Thomas Aquinas and the Search for His Original Insight

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For Rolf Schönberger, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday.

"[Despite the insufficiency of natural means needed to attain their perfection], human beings are ordered to a higher end. Even if human beings stand in need of manifold external aids in order to attain this end, and even though their natural resources are insufficient to reach this goal on their own, nonetheless human beings are still more perfect than more self-sufficient creatures."

—Thomas Aquinas[1]

"This [lack of instinctual determination and of the basic self-sufficiency of any isolated individual] is on account of the nobility of human beings and the comparative innobility of other animals, as you will soon see further below."

—Avicenna[2]

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1 Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 10, ad 5.

2 Avicenna Latinus, *Liber de anima seu sextus de naturalibus* V, chap. 1, ed. Simone Van Riet (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 70 (lines 14–17). The entire first chapter (69–81) is dedicated to this theme and stresses from the very beginning the centrality of interpersonal society and language.

The Argumentative Goal of This Paper

A link between Thomas Aquinas in the history of his sources and Thomas Aquinas in the history of his readers can be found in the brief history of his own development. The following reflections want to call attention to one of those original, abiding, transformative, and still significant insights that run through Thomas's entire work and merit future historical investigation and systematic reflection. The insight discussed here has provided and can continue to provide a constant vector along which innovations coalesce.

Formal Aspects of the Search for Original Insights

The historical and systematic potential involved in identifying an original insight of this kind was shown magisterially in Dieter Henrich's much discussed essay from 1967 on Johann Gottlieb Fichte's original insight. Over fifty years after his initial publication, the author was able to look back at and develop still further his own initial claims and the discussion they had set in motion.[3] Henrich charted the Fichtean sense of a word borrowed from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: "Dies Ich, das viel besagt"—"This Ego that implies a multitude." Henrich could show that this key insight into selfhood and alterity was an early and continuous theme in Fichte that continues to invite our historical investigation and systematic development.

One of Thomas's favorite and most famous borrowings from the Platonic tradition, but not our direct topic here, was the axiom "Quidquid recipitur, recipitur secundum modum recipientis"—"Whatever is received is received in the mode of the receiver." Thomas points hundreds of times to its ontological and epistemological implications. Any original insight of the kind we want to claim here for Thomas's transformation of earlier claims will include the following four elements of reception "in the mode of the receiver":

1. It will be present in all the phases of the author's own development, including the initial or (in this sense) "original" ones.[4]

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[3] Dieter Henrich, *Dies Ich, das viel besagt: Fichtes Einsicht nachdenken* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2019). The essay from 1967, "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht," is reprinted on 5–49. For newer discussion of this retrospective, see Manfred Frank and Jan Kuneš, eds., *Selbstbewußtsein. Dieter Henrich und die Heidelberger Schule* (Berlin: Metzler; Heidelberg: Springer, 2022). For the recent debate between Manfred Frank and Anton Friedrich Koch see 69–110.

[4] The term "original insight" has been expanded by some writers to describe authors who

2. It will show an author's "original" (i.e., his own proper) reading and redirection of older sources.
3. It will be an integral part (though only one part or one necessary element) of the most central or "original" general themes of the author. Although it is highly improbable that any one author would have numerous such original insights, it is not necessary that an original insight would always be singular.
4. And finally, it will merit further development in the best later receptions of the author, an impulse to "original" insights alternative to many of the more common handbook traditions (and more unique than what is generally held as a *doctrina communis*).

After a brief statement and analysis of what is to be identified here as an original insight of Thomas Aquinas, we will look for the presence and content of these four characteristics.

Making Virtue of Necessity, Drawing Strength from Weakness: The Argumentative Structure and Intentional Direction of This Original Insight of Thomas Aquinas

Not surprisingly, the original insight that we want to claim for Thomas is located at a horizon between philosophy and theology, between the experiential anthropology and social ontology suggested by several non-Christian thinkers, both ancient and medieval, on the one hand, and their *relecture* by Thomas within a Christian theology of grace as *extollens / non tollens* of the finite structures of nature, on the other. This insight, despite its Platonic provenance, was crystallized into a theological axiom during a "crisis" in the Latin reception of the natural works of Aristotle, when many of the sharply spiritualized interpretations of Aristotle and his Arabic commentators, which until but shortly before had been still in fashion, were quickly becoming less and less tenable. With newer documentation of the less spiritual dimensions of human being, the authors and texts of the long and winding Peripatetic tradition were seen increasingly as a serious challenge to the Christian faith. The argument of this paper is that Thomas draws from the beginning of his university professorship

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first came to their chief theme only later in their development, e.g., Ulrich Diehl, *Kants ursprüngliche Einsicht: Zur Entstehung seiner kritischen Philosophie* (Halle-Wittenberg: Universitätsverlag, 2013). For Kant's very gradual path to the key insight that distinguishes his critical from his pre-critical thought, see Norbert Hinske, *Kants Weg zur Transzendentalphilosophie: Der dreißig-jährige Kant* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970).

(at the latest) upon something like (and in other respects something also quite unlike) what since Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976) has been called the *Mängelwesentheorie*, reflections on human beings as born without the naturally perfected resources required to reach and maintain the fullness of their proper goal. Thomas will "receive" this insight by inscribing it into an argument with three dimensions or levels of meaning.

The first level is the basis of the distinction between nature and culture or crafts, that human beings are not provided "in the wild" with their clothing (furs or hides) and housing (even in the form of instinctive models for nests or burrows), nor with nourishment (ready-to-consume, uncooked plants or meats), with shoework (hooves), weaponry (claws and fangs), or yet with the finished tools and arts required to compensate these wants for the sake of good living, or even sheer survival. Rather, in place of all these, humans are given "reason and hands," by which they can fashion a wider range of compensatory goods.

The second level of reception is the insight, already well established in antiquity[5], that the sum of these compensatory crafts is not developed and maintained by any one individual, but by synchronic and diachronic forms of community. Humans are therefore more social, even political, by nature than even the most social of animals, like ants, cranes, bees, or even wasps.[6] A synchronic division of labor is needed to supply the variety of wants: some humans to refine and grow grains, others to bake the harvest

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[5] On ancient sources and discussions of the *Mängelwesentheorie*, see Egert Pöhlmann, "Der Mensch—das Mängelwesen? Zum Nachwirken antiker Anthropologie bei Arnold Gehlen," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 52, no. 2 (1970): 297–312.

[6] Thomas Aquinas's allegorical and political intentions are suggested by his telling omission of Aristotle's fourth example of gregarious animals: the wasp. His confrère, a somewhat older student of Albert, Thomas of Cantimpré, had, with reference to Plinius, already by 1241 described the wasp as *inutilis* and moribund in comparison to bees. This long enduring contrast of the wasp to the bee, which seeks out flowers, was allegorical and unflattering. "Vita eorum circa stercus est"—"their life revolves around dung"—as in Thomas de Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum* 9.51, ed. Helmut Boese (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 311, and in his exceptionally wide reception, as seen in Benedikt Konrad Vollmann, Janine Déus and Rudolf Kilian Weigand, eds., *Thomas von Cantimpré, Liber de naturis rerum*, vol. 1, *Kritische Ausgabe der Redaktion III (Thomas III) eines Anonymus*, Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter 54.1 (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2017), 373 (6.29: "De vespis"). Unlike the apparently leaderless but effective cooperation of ants (*politia*), the alternating leadership of cranes (*aristocratia*), or the habitual, productive leadership of bees (*regnum*), the wasp symbolized no positive form of human governance. Thomas's omission of the wasp from the list of gregarious animals underscores his intended reference of these animal allegories exclusively to positive models of sociality and governance. Thomas Aquinas did not seize the opportunity to allegorize this understanding of the

into bread products and to market them (both domestically and in more distant trade), and still others to provide organization, education, and the defense of all that the community needs in order to survive and to thrive.[7] The growth of diachronic experience is needed to pass on the acquired knowledge of medicines, the arts, morals, and civil organization. Humans live from a community of reason and from many hands. For the sake of such community, humans have a further and eminent advantage, namely the capacity for and the dynamic toward conceptual language.

A third level had been suggested by Plato and Avicenna, and this dimension is central to Thomas's reception of the entire insight. In the *Protagoras* (lines 320–23), which Thomas does not know directly, Plato plays down what he describes as marginal accounts that Zeus had punished Prometheus for his theft of the supra-animal tools of fire and the arts.[8] In Plato's version, a Zeus without envy has compassion on the human communities that would then try to live well merely from the acquired resources of energy and technology. That path could lead only to rivalry, strife and war, both civil and foreign (*pace* René Girard). Out of generous compassion, Zeus reacts to Prometheus's own lack of foresight on this

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wasp into explicit admonitions about what might best be avoided in religious or civic communities, nor did he come to a greater acknowledgement of the wasp's better qualities.

7 The admonitions of Thomas of Cantimpré are typically styled as the failure of human societies to live up to the allegorical ideals of bees, including the anticipatory models of a "mixed government" or constitutional monarchy that the author had drawn for them from his experience of Dominican life and alternating, participatory governance; cf. the Heidelberg habilitation of Julia Burkhardt, *Von Bienen lernen: Das Bonum universale de apibus des Thomas von Cantimpré als Gemeinschaftsentwurf; Analyse, Edition, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, Klöster als Innovationslabore 7.1–2 (Regensburg: Schnell and Steiner, 2020). See also the astute interpretation of mixed government in Burkhardt, "Predigerbrüder im Bienenstock des Herrn: Dominikanische Identitäten im 'Bienenbuch' des Thomas von Cantimpré," in *Die deutschen Dominikaner und Dominikanerinnen im Mittelalter*. ed. Sabine von Heusinger, Elias H. Füllenbach, O.P., Walter Senner, O.P., and Klaus-Bernward Springer, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens, n.s., 21 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 183–206; and now also Burkhardt, "Learning from Bees, Wasps, and Ants: Communal Norms, Social Practices, and Contingencies of Nature in Medieval Insect Allegories," in *Fragmented Nature: Medieval Latinate Reasoning on the Natural World and its Order*, ed. Mattia Cipriani and Nicola Polloni, Studies in Medieval History and Culture (Oxford: Routledge, 2022), 93–110. Thomas Aquinas stops short of his confrater's association of wasps and the demonic.

8 The broad narrative tradition since Hesiod of the punishment of Prometheus with its take on the *Mängelwesentheorie* of humanity was dramatized famously in *Prometheus Bound*, until recently always attributed to Aeschylus in the century before Plato, available today in the edition and English translation of Alan H. Sommerstein in Loeb Classical Library [LCL] 145 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

point by supplying what no Titan could ever steal (or, in the context of the *Protagoras*, ever sell?): a sense of the just and a sense of shame at not acknowledging it. In Plato's retelling, this divine gift to human beings of a sense of justice and shame makes possible the depth of community needed for human fulfillment.[9]

The friendship and community needed for the attainment of the human end includes, in this Platonic reading and its development, some human community with God. The oft-cited Aristotelian insight from the *Ethics* that what we do through our friends we do somehow through ourselves receives in Thomas's reading, and in his patent contradiction of Aristotle's well-known denials, the explicit affirmation of the possibility of friendship and community with God.[10] In Cicero, this suprapragmatic sense of justice and shame is aided by the verbal power of the gifted *rhetor* needed to found and maintain the republic. In Avicenna, the prophet needed to found and renew the community by his verbal power lives in the grey zone between reason and revelation.[11] For Thomas, the friendship with God sought but not attained by human insight into our need and our reflected desire for grace (including prayer as the *interpres desiderii*) makes or deepens virtue—and more than virtue.

Thomas's Account of Human Beings as *Mängelwesen*

Early Writings

Certainly from the time of his first regency as a teaching master in Paris, Thomas utilizes previous accounts of the constitutive compensation of initial human deficiency. From the first two years of his first regency in Paris, Thomas names his two major sources, as well as his intended synthesis and extension of their thought. For our purposes here, two textual examples from this early period will suffice:

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9 For Avicenna's observations on the connatural sources of shame, see Michael Nathan-John Fatigati's recent dissertation, "Avicenna on Emotions: Their Nature and Significance for Knowledge and Morality" (University of Toronto, 2021). Several ancient and patristic authors underline the role of familial and societal critique in the pedagogical transmission of an already given moral sense.

10 See Guy Mansini, O.S.B., "Similitudo, Communicatio and the Friendship of Charity in Aquinas," in *Thomistica: Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale, supplementa*, vol. 1, ed. E. Manning (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 1–26.

11 For the influence of Avicenna's sense of prophecy on Islamic thought, see Ayman Shihadeh, "Aspects of the Reception of Avicenna's Theory of Prophecy in Islamic Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 86 (2013): 23–32.

Contra Impugnantes

Jean-Pierre Torrell dated Thomas's defense of the academically engaged mendicant vocation in the *Liber contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem* to the first year of Thomas's first regency in Paris, 1256.[12] In answering a specious anthropological argument trying to cite the natural law to claim that members of all religious orders should restrict themselves to manual labor, Thomas first sharpens the objection before answering it:

> The argument refers to those who would forego manual labor altogether. That our very nature inclines us as human beings to work with our hands is suggested by the disposition of our body. For nature did not give humans their clothing, as it gave fur to other animals; nor did it provide us with weapons, like the horns given to oxen or the claws given to lions; nor did nature prepare us any food, with the exception of milk, as Avicenna notes.[13] But yet in

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[12] Most likely, to October 1256; see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal and Matthew K. Minerd, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 100.

[13] The exact text of Avicenna which is referenced here by Thomas is at least for now not altogether clear. It does not seem to be (or to be exclusively) the lengthy and perspicuous discussion of this topic, identified as Thomas's main source by the Leonine edition, from Avicenna Latinus, *De anima seu Liber sextus de naturalibus*, 5.1, ed. S. Van Riet (Leiden: Brill 1968), 70 (indeed, see the entire chapter, 69–81), referenced in *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem* I, in Leonine ed., 41.A:90B (lines 452–63). For background, see also Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's* De anima *in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul 1160–1300*, Warburg Institute Studies and Texts 1 (London: Warburg Institute, 2000). Thomas's remark in this early work, "excepto lacte, ut Avicenna dicit," would fit well to the general tendency of Avicenna to augment the zoological works of Aristotle with observations drawn from Galen, whose therapeutic and nutritional works included a detailed presentation of the unique organic anatomic advantages of the human mother and child that together make nutrition given with a mother's milk to be an important exception to the rule of natural human deficiency. But already Aristotle himself states in this zoological work that he had often described *natura* (*physis*) as the source of this initial human nourishment: "in mulieribus autem natura utitur mamillis in alia operatione, et est operatio quam diximus saepe, scilicet cibus fetus"—"Nature uses the breasts of women for multiple functions, but the one which we have most often discussed is the nourishment of offspring" (*De animalibus, Michael Scot's Arabic-Latin translation*, pt 2, bks. 11–14 [*Parts of animals*], line 688a, ed. Aafke M. I. van Oppenraay [Leiden: Brill, 1988], 193 [available also through the Aristoteles Latinus database]; Van Oppenraay has kindly pointed out that Avicenna does not take up directly here Aristotle's reference to nature). Whether Thomas found the qualification *excepto lacte* directly in one of Scot's translations of Avicenna's zoological works, or whether he includes the formulation here as his own reading of the Peripatetic tradition, or (less

> place of all these things, it gave us *reason*, by which human beings can provide all these things for themselves, *and hands*, by which they can execute the provisions of reason, as the Philosopher notes in book 14 of *De animalibus*.[14]

In the present context, the actual counterargument is not so important: that the cited texts did not intend to exclude, but rather to include, the division of labor in advanced societies, suggesting that, were the unarticulated natural law understood to apply in the same manner for all, the argument would apply to professors from the diocesan clergy as much as to those belonging to religious orders. Even the beginning of this answer is preparing the ground for the wisdom of a complementary division and coordination of labor, which is the main point of the argument as it continues. The compensation of initial wants "by reason and the hand" is shown to be a social compensation attainable only by many competent heads, both at any given time and across the generations, by the versatility and cooperation of many hands, and by the many kinds of distributed tasks which the first two pluralities make possible. This reference by Thomas to Avicenna's sense of the strength drawn from weakness recurs in a topic which has received far more attention in modern Thomistic scholarship: the metaphysics developed already in *De ente et essentia* even prior to the beginning of the first Parisian regency. Thomas followed from early on, if only in good part, Avicenna's experience of the contingency of the self and all existents other than what must be the *unum necessarium*

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likely) as an oblique reference to Avicenna's medical studies, can remain open for now. There is no reason to doubt his substantial debt here to Avicenna for identifying the importance of something like that *Mängelwesentheorie* that Aristotle had seemed to play down. On the intensity of the engagement with Avicenna's zoological works in the time and place of Thomas's initial university studies, see Erik Kwakkel, "Behind the Scenes of a Revision: Michael Scot and the Oldest Manuscript of his *Abbreviatio Avicenne*," *Viator* 7, no. 1 (2009): 107–32. Avicenna's general sympathy for a nonreductive version of the *Mängelwesentheorie*, together with its insights into cultural and social compensation, is more clearly stated in the cited passage of his version of *De anima* than in some of his elucidations of *De animalibus*. My special thanks is owed to Dr. Oppenraay for her generous and expert assistance in searching for Thomas's precise source among the several Avicennan texts available to him and to us.

14 Thomas Aquinas, *Contra impugnantes* II, chap. 4, ad 1 (Leonine ed., 41.A:90B [lines 452–63]). Unless otherwise attributed, translations are original. For Avicenna's place in the history of a less speculative question, see Bethany Somma, "Avicenna on Animal Goods," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 6 (2022): 19–52.

as an indirect path into metaphysical transcendence (regarding what is "not-contingent").[15]

It is also clear that Thomas's interpretation here does not pit Aristotle and Avicenna against each other. The most recent study of this question, an otherwise impressive monograph by Christian Rode, does, however, precisely that.[16] It first draws what is arguably an overstated contrast between the "maximalism" of Aristotle, who sees the city/state as the only setting in which individuals can fulfill their existence as personal and political actors, and the "minimalism" of Avicenna, who, it is claimed, would see the city/state chiefly as the best way to supply those basic animal needs which nature had not provided to the *Mängelwesen* of human being. Rode is concerned chiefly with the reception of Aristotle's *Politics* in roughly the century after its first translation into Latin by William of Moerbeke in 1260. Rode traces the consequences of what he sees as the divide between Aristotle and Avicenna into the fourteenth century to establish the degree of autonomy rightly claimed for the state vis-à-vis the Church. Rode largely ignores Aristotle's writings other than the *Politics*, such as the one cited here by Thomas and later commented upon by Albert the Great: *De animalibus*.[17] The Latin translations that Michael Scot had provided before and after his move to Italy (1220) and the Kingdom of Naples[18] for the

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15 See Georges C. Anawati, "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la métaphysique d'Avicenne," in *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274–1974: Commemorative Studies*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), 449–65. For Thomas's extensive use of Avicenna see the 426 citations excerpted by Clemens Vansteenkiste, "Avicenna-Citaten bij S. Thomas," *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* 15, no. 3 (1953): 457–507, esp. 405.

16 See Christian Rode, *Soziale Ontologien des Mittelalters: Der Status der politischen Gemeinschaft und das* Mängelwesen *Mensch*, Beiträge zum Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, n.s., 93 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2022).

17 The scholars of the Cologne edition of Albert's works estimate the years 1258–1263 for Albert's twin works *Quaestiones super de animalibus* and *De animalibus*. Albert includes the common list of the apparent disadvantages of the human anatomy, but he follows Aristotle here in denying that these seeming weaknesses are in the end truly disadvantageous. For Albert's praise of the human hand, underlining his acceptance of Aristotle's distance from the most explicit *Mängelwesentheorien*, see Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus Libri XXVI nach der Cölner Urschrift* , ed. Hermann Stadler, Beiträge zum Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters 16. 2 [bks. 13–26] (Münster: Aschendorff, 1921), notably bk. 14, tract. 2, chap. 2 (pp. 964–68). He recalls the ironic remark on predetermined animals as forced to sleep in their shoes and armaments. As in Aristotle (688ab), Albert's following section (bk. 14, tract. 2, chap. 3 [pp. 968–71]) highlights both the commonalities and the advantages of the human anatomy vis-à-vis other mammals as regards nursing.

18 For Michael Scotus's life and work, as well an accompanying bibliography, see the entry

zoological works of Aristotle and Avicenna included books 11–14 of *De animalibus* and the *Abbreviatio Avicennae* of what William of Moerbeke would later identify as *De partibus animalium*.[19] Rode will eventually admit that these justifications of the city/state by Aristotle and Avicenna do not necessarily contradict each other,[20] but can legitimately be viewed as complementary. Rode leans for the most part toward granting little more to Thomas than that he had come to mix or mix up two contrary (if not outright contradictory) theses.[21]

This stark contrast overlooks the moment of neediness that even Aristotle identifies in lesser figures than the state and the statesman. As Alasdair MacIntyre points out in his "Thomistic" turn in *Dependent Rational Animals*, even the "megalopsychos" of Aristotle has needs beyond the need to give to others by directing and ordering their polis.[22] It is true, however, that Aristotle, unlike Thomas (so MacIntyre's main point), had been reluctant to dwell on the experience of inevitable human fragility as a source of greater justice.[23] In *De partibus animalium*, Aristotle had been especially reluctant to endorse the critical view of human nature as a *Mängelwesen*. Contemporary commentators[24] see in this work of Aristotle

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for him on the ALCUIN: Infothek der Scholastik website, ed. Rolf Schönberger at the Univeristy of Regensburg, alcuin.de/philosopher.php?id=1555.

19 See Aafke M. I. van Oppenraay, *De animalibus, Michael Scot's Arabic-Latin translation*, pt. 2, bks. 11–14 (*Parts of animals*). See also Aafke M. I. van Oppenraay, "Avicenna's *Liber de animalibus* ('Abbreviatio Avicennae'): Preliminaries and State of Affairs," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 28 (2017): 401–16. Van Oppenraay echoes there (404n13) the warning by M.-T. d'Alverny concerning the very preliminary state of our editions of the many diverse Latin versions of Avicenna and Avicennan literature which circulated in the thirteenth century; see d'Alverny, "*Avicenna latinus*: Les traductions d'Avicenne; quelques résultats d' une enquête," in *Actes du Ve Congrès International des Arabisants* (Brussels, 1970), Correspondance d'Orient 1 (Brussels: Centre pour l'Étude des Problèmes du Monde Musulman Contemporain, 1971), 151–58, at 158. Circulating among the mendicants of the thirteenth century were also Latin florilegia of Avicennan texts.

20 See Rode, *Soziale Ontologien*, 424.

21 See Rode, *Soziale Ontologien*, 74 (*vermischt*), 421 (*vermengt*).

22 See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

23 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, e.g. ix–xii, 127.

24 For this suspected Platonic background to Aristotle's distancing at 687a5 and 687a24, see Aristotle, *Über die Teile der Lebewesen*, trans. Wolfgang Kullmann, with commentary (Berlin: Akademieverlag, 2007), 491–92 and 696–98. To Aristotle's suspected reasons for his skepsis about the *Protagoras* Kullmann adds his basic conviction about the eternity of the world and its species. For the possible target(s) of this ironic discussion see again Pöhlmann's instructive "Der Mensch—das Mängelwesen?"

an unnamed reaction to Plato's retelling of the Prometheus story in the *Protagoras*. It is not without enjoyable and genuinely insightful irony that Aristotle mentions among the disadvantages of the envied predetermination of animals with hooves and talons that they are "so to speak" forced to sleep with their shoes on and still dressed in their armaments, or that all kinds of labor, no matter how fine or how crass, need to be tackled by one and the same tool. Aristotle's celebration of the hand and the versatility it has from its structure is a paradigm of the advantages of the human body over those of other animals.[25] The view of the hand as the "instrument of instruments" is mentioned briefly in *De anima*,[26] but the fuller development of this insight is found in the cited passage of *De partibus animalium*. Albert the Great will make the Aristotelian celebration of the human hand his own, seeing in the wide range of the gestures that can accompany and facilitate speech a sign of the undetermined and universal scope of human discourse. Drawing on Avicenna's analysis of inner and outer sensuality, Thomas will develop the praise of the hand less in terms of its ability to grasp and retain a grip on diverse objects than in those of its uniquely refined sense of touch and its contribution both to sensation as a whole and to intelligence.[27] As suggested already by Aristotle, the advantage of human fingernails over animal claws is found in the ways in which the sense of touch is protected and enabled so as to enhance rationality and its presence to the real.[28]

In his versions of the *De anima*[29] and, if more reservedly, in *De partibus*

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[25] Aristotle, *De partibus animalium* 487ab, also available in Greek and English in LCL 12 (371–71), trans. A. L. Peck, immediately followed by Aristotle's comments on anatomical advantages for human nursing.

[26] See Aristotle, *De anima* 432a (the hand is the "órganon . . . orgánon," to which the soul is compared as the form of forms), 687a ("hospereì órganon prò orgánon").

[27] See Thomas Aquinas, *De ver.*, q. 26, a. 3, corp. (Leonine ed., 22:756 [lines 199–204]).

[28] In his commentary on the *Sentences*, Thomas had referred some forty-three times to this passage in *De partibus animalium*, often in the shorthand of a reference to compensation through "discursive reason and our hands." As Robert Busa's *Index thomisticus* documents, the link of hands and head will be developed by Thomas in over a hundred places throughout his writings. Two representative examples can demonstrate this pattern: *In* II *sent*., d. 1, q. 2, a. 5 (with reference to Avicenna and Aristotle), and d. 3, q. 3, a. 1 ad 1. Already here the complementarity of Aristotle's remarks on the human hand with still older anticipations of the *Mängelwesentheorie* is implied. For a similar argument prior to the end of the first Parisian regency, see *Quodlibet* VII, q. 7, a. 1, corp. A reflection of this singular importance of "the head and the hands" is found today in the simplified contemporary rite of the Roman Catholic sacrament of the holy anointing of the sick, in which these two sites of anointing are taken for the whole human being.

[29] As above in notes 13 and 14, see *Liber de anima seu sextus de naturalibus* 5.1 (ed. Van

animalium (and the *Abbreviatio Avicennae*), Avicenna would begin his analysis by stressing the goal of nature as fostering community among humans (thus his opening emphasis in *De anima* 5.1 on the human strengths made possible by voice and language) and the role of the prophet in establishing the ideal community.[30] Far from developing merely in the context of the necessary compensation of basic animal needs, it was the higher vision of interpersonal community which called in the first place for this lack of instinctual and organic predetermination and of biological self-sufficiency.[31] Avicenna notes that these deficiencies are intended on account of "the nobility of human beings and the comparative innobility of other animals."[32]

Riet, 69–81), which Rode references and which the Leonine ed. sees as the work implied by Thomas's reference to Avicenna in *Contra impugnantes*).

30 For the influence of Avicenna's sense of prophecy in Christian thought, see Marianne Schlosser, *Lucerna in caliginoso loco: Aspekte des Prophetie-Begriffes in der scholastischen Theologie*, Veröffentlichungen des Grabmann-Instituts, n.s., 43 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

31 Rode mentions in passing (*Soziale Ontologien*, 60–61) the general possibility (without pointing to any particular passages) that Avicenna's version of the *Mängelwesentheorie* may well have drawn on the works of Nemesius of Emesa, who (like Gregory of Nyssa in his own genuine works) elaborates the *Mängelwesentheorie* along Platonic lines. In the course of his life, Emil Dobler reworked and expanded his 1946 dissertation from Fribourg, "Nemesius von Emesa und die Psychologie des menschlichen Aktes bei Thomas von Aquin. Eine quellenanalytische Studie" (published by Werthenstein in 1950), adding closely related studies on Gregory of Nyssa and John of Damascus: Dobler, *Zwei syrische Quellen der theologischen Summa des Thomas von Aquin*, Dokimion 25 (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 2000); Dobler, *Falsche Väterzitate bei Thomas von Aquin*, Dokimion 27 (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 2001); Dobler, *Indirekte Nemesiuszitate bei Thomas von Aquin*, Dokimion 28 (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 2002). Both Nemesius (*De natura hominis*) and Gregory (*De opificio hominis*, nos. 4 and 7) appropriate and provide prosaic narratives for the *Mängelwesentheorie*. As documented by Dobler, Thomas often cites Nemesius and *De natura hominis* in the translation of Burgundio of Pisa and accepts his attribution of the work to Gregory of Nyssa. However, Thomas himself does not seem to cite Nemesius's elaborations of the "Mängelwesentheorie" directly. The mediation of these particular texts through Avicenna remains uncertain. For Thomas's frequent use of Nemesius's anthropology, see Gérard Verbeke, "Fatalism and Freedom according to Nemesius von Emesa und Thomas Aquinas," in *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274–1974, Commemorative Studies*, ed. Anton Pegis, vol. 1 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), 283–314.

32 See the reference in note 2 above.

Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate

This last insight finds an echo and an extension in a second text from the first regency, not long after *Contra impugnantes*: Dating from ca. 1258, the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, in question 14, article 10, asks whether it is necessary for human beings to have faith. The fifth objection against such a necessity had argued:

> It is more perfect to be able to attain one's goal through one's own proper powers than not to have the power to attain it. Other animals are able to attain their goals by their own powers. Since human beings are more perfect than other animals, it seems that natural cognition would be sufficient for human beings to attain their goal. Thus there is no need for faith.[33]

The reply to the objection shows the *modus recipientis* in Thomas's theological transformation of the *Mängelwesentheorie*. Not unlike the passage cited above, Thomas, too, sees in the experience of this initial imperfection an aid along the path to the still greater perfection of receiving divine help and community. Here it is no longer a question of the "happy fault" of those missing animal instincts and physical advantages which are compensated by the versatility of discursive reason, hands, and the human division of labor, but an experience of the inadequacy of merely natural reason and the fruits of both acquired virtue and societal cooperation (the use of many hands and many human minds) that intensifies the desire for the gift of faith and the divine *communicatio* (*koinonia*) which is the foundation of that friendship with God which Thomas explicates as the essence of charity. What we do through this Friend we somehow do through ourselves and for our proper end. The imperfection that is admitted for the beginning of faith is part of a perfection greater than the self-sufficiency of a use of our reason on its own. This is, for Thomas, a key insight, one that he had expressed already in his earliest works:

> [Despite the insufficiency of natural means needed to attain their perfection,] human beings are ordered to a higher end. Even if human beings stand in need of manifold external aids in order to attain this end, and even though their natural resources are insufficient to reach this goal on their own, nonetheless human beings are still more perfect than more self-sufficient creatures. There are two

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[33] *De ver*., q. 14, a. 10, obj. 5.

> reasons for this: First, because human beings are ordered to a higher goal. Even though human beings need manifold help to reach their goal, for which their natural principles and resources are insufficient, still they are more perfect. Second, the very lack of determination itself belongs to the perfection of human being. Because of it, there are several possible routes to reach the final goal. For such a being, quite unlike other animals, it is impossible to determine just one single natural path. In place of all that, which nature in its providence has determined for other animals, the human was given reason, by which it can likewise prepare itself to receive that divine help needed to receive the life to come.[34]

The Unfolding of the Dynamics of the Compensation for Initial Deficiencies in Thomas's Middle Years in Italy

De Regno ad Regem Cypri

The locus classicus for Thomas's treatment of the first two levels of the immanent logic of this dynamic is the authentic fragment of his incomplete treatise on kingship, presumably dating from 1267.[35] In numbers 4–7 of the opening chapter, Thomas follows the logic of the *Mängelwesentheorie* to establish the need for community, the centrality of language, and the necessary division of labor. Only after that will he speak of the need, the possibilities, and the challenges involved in directing this community.

> [4] To be sure, the light of reason is placed by nature in every man, to guide him in his acts towards his end. Wherefore, if man were intended to live alone, as many animals do, he would require no other guide to his end. Each man would be a king unto himself, under God, the highest King, inasmuch as he would direct himself in his acts by the light of reason given him from on high. Yet it is natural for man, more than for any other animal, to be a social and political animal, to live in a group.
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> [5] This is clearly a necessity of man's nature. For all other animals, nature has prepared food, hair as a covering, teeth, horns, claws

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[34] *De ver*., q. 14, a. 10, ad 5.

[35] See *De regno* in Leonine ed., 42:449–50, specifically the notes to lines 28–64; see also the footnotes in nos. 2–5 in *On Kingship to the King of Cyprus*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 3–5. For a date around 1267, see Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:198–200.

as means of defence or at least speed in flight, while man alone was made without any natural provisions for these things. Instead of all these, man was endowed with reason, by the use of which he could procure all these things for himself by the work of his hands. Now, one man alone is not able to procure them all for himself, for one man could not sufficiently provide for life, unassisted. It is therefore natural that man should live in the society of many.

[6] Moreover, all other animals are able to discern, by inborn skill, what is useful and what is injurious, even as sheep naturally regard the wolf as their enemy. Some animals also recognize by natural skill certain medicinal herbs and other things necessary for their life. Man, on the contrary, has a natural knowledge of the things which are essential for his life only in a general fashion, inasmuch as he is able to attain knowledge of the particular things necessary for human life by reasoning from natural principles. But it is not possible for one man to arrive at a knowledge of all these things by his own individual reason. It is therefore necessary for man to live in a multitude so that each one may assist his fellows, and different men may be occupied in seeking, by their reason, to make different discoveries—one, for example, in medicine, one in this and another in that.

[7] This point is further and most plainly evidenced by the fact that the use of speech is a prerogative proper to man. By this means, one man is able to express fully his conceptions to others. Other animals, it is true, express their feelings to one another in a general way, as a dog may express anger by barking and other animals give vent to other feelings in various fashions. But man communicates with his kind more completely than any other animal known to be gregarious, such as the crane, the ant or the bee.—With this in mind, Solomon says: *It is better that there be two than one; for they have the advantage of their company.*[36]

Later Variations of the Theme of the Advantages of Recognized Deficiencies

In the later editions of the work most associated with the term *Mängelwesen*, Arnold Gehlen will see a parallel to his own thesis in a text

[36] Phelan (trans.), *On Kingship*, 3–5. MacIntyre expands the references to social animals to include in particular dolphins with their communal innovations, communications and mutual reliance: For the extensive and detailed discussions, see the indices to *Dependent Rational Animals* (esp. 168).

by Thomas Aquinas roughly contemporary with *De regno* but inaugurating the later phase in Thomas's development: his *Summa theologiae*. Gehlen had learned of it only from the reception of the first edition of his 1940 work *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*:

> Josef Pieper has called my attention to the fact that the anthropological problem defined here is described in the *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas (I, 76, 5): "The intellectual soul is the most perfect of souls. However, since the bodies of the other sensing beings (that is, of animals) have been provided by Nature with natural means of protection (fur instead of clothing and hoofs instead of shoes) as well as with their own weapons (such as claws, teeth, and horns), then it would appear that the intellectual soul should not have been united with such an imperfect body, which lacks such natural means of defense." In his answer to this problem, Thomas Aquinas even makes mention of the "reduction of instincts": "The intellectual soul has infinite strength because it can comprehend the universal" [openness!]. "For this reason, Nature could not provide it with definite, instinctive beliefs. . . . Instead of all these things, the human being possesses reason and his hands, which are the tools of tools." A similar line of reasoning also appears, as A. Szalai has indicated to me, in Aquinas, *De regimine principum* l, 1 [*De regno* 1].[37]

Thomas develops his claims for the priority of physical indetermination with the same sense of priority that Aristotle had claimed in the relation of human reason and hands. Aristotle had argued against Anaxagoras on a similar point: it is because we have reason that we have hands, of which only discursively rational beings can make meaningful use, so as to craft by art what we lack by nature; but (against Anaxagoras), we surely do not

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[37] Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* [1940], trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer, with an introduction by Karl Siegbert Rehberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 402. Gehlen passes over the criticisms enunciated by Pieper in 1946 of the strongly reductive elements of Gehlen's truncated version of the *Mängelwesentheorie*, the blindness of his biologism to goals higher than sheer human survival and to human gifts such as the spiritual soul; see the extensive and critical review by Pieper, "*Anthropo-Biologie*: Über Arnold Gehlens *Der Mensch*," *Frankfurter Hefte* 1, no. 7 (1946): 683–87 (repr. in *Miszellen: Register und Gesamtbibliographie*, vol. 8.2 of *Werke*, ed. Berthold Wald [Leipzig: Meiner, 2008], 604–12; for the explicit references to the *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] of Thomas Aquinas aiming at both comparison [on initial human needs] and contrast [Gehlend's blindness to the human spirit], cf. especially 609).

have reason thanks to our having hands.[38] Thomas sees Aristotle's view of the *polis* (or *civitas*) as supplying what is lacking in the village, the *villa*, the household, and the individual as an endorsement of this account of the origins of the *civitas* as compensatory for a hierarchy of more basic innate needs.

The Nobility of Humanity and Its Deficiencies in Nature and Grace

A first comment that can be made in this final section is that Gehlen's reference to Thomas is as interesting for the differences it glosses as for the similarities that it rightly points out. In Gehlen's own programmatic, his *Mängelwesentheorie* was designed to eliminate the need for concepts like spirit, transcendence, and personhood, although they had been favored by other representatives of the movement that, from Max Scheler onward, was known as "philosophical anthropology" (with important anticipations in Johann Gottfried Herder [1744–1803][39]). In Gehlen's reading, perceived physical need would be a better impulse for development than any transcendental goals, just as in many neo-Darwinian accounts of human evolution as stemming simply from the physical givenness of the human hand.[40] In Aristotle's terms, Gehlen and neo-Darwinianism think along the lines of Anaxagoras. In addition to this difference, Thomas is also free of Gehlen's proximity to *Rechtspositivismus* and its conviction that there is no natural law by which to judge and oppose positive human law. Thomas is closer here than Gehlen to the point of Plato's myth of the original gifts of justice and shame. Given the universal need to augment nature by societal construction, Gehlen, both before and after 1945, saw the positive law as beyond question from human nature to a degree not found in Thomas. For the latter, the possibility of serious political errors by a nation's rulers or by flawed individual conscience is also a condition of the possibility of concrete practical truth.[41] Any genuine reception of

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38 Aristotle, *De partibus animalium* 687a.

39 See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 32–76 (pt. I, chaps. 1–2). Pannenberg defends here, especially 40–73, many of the more transcendent arguments asserted by Herder and despite high praise omitted in Gehlen's references.

40 See two recent publications without explicit reference to Gehlen: Eberhard Finke, *Das Recht liegt auf der Hand: Ein Erbe der Evolution* (Berlin: AT Editions, 2011); Frank R. Wilson, *Die Hand—Geniestreich der Evolution: Ihr Einfluß auf Gehirn, Sprache und Kultur des Menschen* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2000).

41 See Richard Schenk, *Revelations of Humanity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), esp. 11–39 (chap. 1: "Practical Falsehood and Metaphysics").

the *Mängelwesentheorie* will need to continue these philosophical and politically foundational debates regarding the limits of both biologicism and positive law.

A second note would be that Thomas's principal development of his original insight was a properly theological one, leading him to a recurring programmatic insight with numerous variations and concrete applications in the theology of grace. As a recurring axiom on grace and nature puts it,[42] grace does not destroy nature or the experience of its limitations, but rather elevates and perfects nature precisely by preserving and ennobling nature's experience of its limits: *extollens, non tollens*. In all the discussions of the centrality of charity as friendship, the memory is never far away that had led Thomas to draw on the third book of the *Ethics* for his theological *relecture* of the *Mängelwesentheorie*:

> Nature is never deficient in what is necessary for human life. Although nature had not provided man with weapons and clothing as it did other animals, it gave him reason and hands, by which he can acquire these things for himself. Nor is nature deficient toward him in what is necessary for him, even though nature does not provide them with any principle by which they might attain beatitude on their own; for, that is impossible. But nature gives us free choice, by which we can turn to God, who can give us beatitude. As is said in book III of the *Ethics*: "Whatever we can do through friends, we can in some sense do through ourselves."[43]

The successful acts of intellect and will that develop into the virtues of spontaneity in reason and action are concomitantly experiences of deficiency. They can be learned in analogy to the *quinque viae* as arguments from experienced deficiency toward the acknowledgement of what cannot fail, or to the inherent limits of successfully analogical language founded upon its acknowledgement of the unavoidably inadequate *modus significandi* and in its negation of this inadequacy.

The theological development of this original insight softens many of the hardened, inherited antinomies around grace and nature: the help which is

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[42] For the transformation of an insight of neo-Platonic theodicy about Providence's "saving" or tolerating the failing of free human choice into a key axiom about grace as "saving" and ennobling even the experienced failings of human nature, see Richard Schenk, "From Providence to Grace: Thomas Aquinas and the Platonisms of the Mid-Thirteenth Century) *Nova et Vetera* (English) 3 (2005): 307–20.

[43] *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 5, ad 1.

desired underlines rather than glosses the experienced insufficiency needed to recognize grace as grace.[44] This original insight recurs in all successful acts of human existence,[45] including the experienced need for more than philosophical insight and the experience and "stimulus" of limitations in acquired and then again in infused moral virtue, as exemplified in Thomas's analysis of *religio*. Beginning with the awareness that *religio* is "only" a potential part, albeit an eminent one, of all acquired and infused virtue *ad alterum—religio* owes its development *in lege naturali*, *in lege scripta*, and *in lege evangelica* to the experience of an inadequacy of each more basic stage, in the best cases transformed but not destroyed, calling for human and divine help and communication:

> Natural reason demands of human beings that they submit themselves to One who is higher: on account of the defects which they sense in themselves, and for which they need to be helped and guided by One who is higher. Whatever that One might be, this is what all peoples call God.[46]

Even in light of lived Gospel discipleship, embodying such virtue with its sense of the assistance and the community of others and of the Other

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[44] On the ties between human desire and the concomitant experience of human deficiency, see Jacob W. Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart: Thomas Aquinas and Henri de Lubac on Nature, Grace, and the Desire for God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019). The work includes many references to Avicenna, but not to the zoological works.

[45] For the graced elevation of the experience of finitude in all four of Kant's anthropological questions (about knowledge, choice, hope and anthropodicy), see Richard Schenk, *Die Gnade vollendeter Endlichkeit. Zur transzendentaltheologischen Auslegung der thomanischen Anthropologie*, Freiburger theologische Studien 135 (Freiburg: Herder, 1989). The study predates a more recent, chiefly English-language debate on Thomas's eschatology of the separated soul, which, despite the clumsy conceptual framing of the question as an alternative between "survivalist" and "corruptionist" interpretations, does nothing to diminish the continued force of Thomas's original insight even for human beatitude *post resurrectionem*. For just one example, see the eternal importance of *timor filialis* according to *ST* II-II, q. 19, a. 11. As the acknowledgement and praise of alterity, *timor filialis* remains eternally the condition of the possibility of knowing grace as grace. For differing degrees of beatitude given the awareness of merely partial comprehension, see already *ST* I, q. 12, aa. 6–8. For insights into more earthly forms of graced fear and anxiety, see Schenk, *Revelations of Humanity* esp. 214–48 (chap. 8, "*Factus in agonia*: On the Anxiety of Christ and of Christians in the Face of Death").

[46] In the context of a diachronic and existential analysis of sacrifice, see *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 1 corp.

in the friendship called charity, we experience that need for the presence and activity of this Other in the virtue of religiosity[47] and in the sacraments. But even then, as Thomas and the wider Church knew well from Augustine, sacraments remain imperfect mediations, still *in genere signi*. By this ennobling experience of their limitations as signs, they call for eschatological immediacy and fullness. Thomas sees in the sacrament of the Eucharist an intense fulfillment of his original insight into the graced finitude of *religio* and of human existence as a whole:

> Tibi se cor meum totum subiicit;
> Quia te contemplans totum deficit.
>
> My heart gives itself completely over to you;
> For in contemplating you, it knows how completely it fails.[48] N·V

[47] As cited in the preceding footnote.

[48] See Robert Wielockx, "*Adoro te deuote: Z*ur Lösung einer alten Crux," *Annales theologici* 21 (2007): 101–38. Wielockx suggests here that the original prayer might well have begun: "Te deuote laudo, latens ueritas." For his impulse for the renewal of scholarship on the poem, see Robert Wielockx, "Poetry and Theology in the *Adoro te devote*: Thomas Aquinas on the Eucharist and Christ's Uniqueness," in *Christ among the Medieval Dominicans: Representations of Christ in the Texts and Images of the Order of Preachers*, ed. Kent Emery and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 157–74. Henk J. M. Schoot offers as a translation of this couplet: "To You my heart submits itself completely, because in contemplating You, it entirely falls short" ("Eucharistic Transformation: Thomas Aquinas's *Adoro te devote*," *Perichoresis* 14 [2016]: 67–79).