

GOD AND ORDER IN THOMAS AQUINAS

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SUMMARY: 1. *A Historical Note On Twentieth Century Thomism*. 2. *An Overview of Aquinas on Order*. 3. *The Natural Knowledge of God's Existence*. 4. *Wisdom: Human and Divine*. 5. *Conclusion*.

ALTHOUGH the notion of order is obviously fundamental to Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics and natural theology, the topic of order goes overlooked in most Thomistic metaphysics books of the twentieth century. Standard (and good) works typically treat of act, potency, essence, existence, the real distinction, the composition of all finite being, analogy, substance, accident, causality, and sometimes participation, but it is uncommon for a book or article to thematize *order* for our contemplation.¹ Charles De Koninck, Oliva Blanchette, and Ralph McInerny are some noteworthy exceptions, but they are exceptions.² Reading many works of Thomistic metaphysics, one is left with the impression that metaphysics begins and ends with general metaphysics-

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¹ For example, R. GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE's *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*, (Herder, St. Louis 1950), has no chapter on order, but like Aquinas mentions order a great deal. Norris Clarke's *The One and the Many* does not study order as such, but in keeping with Aquinas's thought the book leads up to a contemplation of the order of *ens commune*. J. WIPPEL's *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2000, has no chapter on order. E. FESER's *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, (Editiones Scholasticae, Neunkirchen-Seelscheid 2014), also has no chapter dealing with order.

² See: *The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists; The Principle of the New Order*, in *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, Vol. 2, Trans. R. McInerny, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 2009, pp. 63-163; *The Cosmos*, *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, Vol. 1., Trans. R. McInerny, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 2008, pp. 235-354; O. BLANCHETTE, *The Perfection of the Universe According to Aquinas: A Teleological Cosmology*, (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA 1992), and IDEM, *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2002, ch. 9; R. MCINERNY, *Preambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2006, pp. ch. 11. For a theological treatment, see also J.H. WRIGHT, *The Order of the Universe in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*. (Rome, Gregorian University Press, 1957).

ics rather than going on to fulfillment in natural theological contemplation of the order of all things under God or of God as ordering all things.

The purpose of this paper is to make order thematic as a part of metaphysical study. I will also try to show how a consideration of order sheds some light on topics such as the natural knowledge of God and the nature of wisdom human and divine. More specifically, I intend to argue that for Aquinas all natural knowledge of God begins from the contemplation of world order and that the order of creation is where the wisdom of God meets the wisdom-seeking of human beings.

In the first section I offer a brief historical note on twentieth century existential Thomism in order to motivate and contextualize our consideration of the metaphysics of order. In the second section, I offer an overview of Aquinas's metaphysics of order. In the third section, I discuss the natural knowledge of God in light of the theme of world order. In the final section, I discuss wisdom both human and divine.

1. A HISTORICAL NOTE ON TWENTIETH CENTURY THOMISM

In this section, I want to motivate a deeper study of order by making a historical observation about Thomistic metaphysics of the twentieth century.

Two of the most prominent and influential Thomists of the twentieth century were Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. In response to the existentialist movement of their day, they advanced what is commonly called an existential Thomism.

Gilson argued on historical grounds that Aquinas had a distinctive and historically unmatched metaphysical doctrine. Every other metaphysician in history, according to Gilson, had made the mistake of identifying being (*esse*) with a more specific form of being (i.e., with a genus within *ens commune*). But the real distinction between essence and existence, the metaphysically composite character of all finite being, and the limitation of existence by essence were distinctively Thomas's own metaphysical discoveries, and these unique insights helped him to avoid the reductionism that every other metaphysician had fallen into.³

Maritain argued on philosophical grounds that Thomism is an existentialism all its own. Aquinas held that truth is primarily in the judgment, and judgment restores abstracted essences to the existential order. All living things are mortal, not only in the very essence or concept of "living thing", but in the living things themselves in existence. Moreover, Maritain emphasized, metaphysics as a science of being as being is a knowledge of the existential order,

³ Such is the argument of É. GILSON, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 1952.

born originally from experiencing the existential order. Metaphysics is not just an *a priori* exercise of analyzing abstracted essences, concepts, or ideas into their constitutive parts and elaborating a set of necessary truths. It is not even an analysis of the *idea* or *concept* of being. It is rather a reflection upon and articulation of being as existing.⁴

In their impressive and important works, Gilson and Maritain brought to light the metaphysics of *esse* in Aquinas. They pointed to something worth pondering: being as existential act. With the emphasis on being as existential act, however, it seems to me that other important metaphysical themes in Aquinas were overlooked. For example, the theme of participation seems to have gone largely overlooked until Cornelio Fabro and L.B. Geiger to made participation thematic for metaphysical study among Thomists.⁵ The theme of *order*, I want to suggest, is another example.

Gilson and Maritain tended to contemplate the existential order *as existential*. In so doing they tended to overlook the existential order *as order*.⁶ Yet, for Aquinas, it is the contemplation of the existential order *as order* that leads the human being to the highest contemplation of all: God and his attributes, i.e. natural theology. The natural desire to understand is not fulfilled by general metaphysics, but by natural theology as the contemplation of the order of all things as manifesting God.

Some twentieth Thomists discussed order as such, but rarely. Charles De Koninck wrote extensively on it.⁷ Oliva Banchette, moreover, has shown that for Aquinas the order of the world as a whole is perfected when human beings rise from the contemplation of world order to the contemplation of the God who orders it, and also that God created the universe as an order for just this end: so that by the order of the universe God might manifest himself and his attributes to some extent to human beings who care to contemplate the order of it all.⁸ In the order of things, God is near to us, showing himself to us (to some extent), and God has endowed human beings with a desire to know him by contemplating that order. These are profound meta-

⁴ Such is the argument of J. MARITAIN's *Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism*, Translated by L. Galantière and G.B. Phelan, Doubleday, New York 1956.

⁵ C. FABRO, *Participation et causalité selon s. Thomas d'Aquin*, Publications universitaires de Louvain, Paris-Louvain 1961. L.B. GEIGER, *La participation dans la philosophie de s. Thomas d'Aquin*, Vrin, Paris 1942, 1953².

⁶ This is not to criticize Gilson and Maritain or existential Thomism alone for overlooking order. Although Aristotelian and Transcendental Thomists tend to discuss it more, it was uncommon in the twentieth century for any Thomists to discuss order.

⁷ Charles de Koninck's writings on order prompted Ralph McInerny to call de Koninck the "Philosopher of Order". See R. MCINERNY's, *Charles De Koninck: A Philosopher of Order*, «The New Scholasticism», 39/4, (October, 1965), pp. 491-516.

⁸ O. BLANCHETTE, *The Perfection of the Universe According to Aquinas: A Teleological Cosmology*, cit.

physical and anthropological statements about the ultimate final causes of creation and human existence, yet their truth comes to light only by considering deeply the existential order *as an order*. The contemplation of the existential order as an order, therefore, promises deep fulfillment of both human beings and the cosmos. So, I turn now to provide an overview of Aquinas's metaphysics of order.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF AQUINAS ON ORDER

The overview offered here claims in no way to be exhaustive, but just to present a few key points in Aquinas's metaphysics of order. I will italicize the key points to highlight them for consideration. These key points will help illuminate in the next sections topics such as the natural knowledge of God and wisdom human and divine. I proceed by considering (a) the definition of order, (b) the existence of order, (c) two divisions of order, and (d) wisdom.

(a) *The Definition of Order*. In every *ordo* there are many things related or arranged in some definite way, but an order is more than just any arrangement of a plurality. What more is there? If one throws several marbles on the ground, they fall into various locations. Each marble is related to each other, and they fall into a determinate arrangement. But whatever that arrangement may be, it is strikingly different than if one had arranged the marbles on the ground in a circle. What is the difference in the two arrangements?

In one of the rare articles (in English) on order in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Brian Coffey points out that in every order, many things are related to something first. Based on several passages of Aquinas, Coffey offered a definition of order that we can make our own.⁹ According to his definition, we can say *order is the arrangement of a plurality of things or objects according to anteriority and posteriority in virtue of a principle*.

Let us now reconsider the case of the marbles. Although the marbles scattered on the ground are related to each other in an arrangement, the arrangement has no first or organizing principle. The marbles arranged in a circle, however, are related to each other by virtue of a principle, i.e. the center of the circle. (The center is the formal principle of their arrangement, the person placing them in a circle is the efficient principle of the arrangement.)

From Coffey's definition, there seems to follow two important points that will appear later. *Wherever there is a principle there is an order and wherever there is an order there must be a principle*. The latter claim is very important for our purposes. When applied to specifically causal orders, it seems to imply that *every causal order has a first cause*. We find something like this in Aquinas's own

⁹ B. COFFEY, *The Notion of Order According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, «The Modern Schoolman», 37/1 (1949), pp. 1-18. The principle is on p. 7.

words when discussing natural knowledge of the existence of God at SCG III c.38 n.1: «*there is no order without an orderer*».

(b) *The Existence of Order*. A study of the term “ordo” in Deferrari’s lexicon¹⁰ and the *Index Thomisticus* shows how Aquinas refers to a variety of orders. Aquinas refers to the order of agents, the order of ends, the order of formal cause or essence, the order of material cause, the order of causes (without qualification), the order of composition, the order of resolution, the order of intention, the order of execution, the order of apprehension, the orders of due (*debitum*), dignity, location, duration, generation, time, justice, politics, reason, right reason, nature, and more. He speaks of particular orders, universal orders, accidental orders, orders *per se*, higher orders, lower orders, the order of things (*rerum*), the order of understanding, the order of things to understanding, the order of the will, the order of necessity, and the order of congruity. To give some familiar theological examples, Aquinas also speaks of the order of the celestial hierarchy and ecclesiastical hierarchy including the particular orders of angels, deacons, priests, bishops, and sacraments. From all this one can see that for Aquinas *there are many orders in reality*. More than this, I would suggest, *reality presents itself as a manifold of order*.

One order in particular is worth noting with care: the order of the universe. Aquinas refers to this order many times.¹¹ When speaking of the order of the universe, he often also speaks of its beauty and harmony.¹² Yet, nowhere does he offer a proof *an sit* that the universe or world of Nature is an order. He seems to take the order of the universe, as well as its beauty and harmony, as an observable given. This leads to another key point. *The universe is an order*. Aquinas’s most extensive account of the order of the universe is in *In Meta.*, Bk. XII, lec.12, where he discusses the unity of order.¹³ In this lecture, Aquinas

¹⁰ Cfr. R.J. DEFERRARI, *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Daughters of St. Paul, Boston 1960, pp. 738-741.

¹¹ For example, *In Meta.*, XII l.12. For a sample of other places, see: *SCG.*, I c. 70 n. 4; *ST.*, I q. 15 a. 2 resp.; *QDV.*, q. 2 a. 2 resp.; *De Pot.*, a. 3 a. 18 resp.; *De substantiis separatis*, c. 15. All translations of Aquinas are my own unless otherwise noted. Abbreviations for references to texts of Aquinas:

<i>CT</i>	<i>Compendium theologiae</i>
<i>QDV</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de veritate</i>
<i>De Pot.</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei</i>
<i>In Div. Nom.</i>	<i>Super librum Dionysii de divinis nominibus</i>
<i>In Meta.</i>	<i>Sententia super Metaphysicam</i>
<i>In Nic. Eth.</i>	<i>Sententia libri Ethicorum</i>
<i>SCG</i>	<i>Summa contra gentiles</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa theologiae</i>

¹² *De Pot.*, III q. 16 resp.; *CT*, c. 102; *In Div. Nom.*, c. 7 l.4.

¹³ See R. MCINERNEY, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2006, ch. 11.

nas expands upon Aristotle's contentions that the universe is an order, that it is one order, and that it has its good both in its own order and in a separated good, i.e. God. Aquinas advances all three of these claims in some of his own works, as we shall below.

(c) *Two Divisions of Order*. In the opening lecture of Aquinas's *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* we find a short but dense account of order in general. This passage is valuable for two reasons. Because it stands at the head of the commentary, before proceeding to the comments properly speaking, it can fairly be said to be Aquinas's own thought. It is also valuable for its generality. He offers two divisions of order in general that are worth our consideration.

The first is a division of order in itself. «*Order in things (in rebus) is twofold: part-to-whole and means-to-end*». ¹⁴ Aquinas is claiming that every order of finite things is either a part-whole arrangement or a means-end arrangement. ¹⁵ The opposite seems inconceivable: an order of finite things that is neither a part-whole arrangement nor a means-end arrangement. Someone may propose mathematical orders as a counterexample, e.g. the natural numbers. Are they a part-whole arrangement? Aquinas commonly uses talk of part and whole to cover a whole range of things having obviously different ontological statuses. A chair is a whole with parts, a human being is part soul and part body, and definitions have parts, i.e. genus, differentia, individual, etc.. Given this broad and analogical sense of "whole" and "part," then whether the natural numbers are Platonic entities, members of a set, or discrete quantities of substances, they can be called parts of a whole.

After offering the division of order in itself, Aquinas goes on in the opening of the *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* to claim that «*it is proper to reason to know order*». ¹⁶ In the passage, Aquinas is distinguishing reason from the senses. Since powers of the soul are distinguished by their acts, and acts by their objects, reason is distinguished from sense because reason knows order and sense does not. The claim may be understood generally in regard to various acts of the intellect. In the act of simple apprehension, the intellect apprehends the order in things and between things. When we apprehend (or rather deeply understand) the form of a sensible thing such as a horse, we grasp the order in the horse, i.e. the parts, their operations, and the ends of the parts and whole. When we apprehend horseback riding, we grasp an order between horse and rider. We can even apprehend and explore, it seems,

¹⁴ *In Nic. Eth.*, Bk. 1 l.1 n. 1. Obviously, the italics are mine.

¹⁵ It is important to note that Aquinas here speaks of the order in things. Taking a thing (*res*) to be a finite being, the division does not apply to God, and so leaves open the possibility that the Trinity can be called an order in some sense that is neither part-whole or means-end (i.e. an order of processions). Thanks to Simon Gaine, O.P. for raising the question of order in the Trinity for me in conversation.

¹⁶ *In Nic. Eth.*, c. 1 l. n. 1.

the order of the entire universe. This is what Aristotle and Aquinas undertake in *In Meta.* XII L.12.¹⁷ In the act of judgment, when the speculative intellect affirms a *per se* truth, the intellect affirms a causal order between the things signified by the subject and predicate. In the act of perfect demonstration, reason reproduces in itself, in the order of the terms of the syllogism, the same causal order as reality itself.¹⁸ In the various acts of prudential reason, the intellect aims to order action in accord with reason. In various works of art, practical reason puts order in artifacts. Wherever the proper activity of human intellect or reason is going on, it seems, the person is either coming to know the order of things or to choose according to the order of things or to make an order in things. Aquinas unfolds all this in more detail as follows.

In light of the claim that it is proper to reason to know order, Aquinas offers a second major division of order. «*Order is related to human reason in a fourfold way*».¹⁹

Aquinas says that for each of the four ways that order relates to reason there is a particular order, and a corresponding philosophical discipline to study that particular order. Let us consider each of these orders in turn.

First, *there is an order that reason does not establish but only beholds*. Of the four orders that Aquinas identifies, one precedes reason and three proceed from reason. The order that precedes reason is one that we do not create, invent, establish, or produce. We merely behold it. He calls it the order of things in nature (*ordo rerum naturalia*). Taking for granted that nature is an order of things, Aquinas says it belongs to natural philosophy and to metaphysics to study the order of things in themselves. He makes a point of saying that it belongs not only to natural philosophy, but also to metaphysics, to study the order of beings.²⁰

Second, *there is an order that reason establishes in its own act of consideration when it arranges its concepts and signs of concepts among themselves*. Aquinas acknowledges that we can step back from beholding the order of things, reflect upon our own cognitive operation, and behold the concepts and signs that we use. What we behold by so reflecting upon our cognition are “beings of reason”. We can then establish an order or arrangement among our own beings of reason, our concepts and signs. It is the work of logic to arrange our concepts and signs in an orderly way, and establish an order to them that otherwise would not be there.

Third, *there is an order that reason establishes in the operations of the will or voluntary acts*. Aquinas thinks of practical intellect as reflecting upon our own

¹⁷ *In Meta.*, 12 l.12 n. 2627.

¹⁸ See J. JENKINS, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, ch. 1 for a summary treatment of causal ordering in demonstrative reasoning.

¹⁹ *In Nic. Eth.*, c. 1 l. n. 1.

²⁰ *In Nic. Eth.*, c.1 l. n. 2.

voluntary acts, and giving order or form to those acts. When we reflect upon and order our own acts well in the middle of acting, i.e. when we act prudently, our acts are woven into a good and intelligible life story. It belongs to moral philosophy to step back from the kind of reflection that goes on in acting, i.e. prudential reflection, and speculatively study the ordering of voluntary acts in order to cultivate and facilitate prudence and other virtues. In this way, philosophy contributes something to real life, i.e. to practical affairs. It helps human beings to order our acts well, and live so as to perfect our human nature and reach our true end as human beings.

Fourth, *there is an order that reason in planning establishes in external things which it causes, e.g. a chest or a house*. The world is full of objects or artifacts that human beings have made. Aquinas acknowledges a technological order. What is the technological order? The question is latent with potential for clarification and development. Does Aquinas mean merely that each individual artifact has an order that we give to it or does he mean that all our artifacts together have an order among them, i.e. there is “a world of artifacts”? From his words, we cannot rule out the latter as a possible reading. The distinction between the technological order and moral order sets up for a philosophical or moral reflection upon technology. What is the world of artifacts? It is one thing to ask how we shape artifacts, but how do they shape us? Does the world of artifacts obscure the order of nature from our view?²¹ Does the order of artifacts have some sort of life of its own? How do we live with or in the world of artifacts?

(d) *Wisdom*. Having viewed the four ways that order relates to reason, we are in a position to say what *wisdom* is. *Wisdom considers the highest causes of world order*. On Aquinas’s account of human cognition, human beings naturally seek to understand the causes of the proper attributes of the various kinds of things around us. We want to know why human beings do what they do, why animals do what they do, why living things do what they do, and why material things do what they do, etc. This process of inquiring into the causes of increasingly more extensive categories leads eventually to asking after the causes of the most extensive class of all, namely, being (*ens commune*). It is the contemplation of the order of all things that leads to the inquiry into the first principle or highest cause of all things, and so it is such contemplation that leads to wisdom. For wisdom «considers the highest causes».²² When one has

²¹ For the claim that the order of technology obscures our sense of the natural order, and the attempt to recover by phenomenological reflection a sense of the order of nature, see E. KOHAK, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984.

²² *ST.*, I-II q. 57 a. 2 resp. For a discussion of Aquinas on wisdom, see E. STUMP, *Aquinas*, Routledge, New York 2003, ch. 11.

found the highest causes, one is in a position to read the world, so to speak, in light of the highest causes. If one thinks that matter is the highest cause, for example, then one will see persons and everything else in the world as just matter. If one thinks that God is the highest cause, then one will see and speak of persons and everything else quite differently. Such is the primacy and value of wisdom or one's account of the highest cause. In sum, wisdom is an understanding of the order of all things in light of the highest causes.

Another point to make about wisdom is an Aristotelian principle often quoted by Aquinas. *It belongs to wisdom to order.*²³ Wisdom not only considers or contemplates the highest causes of world order, but wisdom puts things in order and directs them according to an order. We have seen that human wisdom puts order into our own human notions, acts, and artifacts, but human wisdom does not put order into the order of nature. The wisdom of God, however, not only beholds the order of nature, but puts order in it. God creates nature as an order and directs the world according to God's pre-understanding of the order of things, i.e. according to divine providence.²⁴ All these claims lead to the topic of the natural knowledge of God.

3. THE NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

Thomas Aquinas is well known for the claim that human beings have a natural knowledge of God, or a knowledge of God by the light of human reason apart from faith and divine revelation. But Aquinas makes a puzzling set of remarks on the natural knowledge of God. On the one hand, Aquinas says that all or nearly all human beings have some knowledge of God.²⁵ On the other hand, he says that only a few people, after a long period of time, and still with an admixture of error have a knowledge of God by the light of reason alone.²⁶ In order to resolve these apparently conflicting claims, Thomists commonly distinguish between pre-philosophical knowledge of God and properly philosophical knowledge of God.²⁷ The former is a general and confused knowledge, and all or nearly all people are aware of the existence of God in that way. The latter is a conceptually sophisticated and logically rigorous knowledge of God, and only a few people – philosophers – know the existence of God in that way. The purpose of this section is to show that for

²³ SCG., I c. 1 is but one example of the appeal to the directive function of wisdom.

²⁴ For an account of divine providence as God's pre-understanding on the order of the world, see ST., I q. 21.

²⁵ ST., I. q. 2 a. 1 ad 1 & SCG., III c. 38.

²⁶ SCG., I c. 4.

²⁷ See for example: J. MARITAIN, *A New Approach to God*, in IDEM, *The Range of Reason*, Scribner & Sons, New York 1945; R. MCINERNEY, *From Shadows and Images to the Truth*, in P. KWASNIEWSKI (edited by), *Wisdom's Apprentice: Thomistic Essays in Honor of Lawrence Dewan*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2007.

Aquinas the contemplation of world order is the starting point for *both* forms of the natural knowledge of God.

We begin with a remark that Aquinas makes about the natural knowledge of God in general. Here is Aquinas commenting on pseudo-Dionysius:

«We know God, but not through his nature, as if seeing his nature: for his essence is unknown to creatures and exceeds not only the senses, but also all human reason and every angelic mind... We do not, therefore, know God by seeing his essence, but from the order of the whole universe. For the whole of creatures is displayed to us by God so that we may know him, for the ordered universe has some likeness and faint resemblance to the divine nature to which it is compared as an image to its principle exemplar. Thus, from the consideration of the ordered universe we ascend in degrees, so far as we are able, by our intellect to God who is above all, and this in three ways».²⁸

In the passage, Aquinas clearly says that we know the existence of God from the order of the whole universe, and that the universe has the order it does in order to manifest God's existence and attributes to us (though God's essence never becomes manifest to us in this life). Starting from the order of the universe we ascend to God's existence (by the ways of negation, eminence, and causality). Even when not commenting on Dionysius, when writing in treatises properly his own, Aquinas makes similar claims: «Scripture urges us to look at the stars, since their order (*dispositio*) maximally shows how everything is subject to the will and providence of the creator».²⁹ In these texts, there is no indication that Aquinas is speaking specifically of either pre-philosophical knowledge of God or philosophically demonstrative knowledge of God. He says simply, without qualification, that the natural knowledge of God comes from considering the order of the universe. Let us now consider the two forms of natural knowledge of God respectively: pre-philosophical and properly philosophical.

Concerning the pre-philosophical knowledge of God's existence, Aquinas thinks that all or nearly all people by nature have a general and confused knowledge of God. When discussing this sort of knowledge of God, Aquinas sometimes refers to a pre-philosophical knowledge of God based on goodness and sometimes to a pre-philosophical knowledge of God based on order.³⁰ Here is his discussion of the matter in terms of order in *SCG* III c. 38:

«For there is a common and confused knowledge of God which is present in about (*quasi*) all human beings; this is either because it is self-evident... as some have held, or, what seems more to be true, because by natural reason humans can at once (*stat-*

²⁸ *In Div. Nom.*, c. 7 l. 4.

²⁹ *De Pot.*, q. 3 a. 17 resp.; See also: *SCG.*, I c. 13 n. 35.

³⁰ For the natural knowledge of God from goodness or beatitude see *ST.*, I. q. 2 a. 1 ad 1; *SCG.*, I c. 11 n. 6.

im) arrive at some sort of knowledge of God. For, when human beings see that things in nature run according to a definite order, and that ordering does not occur without an orderer, they perceive in most cases that there is some orderer of the things that we see. But who or what kind of being, or whether there is only one orderer of nature, is not yet grasped immediately in this general consideration». ³¹

Perceiving the order of the universe, and *implicitly* in conjunction with the principle that every order has a first principle, most people spontaneously see that there must be a first principle of world order.³² People commonly say about the world “there has to be *something* behind it all”. From the order of the world one knows *that* there is at least one principle of world order, a “something”, without yet knowing distinctly *what* this something is or even whether it is one or many. Now for Aquinas, since the principle of world order is God, by knowing that a principle of world order exists, by knowing that *something* has to be there behind it all, one knows God (though perhaps without realizing it, and without yet knowing him distinctly as God). The pre-philosophical knowledge of God can be so vague and confused that one knows God, but does not necessarily know God by the name of “God.” The main thing to notice in the above passage is that the natural knowledge of God, in its imperfect of pre-philosophical form, begins from the consideration of the order of the universe.

Now we must ask whether this pre-philosophical knowledge of the principle or world order is inferential knowledge or not. The question has been asked, and it is difficult.³³ In the passage, Aquinas does contrast this type of knowledge of God with the claim that the existence of God is self-evident, and says it seems more true that even in this common and confused knowledge we arrive at the knowledge of God by natural *reason*. I take “reason” to mean here the power of reasoning or inference. Nonetheless, he also says we arrive at this knowledge *statim* – at once. Although we, thinking as philosophers, can spell out such pre-philosophical natural knowledge of God in argumentative form, while the ordinary person does not necessarily spell out the reasoning in such explicit form. The whole point of distinguishing pre-philosophical

³¹ SCG., III c. 38 n. 1.

³² In a survey of ten thousand Americans, when asked why did they you believe in God, the most common answer (at 28.6% of believers) was the “good design / natural beauty / perfection / complexity of the world or universe” as their own reason for believing in God. In so answering, those surveyed are manifesting the sort of knowledge Aquinas points to here (but they are manifesting it in statistically fewer cases than Aquinas thought people have such knowledge). See survey results at <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2006/08/Who-Believes-In-God-And-Why.aspx?p=2>.

³³ A. PLANTINGA, *Reason and Belief in God*, in J.F. SENNETT (edited by), *The Analytic Theist*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1998, ch. 5, and A. PLANTINGA, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000.

sophical from properly philosophical knowledge of God is to suggest that the former is not so conceptually explicit or logically rigorous as the philosopher's arguments. Pondering the world one day, an ordinary person may just spontaneously think or say "there must be *something* behind it all" without being able to say why he or she thinks so. There may be no *explicit* reasoning at all or the reasoning may well be as general and as confused as is the knowledge we are talking about. Although it is vague and confused, and perhaps unnoticed or barely noticed as reasoning, this pre-philosophical knowledge is a starting point of inquiry into the existence of God. It gives recurring food for thought, and coupled with the innate desire to understand it can drive a person to elaborate philosophically sophisticated arguments for the existence of God as a way of trying to put into words what one knows in a more primordial way. One could say that the pre-philosophical knowledge of God is like a seed that, when planted in the mind of someone with philosophical interest, time, and aptitude grows into properly philosophical knowledge of God.

Concerning such properly philosophical knowledge of God, it too begins from the contemplation of order. This may sound strange to some Thomists. After all, do not Aquinas's "five ways" begin from the observations of motion, efficient causation, contingent being, participated being, or the teleological orientation of things in nature? There are two things to say in response.

First, Aquinas does provide some philosophical arguments for the existence (or providence) of God based on the observation of the order of the world as a whole. We find the argument from world order, for example, in *SCG* I c.13 n.35, And we find a similar argument from world order for the providence of God in *SCG* III c.64 n.6. And a more extensive version of similar reasoning may be found in *In Meta.* XII L.12.

Second, and more importantly, let us note that each of Aquinas's five ways retains a feature of what he says when speaking generally of the natural knowledge of God. When speaking generally, he says that the natural knowledge of God starts from observing the *order* of the world.³⁴ Once one passes from pre-philosophical knowledge to properly philosophical knowledge, it seems to me, that starting point of the natural knowledge of God is not discarded but clarified in terms of more specific orders of reality. In the five ways, I want to suggest, each argument starts not from the order of the world, but from a specific order *in* the world. The first way begins with the observation that "*in the world*" some things are in motion. The second way starts explicitly from the "*order of efficient causes*," the fourth way from the "*gradation in things*," and the fifth way from "*governance of the world*." Although the third way does not refer so explicitly to an order as such, Aquinas in fact points to things in the order of generation and corruption. It seems, therefore, that

³⁴ See again the passage of *In Div. Nom.*, c. 7 l.4 quoted above.

each of the properly philosophical arguments for God's existence is, in a way more conceptually sophisticated and logically rigorous than pre-philosophical knowledge of God, an argument from order.

In sum, therefore, we can say that both forms of the natural knowledge of God, both pre-philosophical and properly philosophical, begin from a contemplation of the order of the world. Pre-philosophical knowledge begins from a contemplation of the order of the world as a whole, and leads to a general and confused knowledge of God. Properly philosophical inquiry develops and clarifies one's pre-philosophical knowledge of God, and rigorously elaborates argument for the existence of God based either on the premise that the universe as a whole is an order or on the premise regarding a more specific order in the universe. We can say that the natural knowledge of God begins remotely (in the order of one's cognitive development) from the contemplation of the order of the world, and it begins proximately (in the logical order of explicit premises and conclusion) from either the order of the world or various orders in the world.

Realizing that the contemplation of order is the starting point for natural knowledge of the existence of God might be important in addressing those who find Aquinas's five ways or other arguments of natural theology unconvincing. Instead of simply rehearsing again the premises and principles with more conceptual precision, Thomists might in phenomenological fashion return to the original (remote, cognitive developmental) starting point of the arguments. Perhaps a new strategy for presenting Aquinas's cosmological arguments would be to return to the primordial contemplation of world order in general, and offer a way for others to do the same, so that we can all connect again with the soil from which cosmological reasoning first springs.³⁵

4. WISDOM: HUMAN AND DIVINE

Wisdom considers the highest causes of world and also puts all things in order. The purpose of this section is to spell out how for Aquinas the order of the world is *from* the wisdom of God and is *for* the wisdom of human beings. The order of the world is meant by God to be the way by which the creature returns to God.

The wisdom of God, also called his *providence*, is God's pre-understanding of the order of all things:

«Good is found in things not only as regards their substance, but also with respect to their order towards an end and especially their last end, which, as was said above,

³⁵ For an example of such a phenomenology, see E. KOHAK, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984.

is the divine goodness. This good of order existing in created things, is itself created by God. Since, however, God is the cause of things by His intellect, and it must be (*oportet*) that the type (*ratio*) of every effect should pre-exist in Him, as is clear from what has gone before, it is necessary that the type of the order of things to their end should pre-exist in the divine mind: and the type of things ordered towards an end is, properly, providence». ³⁶

On Aquinas's account of God's knowledge, will, and creation, God first beholds himself, and in seeing himself beholds himself as giving being to all created things. He sees all created things in particular and as a whole: their existence, attributes, operations, and ends. ³⁷ He sees both their particular ends and the end of all of them combined. He creates many diverse creatures with a specific end in view for them.

Why does God create many diverse things? Aquinas answers:

«Hence we must say that the distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For he brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and since by one creature he cannot be sufficiently represented, he produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever». ³⁸

This passage, taken from the *Summa theologiae*, offers a “top-down” or theological account of why there are many diverse creatures. From the passage we gather two important points. First, God created things in order to represent himself or to manifest himself. Second, since each created thing falls far short of manifesting or representing God, God created many and diverse things in order to manifest himself all the more.

How does the creation of many diverse things in an order manifest God's existence and attributes? A passage in the *Summa contra gentiles* shows us how by offering a “bottom up” approach or philosophical argument concerning the order of the many different creatures. From the contemplation of the many different and diverse creatures that form a single world order one can arrive at a knowledge of a first orderer of all things. In argumentation for the reality of divine providence, Aquinas says:

³⁶ ST., I q. 22 a. 1 resp.

³⁷ See my article *God's Knowledge and Will*, in E. STUMP and B. DAVIES (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

³⁸ ST., I q. 47 a. 1 resp. Here I follow closely the translation of the English Dominicans: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, Translated by the Dominican Fathers of the English Province, Benziger Bros., New York 1948.

«Furthermore, things that are different in their natures do not come together into one order unless they are gathered into a unit by one ordering agent. But in the whole of reality things are distinct and possessed of contrary natures; yet all come together in one order, and while some things make use of the actions of others, some are also helped or commanded by others. Therefore, there must be one orderer and governor of the whole of things». ³⁹

Whether this argument truly delivers divine providence as its conclusion is questionable, but it is safe to say that it is an argument for the existence of a single principle of the ordering all creatures in the world. By offering this argument, Aquinas shows how a created person can move from contemplating the order of many diverse things to the principle of that order, i.e. to God.

For Aquinas, the ultimate point of the orderly universe of many different created things is so that created persons, by contemplating the order of it all, might come to know God and his attributes to some extent. Although I cannot here elaborate the whole teleological cosmology contained in this statement, it suffices to say that for Aquinas the final cause of world order is the manifestation of God and his attributes. Aquinas says: «the whole of creatures is displayed to us by God so that we may know him». ⁴⁰ And in discussing why God made a world of many and diverse creatures, Aquinas answers by saying it is so that human beings may rise from knowing the order, beauty, and harmony of the world to knowing something of the God who orders it. ⁴¹ In the wisdom of God, the order of the world displays God and his attributes to human beings in some small way, and this was to summon us to wisdom, i.e. to contemplate the order of the world in order to find the highest cause of all.

5. CONCLUSION

My aim in writing this paper has been to motivate more consideration of *order* as a metaphysical theme in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, metaphysics is not meant to remain at the level of general metaphysics in which one considers the (important) topics of substance-accident, potency-act, essence-existence, analogy, participation, cause, etc. Metaphysics is meant to go on to fulfillment in the natural theological consideration of God as the highest cause of the order of the world. In this way, metaphysics or natural theology is meant to be wisdom. Unfortunately, Thomists have rarely discussed order as such even though it is clear that for Aquinas the order of the world is how God displays his wisdom to us and summons us to share in that

³⁹ SCG., III c. 64 n. 6. I use the translation of Vernon Bourke here: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Translated by V. Bourke, University of Notre Dame Press, South Bend (Indiana) 1975.

⁴⁰ *In Div. Nom.*, c. 7 l. 4.

⁴¹ *De Pot.*, q. 3 a. 17 resp.; *ST.*, I q. 47 a. 1.

wisdom by the natural knowledge of God (and, of course, by theological and infused wisdom as well). The topic of order is in fact so vast in the writings of Aquinas that this paper must settle with merely pointing it out for further contemplation.

ABSTRACT: Although the notion of order is everywhere in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, especially in major claims about the starting point of the natural knowledge of God and the final end of the cosmos, works on the metaphysics of Aquinas have not commonly discussed order in an explicit way. After making a point about existential Thomism, the purpose of this paper is to thematize order for our consideration, provide an elementary sketch of a metaphysics of order, and show how the theme of order figures into topics such as the natural knowledge of God, the final end of the cosmos, and wisdom.

KEYWORDS: *Thomas Aquinas, Natural Theology, knowledge of God, metaphysics, order, wisdom, providence, creation.*