God’s children was led to glory (Heb 2:10). “The blessed knowledge, which consists in the sight of God, suited Christ the man most excellently, because the cause is always more than the effect” (*ST III*, q. 9, a. 2).⁴⁷ This third case cannot be reduced to any of the previous ones. And yet, it is a case of natural power reduced to act by a supernatural agent.

45. “*Utrum in Christo fuerit scientia beatorum vel comprehensorum.*”

46. “[S]cientia beatorum in Dei visione vel cognitione consistit. Sed ipse plene cognovit Deum, etiam secundum quod homo, secundum illud Ioan. VIII, scio eum, et sermonem eius seruo. Ergo in Christo fuit scientia beatorum.”

47. “*Et ideo oportuit quod cognitio ipsa in Dei visione consistens excellentissime Christo homini conveniret, quia semper causam oportet esse potiore causato.*”

It would therefore seem that it was a case of obediential potency; why does St. Thomas not say that it is?

It is because it is not a miracle. It seems rather that, like all grace, the beatific vision fulfills the potentiality of nature in the sense of its own perfection. Instead of doing violence to it, like the miracle, it perfects it in its own sense. The reason why Christ was in a state of beatific vision is the very reason why the human intellect is able to be lifted up there and to receive it. Christ had a right to beatitude as a man. The expression “obediential potency” is never very good for nature because the latter does not even have to obey: God does what he wants with it. But the expression is still less satisfactory when the divine operation is exercised in the direction of an intellectual nature, always happy to lend itself to it as to the fulfillment of a wish.⁴⁸

The discussion of this problem has brought us what is probably the most lucid and clear text that St. Thomas ever wrote on the relationship between man and his beatitude. Until this supreme moment, St. Thomas remembers Aristotle. There is a human and created beatitude, that by which the philosopher reaches his natural, temporal, and earthly end here below. Christ, the perfect man, enjoyed this human beatitude perfectly, but since in him the distinction of natures remained in the unity of the person, his soul also shared in a divine light, which conferred on him the beatifying knowledge in which God is seen by its essence. This is what, it seems, is the difficulty of naming it:

The vision or beatific knowledge is in a certain way above the nature of the rational soul, insofar as the latter cannot rise there by its own strength. In another way it is

48. Gilson: There is therefore a risk of interpreting the normal definition of natural power in its strict sense when it must be applied to the beatific vision. The intellect is correctly said to be *in potentia naturali* inasmuch as it is capable of all knowledge that can be discovered by its natural light; it is an obediential potency “*ad illa quae supra naturam Deus in eo potest facere*” (*De veritate*, q. 8, a. 5, ad 13). This is the regular definition of the two powers and it is in this sense that prophecy exceeds the natural power of the intellect. However, it is wrong to say: since the obediential power includes what God can do, in nature, above nature, the beatific vision is a case of the obediential power. In this privileged case, natural power and obediential power are not mutually exclusive, because beatitude is a case of natural power on the side of the subject but of obediential power in relation to the cause. Natural power and obediential power exclude each other in all cases, except this one.

according to its nature, as the soul is capable of it according to its nature, as made in the image of God, as has been said. But uncreated knowledge is above the nature of the human soul in all respects.⁴⁹

I cannot help thinking that this text alone is enough, or should be enough, to settle a controversy that is several centuries old by showing that it is pointless. If we placed ourselves in the presence of those who want the beatific vision to be a case of natural power and of those who want it to be a case of obediential power, we must note that St. Thomas himself holds that neither is fully satisfactory, or rather, he holds that neither of them is right, for neither of the two formulas fits exactly that which they would like to express. The soul is in natural power to beatitude, since the latter fulfills a potentiality of its nature: we have seen that this is so even in the case of Christ. But it is a case of a passive natural power to which no active natural power corresponds; it must therefore be reduced to action by a supernatural—and, to tell the truth, divine—cause, as if it were a case of obediential power. It is not one, however, because the obediential power is not nature in potentiality to its own perfection, whereas the beatific vision is eminently a case of actualization of a power in accord with its nature: *secundum naturam*. The unique character of the case further explains that the superior cause can always add to it the perfection of the power that it actualizes, as if it were a case of obediential potency,⁵⁰ although this power is brought thereby

49. Gilson: Here is the actual text of this decisive passage: “*dicendum quod visio seu scientia beata est quodam modo supra naturam animae rationalis, inquantum scilicet propria virtute ad eam pervenire non potest. Alio vero modo est secundum naturam ipsius, inquantum scilicet per naturam suam est capax eius, prout scilicet ad imaginem Dei facta est, ut supra dictum est. Sed scientia increata est omnibus modis supra naturam animae humanae*” (ST III, q. 9, a. 2, ad 3). One must have already understood the doctrine to appreciate the perfection of the formula. Everything is there. We will particularly note the reminder of the doctrinal theme of the image, itself inseparable from that of the nobility of the intellect. It was not fitting that a nature as noble as man, an intellectual substance, should remain incapable of achieving its natural end; God therefore decided to raise him there.

50. Gilson: It is from this point of view that we understand the following text, which brings into play a very important principle in the eyes of St. Thomas: “*Capacitas creaturae dicitur secundum potentiam receptibilitatis quae est in ipsa. Est autem duplex potentia creaturae ad recipiendum. Una naturalis quae potest tota impleri; quia haec non se extendit nisi ad perfectiones naturales. Alia est potentia obedientiae, secundum quod potest recipere aliquid a Deo; et talis capacitas non potest*

into perfect act, as in a case of natural power, because the blessed have nothing more to desire. The wisest thing is therefore to renounce the controversy, because from the fact that beatitude is not a case of natural power, it does not follow that it is one of obediential power, nor vice versa. It is certainly interesting and instructive to know how and why the controversy arose, but that is another matter. The history of Thomism is not always that of St. Thomas Aquinas. □

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impleri, quia quidquid Deus de creatura faciat, adhuc remanet in potentia recipiendi a Deo" (*De veritate*, q. 24, a. 3, ad 3). The text is indisputable and says exactly what these two kinds of power are for St. Thomas, but this is why neither natural nor obediential power applies correctly to the beatific vision. In fact, none of the examples we encounter call it into question, because it draws from both. Those who see the divine substance see everything (*SCG III*, 59); this felicity totally fulfills man's desire (*SCG III*, 63), as if it were indeed a natural desire. But one saint in Heaven can see God more perfectly than another, although all see his substance; everything then happens as if it were a case of obediential potency, because no created intellect can "understand" the divine substance, as the finite cannot understand the infinite. It is therefore correct that, in the beatific vision as in any case of obedient potency, "*quidquid Deus de creatura faciat, adhuc remanet in potentia recipiendi a Deo*." This is not, however, a case of obediential potency pure and simple, because what God gives is then what nature is of itself willing to attain, and capable of receiving. We would like to correct in this sense the note of *The Spirit of Thomism* (P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1964), 116n35.