

A World of Natures and the Presence of God

CHARLES MOREROD, O.P.
Bishop of Lausanne, Geneva, and Fribourg
Fribourg, Switzerland

“NATURE” IS OFTEN mentioned nowadays in an ecological context, where it does not necessarily have a religious connotation. I think that there is there a certain opportunity for believers to show the contribution of Christian faith. At least this is true for philosophers and theologians who walk in the steps of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, as I will try to suggest, because both of them see the world as an organized “Nature” composed of natures.

Which World Does Aristotle See?

When we look around us, we do not all necessarily see the same thing. More precisely: the global pictures that we form can be widely various. Paul Feyerabend wonders why Anaximander did not see the sky the same way as he himself saw it:

I was puzzled by Anaximander’s idea that the sun and the moon were holes in dark structures containing fire. Did Anaximander see the moon as a hole or was he just speculating? . . . Often when wandering around in the countryside I stared at the silver disk, trying hard to make it appear as a hole, or a glare; I didn’t succeed.¹

Am I being relativistic? I hope not, but some things certainly depend on our interpretation. Sense experience is the starting point of philosophy, but it is not philosophy yet. One must then understand what he sees, and this

¹ Paul Feyerabend, *Killing Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 140–41.

understanding can become a global view. For instance, Aristotle's philosophy starts with observation. He looks at the world. What does he see? He sees Nature:

That nature exists, it would be absurd to try to prove; for it is obvious that there are many things of this kind, and to prove what is obvious by what is not is the mark of a man who is unable to distinguish what is self-evident from what is not. (This state of mind is clearly possible. A man blind from birth might reason about colours. Presumably therefore such persons must be talking about words without any thought to correspond.)²

The mere fact that Aristotle says that Nature is obvious means that it is not completely obvious. In other words: some can actually look at the world and not see it as "Nature." In the first place, the terms must be clarified. What does "nature" mean? It is first of all the inner principle thanks to which each being moves according to what it is:

Nature is a source or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself and not in virtue of a concomitant attribute.³

Once the term is explained, we can think about it and recognize that it expresses what we experience. Everyone who knows what a cat is expects an unknown cat to behave in a certain way, given the circumstances. Natural things move always according to a certain pattern, if nothing prevents them from doing so.⁴ And if things go wrong, for instance in the case of human actions, this is normally by excess in the sense of nature itself:

In the natural appetites few go wrong, and only in one direction, that of excess; for to eat or drink whatever offers itself till one is surfeited is to exceed the natural amount, since natural appetite is the replenishment of one's deficiency.⁵

"Nature" means a principle of action that is in the individuals of a species (such as human "nature"), but it also indicates the whole world of

² Aristotle, *Physics* II.1, 193a4–9.

³ Aristotle, *Physics* II.1, 192b21–23.

⁴ See Aristotle, *Physics* II.8, 199b16–19: "Those things are natural which, by a continuous movement originated from an internal principle, arrive at some completion: the same completion is not reached from every principle; nor any chance completion, but always the tendency in each is towards the same end, if there is no impediment."

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.11, 1118b15–18.

natural things ("Nature"). Considering the interaction of different specific natures, Aristotle sees the world as organized. For instance, the social character of human nature implies the natural existence of a state.⁶ The same is true when different species interact. The whole of Nature is a kind of system where every species has a role between other species:

Nature proceeds little by little from things lifeless to animal life in such a way that it is impossible to determine the exact line of demarcation, nor on which side thereof an intermediate form should lie. Thus, next after lifeless things in the upward scale comes the plant, and of plants one will differ from another as to its amount of apparent vitality; and, in a word, the whole genus of plants, whilst it is devoid of life as compared with an animal, is endowed with life as compared with other corporeal entities. Indeed, as we just remarked, there is observed in plants a continuous scale of ascent towards the animal. So, in the sea, there are certain objects concerning which one would be at a loss to determine whether they be animal or vegetable.⁷

Commenting on what he sees—an ordered universe—and taking one further step, Aristotle says that "nature never makes anything without a purpose"⁸ and that "everything that depends on the action of nature is by nature as good as it can be."⁹ This is why, for instance, animals must have senses:

Animals must be endowed with sensation, since Nature does nothing in vain. For all things that exist by Nature are means to an end, or will be concomitants of means to an end. Every body capable of forward movement would, if unendowed with sensation, perish and fail to reach its end, which is the aim of Nature; for how could it obtain nutriment?¹⁰

When Aristotle observes the world around him, what does he see? He sees an ordained Nature, composed of many natures, each one of them a meaningful principle in virtue of which beings move within the whole picture. But he has to defend that view, if only by saying that it is evident. It might be necessary to defend it even more 23 centuries later. Let us repeat the question to ourselves. When we look at the world, what do we

⁶ See Aristotle, *Politics* I.2, 1253a2–4: "It is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity."

⁷ Aristotle, *Historia animalium* VIII.1, 588b4–13.

⁸ Aristotle, *De anima* III.9, 432b21.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.9, 1099b21.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *De anima* III.12, 434a30–b2.

see? Many points on a map or some kind of ordained picture? Even an ordained picture can be looked at as just many points: this is what the ant sees while walking on a big portrait of President Lincoln.

Different practical attitudes derive from different viewpoints. If the individual fisherman just catches fish wherever he finds them to be plentiful, from his viewpoint this makes sense. But it is possible that he is disturbing the broader picture more than he thinks, as it is becoming increasingly clear in ecological terms. A similar question arises when one tries to find God from the world. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn summarizes this question in Maritain's terms of a Republic of Natures:

The never ending debate, as to whether there is something like a 'design' in creation, thus goes round in circles, perhaps because nowadays, whenever people talk about 'design' and a 'designer', they automatically think of a 'divine engineer', a kind of omniscient technician, who—because he must be perfect—can, equally, only produce perfect machines. Here, in my view, lies the most profound cause of many misunderstandings—even on the part of the 'intelligent design' school in the U.S.A. God is no clockmaker; he is not a constructor of machines, but a Creator of natures. The world is not a mechanical clock, not some vast machine, nor even a mega-computer, but rather, as Jacques Maritain said, 'une république des natures', 'a republic of natures.' In order to talk meaningfully about the Creator having a 'design', we have to retrieve the concept of 'Nature', an understanding of which we have largely lost today, and which has been replaced by a technical and mechanistic understanding of living things. To say that God creates a 'republic of natures' means that in his creation there is above all what is called *phyein* in Greek, growth and becoming, with all its hesitation, its trials, its failures and its breakthroughs, its instances of cooperation and of conflict, its inconceivable prodigality and its unexpected by-products—both successful and unsuccessful. All natures have their own unmistakable form of activity and influence, with which they are endowed by the Creator, and which lets them grow out of themselves and be active. They reach their goal or attain their purpose not by a force applied from outside them, but by one from within them, working outward. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that a 'nature' is an 'inner principle' on the basis of which everything does those things, and has those effects, which correspond to its nature. He attributes this inner principle to the *ars divina*, the art of the Creator, who endows the creatures with their self-development and the way they shape themselves.¹¹

¹¹ Christoph Schönborn, *Chance or Purpose? Creation, Evolution and a Rational Faith*, ed. Henry Philip Weber, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 98–99. Maritain is quoted from 'Réflexions sur la nécessité et la contingence,' in *Raison et raisons* (Paris: Egloff, 1947), 62. The last sentence refers to Thomas Aquinas, *In Physicorum* II, lec. 14, no. 8.

In other words: one of the best ways to find God from the observation of the world is to see order in the world—and to see that order in terms of “natures” rather than as the order of a watch. Following the explicit suggestion of Cardinal Schönborn, I will try to show how St. Thomas Aquinas built such a Christian view on the basis of Aristotle’s principles.

St. Thomas Aquinas: A “Nature” of Natures

Parts of a Whole

St. Thomas, who is in this matter a good disciple of Aristotle, sees the world as an ordained whole. Every part of a whole recognizes, consciously or not, its membership in something bigger and more important:

In natural things, everything which, as such, naturally belongs to another, is principally, and more strongly inclined to that other to which it belongs, than towards itself. . . . We observe that the part naturally exposes itself in order to safeguard the whole; as, for instance, the hand is without deliberation exposed to the blow for the whole body’s safety. And since reason copies nature, we find the same inclination among the social virtues; for it behooves the virtuous citizen to expose himself to the danger of death for the public weal of the state.¹²

In any whole, therefore, the parts are for the whole; in the universe as such everything is for God, and human beings are able to act consciously towards God:

Now if we wish to assign an end to any whole, and to the parts of that whole, we shall find, first, that each and every part exists for the sake of its proper act, as the eye for the act of seeing; secondly, that less honorable parts exist for the more honorable, as the senses for the intellect, the lungs for the heart; and, thirdly, that all parts are for the perfection of the whole, as the matter for the form, since the parts are, as it were, the matter of the whole. Furthermore, the whole man is on account of an extrinsic end, that end being the fruition of God. So, therefore, in the parts of the universe also every creature exists for its own proper act and perfection, and the less noble for the nobler, as those creatures that are less noble than man exist for the sake of man, whilst each and every creature exists for the perfection of the entire universe. Furthermore, the entire universe, with all its parts, is ordained towards God as its end, inasmuch as it imitates, as it were, and shows forth the Divine goodness, to the glory of God. Reasonable creatures, however, have in some special and higher manner God as their end, since they can attain to

¹² *ST* I, q. 60, a. 5.

Him by their own operations, by knowing and loving Him. Thus it is plain that the Divine goodness is the end of all corporeal things.¹³

In the world there are then many interrelated natures, each one of them moving between the others according to its “natural love.” The human nature implies a conscious move towards God. One of the unexpected aspects of such a view is the “natural love” of all things.

The Natural Love of All Things

Because of their natural order—of their place within the whole universe—all things have what St. Thomas calls a “natural love.” This is the case even of things that do not have any knowledge. For instance, “the connaturalness of a heavy body for the centre is by reason of its weight and may be called ‘natural love.’”¹⁴ Of course “love” is taken in the broad sense of the move towards something that is good for the moving subject; the “natural love” of stones is not conscious:

As for the fact that all things have some desire (*appetunt*), it must not be understood only of things that have some knowledge about their possession of some good, but also about things that lack knowledge. These things tend towards the good, not in the sense that they would know it, but because they are moved towards the good by someone who knows, i.e. through the order put by the divine intellect, as the arrow tends towards the target because of the order of the bowman.¹⁵

Angels and human beings have a conscious natural love. They love God more than themselves.¹⁶ The fact that this love is intimately part of their nature is highlighted by the fact that it remains even in Hell:

¹³ *ST* I, q. 65, a. 2.

¹⁴ *ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 1. See also I–II, q. 41, a. 3.

¹⁵ “Quod autem dicit quod omnia appetunt, non est intelligendum solum de habentibus cognitionem, quae apprehendunt bonum, sed etiam de rebus carentibus cognitione, quae naturali appetitu tendunt in bonum, non quasi cognoscant bonum, sed quia ab aliquo cognoscente moventur ad bonum, scilicet ex ordinatione divini intellectus: ad modum quo sagitta tendit ad signum ex directione sagittantis” (*Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lib. 1 l. 1 n. 11).

¹⁶ See *ST* I, q. 60, a. 5: “Consequently, since God is the universal good, and under this good both man and angel and all creatures are comprised, because every creature in regard to its entire being naturally belongs to God, it follows that from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love. Otherwise, if either of them loved self more than God, it would follow that natural love would be perverse, and that it would not be perfected but destroyed by charity.”

The good of the intellectual nature consists in this, that the intellect contemplates what is true, and the will tends towards what is good. But anything true and good derives from the first and supreme good, which is God. Therefore the human intellect in such an extreme misery must have some knowledge of God and some love of God as principle of natural perfections, and this is natural love.¹⁷

The natural love of things is somehow individual, or at least related to each species. But Nature also implies a relation between different natures.

The Coordination of Natures in "Nature"

Each different nature has a place in relation to other natures. Human beings, who are both spiritual and material, have a unique place, "on the horizon and boundary line between things corporeal and incorporeal."¹⁸ This is an illustration of a striking fact: different natures are actually coordinated. And this coordination does not seem to come from Nature itself, at least in part because it involves many beings that cannot consciously play with the orchestra:

The whole order of the universe is due to the first mover, so that what is in the ordained universe explicates what is in the intellect and in the will of the first mover. And thus it is necessary that the whole organization of the universe be from a first mover. . . . All things that are in the universe are somehow ordained, but all do not have the order, like the animals of the Sea, and the birds, and the plants. And although they are not ordained in the same way, they are not related in such a way that one would not belong to the other; but there is some affinity and order of the one to the other. The plants are for the animals and the animals for men. And that all are ordained to each other is clear from the fact that all together are ordained to one end. . . . From this it is clear that natural things act because of an end, although they do not know their end, because they receive from the first intelligence the inclination to an

¹⁷ "Bonum autem intellectualis naturae in hoc consistit quod intellectus respiciat verum, et voluntas tendat in bonum. Omne autem verum et omne bonum derivatur a primo et summo bono, quod Deus est. Unde oportet quod intellectus hominis in illa extrema miseria constituti, aliquam Dei cognitionem habeat, et aliquam Dei dilectionem; secundum scilicet quod est principium naturalium perfectionum, quae est naturalis dilectio" (*Compendium theologiae*, cap.174). See also *ST I-II*, q. 85, a. 2, ad 3; *De veritate*, q. 16, a. 3, ad 5.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* (ScG) II, ch. 68.

¹⁹ "Totus enim ordo universi est propter primum moventem, ut scilicet explicatur in universo ordinato id quod est in intellectu et voluntate primi moventis. Et sic oportet, quod a primo movente sit tota ordinatio universi. . . . Omnia quae sunt in universo, sunt aliquo modo ordinata, sed non similiter omnia habent ordinem,

end.¹⁹

Things are coordinated in a teleological way: towards an end. As the nature of a thing is a principle of action in that thing, which moves it towards its proper purpose, the whole of Nature is composed of things that work together thanks to some ends given by their Maker:

We see the things in nature acting for an end, and attaining to ends which are both useful and certain. And since they lack intelligence, they are unable to direct themselves, but must be directed and moved by one directing them, and who possesses an intellect. Thus it is that the movement of the things of nature toward a certain end indicates the existence of something higher by which the things of nature are directed to an end and governed. And so, since the whole course of nature advances to an end in an orderly way and is directed, we have to posit something higher which directs and governs them as Lord; and this is God. . . . Thus the Psalm (88:10) says: 'You rule the power of the sea, and you still the swelling of its waves,' as though saying: You are the Lord and govern all things. John shows that he knows this about the Word when he says below (1:11), 'He came unto his own,' i.e., to the world, since the whole universe is his own.²⁰

The contemporary ecological movement has "discovered" some unexpected interdependence within Nature: take away or add an animal at some place, and a whole chain is disturbed. One realizes the role played

scilicet animalia marina, et volatilia, et plantae. Et tamen licet non sint eodem modo ordinata, non ita se habent, quod unum eorum non pertineat ad alterum; sed est aliqua affinitas et ordo unius ad alterum. Plantae enim sunt propter animalia, et animalia sunt propter homines. Et quod omnia sint ordinata adinvicem, patet ex hoc, quod omnia simul ordinantur ad unum finem. . . . Et ex hoc patet, quod res naturales agunt propter finem, licet finem non cognoscant, quia a primo intelligente assequuntur inclinationem in finem" (Aquinas, *Sententia Metaphysicae*, Bk. 12, lect. 12, nos. 5–8).

²⁰ "Videmus enim ea quae sunt in rebus naturalibus, propter finem agere, et consequi utiles et certos fines; et cum intellectu careant, se ipsa dirigere non possunt, nisi ab aliquo dirigente per intellectum dirigantur et moveantur. Et hinc est quod ipse motus rerum naturalium in finem certum, indicat esse aliquid altius, quo naturales res diriguntur in finem et gubernantur. Et ideo cum totus cursus naturae ordinate in finem procedat et dirigatur, de necessitate oportet nos ponere aliquid altius, quod dirigat ista et sicut dominus gubernet: et hic est Deus. Et haec gubernandi auctoritas in verbo Dei demonstratur, cum dicit *dominum*; unde in Ps. LXXXVIII, 10 dicitur: *tu dominaris potestati maris; motum autem fluctuum eius tu mitigas*; quasi dicat: tu es dominus et universa gubernas. Hanc cognitionem manifestat Ioannes se habere de verbo, cum dicit: *in propria venit*, scilicet in mundum; quia totus mundus est suus proprius" (Aquinas, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, Prooemium 1).

by some predator when this predator has been exterminated; its extermination leads to the proliferation of smaller animals that eat all the plants. Aquinas had already observed some of that, as appears in his expression “some affinity and order of the one to the other.”

One of the most striking aspects of the organization of the universe is that our intelligence can somehow grasp it. If that were not the case, the starting points of our cultural and scientific activities would be missing. When we start thinking, we trust in the possibility of connecting different elements. This is how a baby comes to realize that both milk and water are “liquids,” that two dogs are “dogs,” and that dogs and cats are “animals.” All of this implies that our rational nature is inserted within a broader whole, which is somehow rational. This is at the heart of Pope Benedict XVI’s lecture in Regensburg, where he applies such a view for instance to contemporary sciences:

Modern scientific reason with its intrinsically Platonic element bears within itself a question which points beyond itself and beyond the possibilities of its methodology. Modern scientific reason quite simply has to accept the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature as a given, on which its methodology has to be based. Yet the question why this has to be so is a real question, and one which has to be remanded by the natural sciences to other modes and planes of thought—to philosophy and theology.²¹

Some scientists have also noticed that. For instance, Joshua Lederberg (Nobel Prize holder for medicine in 1958) explained his activity in religious terms: “What is incontrovertible is that a religious impulse guides our motive in sustaining that scientific inquiry. If not, what else?”²² And the contemporary Spanish agnostic philosopher Amelia Varcácel complains about the religious dimension of reason: “Although religion is irrational, reason is religious. It is anxious to totalize, and we cannot avoid it.”²³

But some questions arise. This “affinity” and “order” do not always seem

²¹ Benedict XVI, Regensburg Lecture, 12 Sept. 2006: see www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

²² Joshua Lederberg, “A Religious Impulse Guides Our Motive in Sustaining Scientific Inquiry,” in *Cosmos, Bios, Theos: Scientists Reflect on Science, God, and the Origins of the Universe, Life and Homo Sapiens*, ed. Henry Margenau and Roy Abraham Varghese (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1992), 184.

²³ “Aunque la religión sea irracional, la razón es religiosa. Tiene, y non podemos evitarlo, ansia de totalizar” (Amelia Varcácel in: Victoria Camps and Amelia Varcácel, *Hablemos de Dios* [Madrid: Taurus, 2007]).

perfect: the physical order helps us understand how a tsunami works. But such an affinity hardly seems good in the case of a devastating tsunami. As the contemporary French atheist André Comte-Sponville says, “The cancerous tumour is also a kind of timer. . . . How does that prove that tumours or cataclysms proceed from an intelligent and benevolent design?”²⁴ And is the order perfect up to the point of a total determinism, where we would lose our freedom? I start with the first of these two questions, that is, evil.

Evil and the Order of Nature

The order of the world is not always perfect, and evil is the first argument that comes to mind against the existence of God—as Aquinas noticed.²⁵ In the terms of David Hume,

This world for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.²⁶

One of the first things that a believer should avoid is giving an easy theoretical answer to such a question. But it remains possible to define the terms of the question. What is evil? Although evil is very present in our lives, it is actually present as an absence rather than as a nature. Evil is what should be in a being of a given nature, and happens not to be there:

Because evil is the privation of good, and not a mere negation . . . , therefore not every defect of good is an evil, but the defect of the good which is naturally due. For the want of sight is not an evil in a stone, but it is an evil in an animal; since it is against the nature of a stone to see.²⁷

Evil can be understood only in relation to specific natures, which are good. Therefore nothing is totally evil, precisely because evil cannot not be attached to a good nature.²⁸ This is hardly an existential consolation, of course, but it shows that evil is actually not an ultimate question. Evil

²⁴ “Une tumeur cancéreuse est aussi une espèce de minuterie. . . . En quoi cela prouve-t-il que tumeurs ou cataclysmes relèvent d’un dessein intelligent et bienveillant?” (André Comte-Sponville, *L’esprit de l’athéisme: Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu* [Paris: Albin Michel, 2006], 100).

²⁵ See Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 1.

²⁶ David Hume, *Dialogues and History of Religion*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), part V, p. 102.

²⁷ *ST I*, q. 48, a. 5, ad 1.

²⁸ See *ST I*, q. 103, a. 7, ad 1: “There is nothing wholly evil in the world, for evil is ever founded on good, as shown above. Therefore something is said to be evil

questions the order of the universe, yes, but it also depends on an existing order. Some contemporary apologists have noticed that clearly:

Regardless of the evil in the world, we still have to explain three things: the fact that the world exists, the intelligence in the world, and the reality of conscious thought. The greatest evils can't erase questions of origin, and these origin questions point clearly to an eternally existent, infinitely intelligent being. But once we recognize the inevitability of God's existence, we're baffled by the fact that there's evil in the world he created.²⁹

This is why Aquinas, with Boethius, turns around the question of God and evil:

Boethius introduces a philosopher asking the question: 'If there is a God, how comes evil?' The argument should be turned the other way: 'If there is evil, there is a God.' For there would be no evil, if the order of goodness were taken away, the privation of which is evil; and this order would not be, if God were not.³⁰

In other words, we go back to the initial question: when we see the world, what do we see? An organized Nature composed of many natures. The organization is not perfect, true enough. But it is organized in a way that Nature itself cannot explain. And any question about the deficiencies presupposes the order, without which the question would be meaningless. To refuse the religious answer is less an alternative answer than a refusal to answer, as John Paul II said in 1985:

To speak of chance for a universe which presents such a complex organization in its elements, and such marvellous finality in its life, would be equivalent to giving up the search for an explanation of the

through its escaping from the order of some particular good. If it wholly escaped from the order of the Divine government, it would wholly cease to exist."

²⁹ Roy Abraham Varghese, *The Wonder of the World: A Journey from Modern Science to the Mind of God* (Fountain Hills, AZ: Tyr Publishing, 2003), 379. See also R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God: The Challenge of John Hick's Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 80: "The 'older schools of natural theology' are on more solid footing (in terms of overall strategy) in seeking to justify belief in God independently of the reality of evil and then subsequently addressing the problem of evil in light of the reasonable belief that God exists. If God exists, then there can be no logical problem of evil. It is only a problem for our understanding and for experience when pain is to be endured."

³⁰ ScG III, ch. 71.

³¹ John Paul II, General Audience, 10 July 1985.

world as it appears to us. In fact, this would be equivalent to admitting effects without cause. It would be an abdication of human intelligence which would thus refuse to think, to seek a solution for its problems.³¹

The universe is organized. Even our consciousness of evil as evil witnesses to that organization. If we refuse to accept an organizer because of the disorders, we just leave without answer the question of why the world is organized at all.

Nature and Freedom

The second problem that can arise from the fact of the order of the universe is about our freedom. The order of the world is beautiful when one considers mountains or wildlife. But does the world's dependence upon God imply a strict necessity, because of divine immutability? God does not create a world where everything would be necessary. He wants an internal diversity of the universe, and therefore some causes are contingent (not necessary).³² This is especially important for all intelligent creatures—angels and human beings—whose natural abilities include free will. For St. Thomas freedom and nature are not opposed, because freedom is understood within the nature of the acting subject:

He acts freely, who acts of his own accord. Now man does of his own accord that which he does from a habit that is suitable to his nature: since a habit inclines one as a second nature. If, however, a habit be in opposition to nature, man would not act according to his nature, but according to some corruption affecting that nature.³³

In other words, we can be free human beings only because we are human beings. Human nature is moved according to what it is, that is, a nature endowed with freedom:

³² See *ST* I, q. 22, a. 4: "I answer that, Divine providence imposes necessity upon some things; not upon all, as some formerly believed. For to providence it belongs to order things towards an end. Now after the divine goodness, which is an extrinsic end to all things, the principal good in things themselves is the perfection of the universe; which would not be, were not all grades of being found in things. Whence it pertains to divine providence to produce every grade of being. And thus it has prepared for some things necessary causes, so that they happen of necessity; for others contingent causes, that they may happen by contingency, according to the nature of their proximate causes."

³³ *ST* I-II, q. 108, a. 1, ad 2.

³⁴ "Et ideo dicendum est, quod Deus omnia movet, sed diversimode, in quantum scilicet unumquodque movetur ab eo secundum modum naturae suae. Et sic homo movetur a Deo ad volendum . . . per modum liberae voluntatis" (*Super Rom.*, cap. 9 l. 3).

God moves everything, but in different ways, because everything is moved by God according to the mode of its nature. Thus the human being is moved by God to will . . . by the mode of free will.³⁴

One of the most important principles for St. Thomas is that God creates natures and respects them. This is how he explains that God, who is purely spiritual, relates to human beings with visible signs. In a sense, He speaks our language, which is not purely spiritual. This appears for instance in these “remedies” that are the sacraments:

Remedies of this kind had to be handed on with some visible signs. First, indeed, because just as He does for all other things, so also for man, God provides according to his condition. Now, man’s condition is such that he is brought to grasp the spiritual and intelligible naturally through the senses. Therefore, remedies had to be given to men under sensible signs. Second, because instruments must be proportioned to their first cause. But the first and universal cause of human salvation is the incarnate Word.³⁵

This text shows how God, because he respects the nature of his creatures, relates to human beings in a human way: first in the incarnation, then in the life of the Church. Human beings relate to God, but with the help of the material world. The basis of human knowledge—the principles that are naturally in any knowing man—depends on sensitive knowledge. This is, for example, the case of the natural knowledge of the difference between the whole and the part:

It is owing to the very nature of the intellectual soul that man, having once grasped what is a whole and what is a part, should at once perceive that every whole is larger than its part: and in like manner with regard to other such principles. Yet what is a whole, and what is a part—this he cannot know except through the intelligible species which he has received from phantasms [images formed in our mind by abstraction from material objects].³⁶

Human beings are thus spiritual beings who need the material world. This is a special case of the interdependence of things in Nature, because the human creature is between two worlds. The wholly spiritual God respects our material component, and uses it to lift us up towards him. But precisely: can we go towards him? How far can the principle of movement which is our nature go?

³⁵ ScG IV, ch. 56. See also *ST* III, q. 61, a. 1.

³⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 51, a. 1.

Human Nature and Its Movement towards God

Human nature depends on the material world, but has a higher aspiration. The problem is that such a desire is beyond our reach, and, in addition to that, we die. Our intellectual nature seeks knowledge, and a knowledge that lasts. The whole body of human culture witnesses to that. For that reason, death is somehow against nature for us:

Everything naturally aspires to existence after its own manner. Now, in things that have knowledge, desire ensues upon knowledge. The senses indeed do not know existence, except under the conditions of 'here' and 'now,' whereas the intellect apprehends existence absolutely, and for all time; so that everything that has an intellect naturally desires always to exist. But a natural desire cannot be in vain.³⁷

On the other hand, our nature is not independent and cannot subsist by itself:

As every created thing has its being from another, and, considered in itself, is nothing, so does it need to be preserved by another in the good which pertains to its nature.³⁸

Not only are we unable to reach what we naturally desire, we are not even able to desire what "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). We must be told about it:

Nature inclines us to hope for the good which is proportionate to human nature; but for man to hope for a supernatural good he had to be induced by the authority of the Divine law.³⁹

Therefore God provided a way for us, which is in line with our nature but leads us to a higher level:

It is the nature of the human mind to gather its knowledge from sensible things; nor can it of itself arrive at the direct vision of the divine substance, as that substance is in itself raised above all sensible things and all other beings to boot, and beyond all proportion with them. But because the perfect good of man consists in his knowing God in such

³⁷ *ST* I, q. 75, a. 6.

³⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2, ad 2.

³⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 22, a. 1, ad 1.

⁴⁰ *ScG* IV, ch. 1.

way as he can, there is given to man a way of ascending to the knowledge of God, to the end that so noble a creature should not seem to exist altogether in vain, unable to attain the proper end of his existence.⁴⁰

Providential actions in the world are in line with creation, even when they lead us to a level infinitely higher than what we could achieve, such as participation in divine life. Here St. Thomas adds the Christian economy to the results of the observation of the world by Aristotle:

The actions of natural things are not in vain—as it is proved in the second Book of *Physics*—but are ordained towards certain ends by the intellect which institutes nature, in such a way that the whole order of nature is somehow the work of an intelligence, as the philosopher says.⁴¹

Human nature is not vain, because it can achieve its relation to the highest good, which it naturally desires: God. But doesn't that achievement destroy nature? Should we apply Exodus 33:20 (*No man shall see Me, and live*) to our human nature? Not surprisingly, Thomas does not think so. For him, "beatitude does not destroy nature, since it is its perfection."⁴² If our desire for beatitude does not destroy our nature in this life—where we so often mistakenly seek beatitude in imperfect goods—the same desire does not destroy our nature when we truly attain beatitude:

There is not in the separated soul a will changeable from good to evil, although it is changeable from this object of will to that so long as the order to the same ultimate end is preserved. It is now apparent that such immutability is not in conflict with the power of free will whose act it is to choose, for choice is of the things for the end; choice is not of the ultimate end. Therefore, just as there is now no conflict with free will in the fact that with an immutable will we desire beatitude and fly from misery in general, so there will be no contrariety to free will in the fact that the will is unchangeably fixed upon some definite thing as upon an ultimate end.⁴³

In Heaven, in the vision of God, we are finally fully human. Of course we cannot choose not to desire God, but we cannot choose that in this life either: I have already said that this natural love remains even in Hell.

⁴¹ "Rerum enim naturalium actiones non sunt frustra, ut in 2 Physic. probatur, sed ad certos fines ordinatae ab intellectu naturam instituyente, ut sic totum opus naturae sit quodammodo opus intelligentiae, ut philosophus dicit." (Aquinas, *Super Sent.*, Bk. 2, d. 25, q. 1, a. 1 co)

⁴² *ST I*, q. 62, a. 7, sc.

⁴³ *ScG IV*, ch. 95.

We have our nature, we are human: this is not optional. Of course in Heaven the possibility of a mistake in the identification of the object that makes us fully happy disappears. But our stable relationship to the Supreme Good does not even mean that our free will becomes inactive, because “it is changeable from this object of will to that.” This should not surprise us if we think that the unchangeable God can make different choices, and that we ask the saints to pray for us: there would no point in asking, were they in a situation in which no choice was possible.

Conclusion

Our senses provide the starting point of our knowledge. But what we see is not all of that we know. We think about the data of our senses. If we think about the world in which we are, we come to notice that it is ordained. Not only is it ordained as a whole, but it is composed of ordained natures. Natural sciences themselves show that by their very distinction—zoology, botanics, chemistry, and so forth; so also do the human sciences—linguistics, musicology, sociology, and so forth. The world is made of parts that have certain characteristics and that can be expected to “behave” in a certain way, but with a certain autonomy.

This is what Aristotle already saw, and expressed in terms of “natures.” St. Thomas Aquinas built upon Aristotle, adding a Christian perspective. The resulting picture is that our world is a whole of interrelated parts. Each nature within Nature has a natural tendency, a “natural love.” This order is not perfect—faith attributes such a disorder to the disturbed relation of human beings with God—but evil itself shows that order exists, even though in a painfully negative way. This order is not designed by God in a deterministic way: God wants different kinds of creatures, including free ones (angels and human beings). Our freedom is due to our nature, and in Heaven both our freedom and our nature remain. In the beatific vision, we do not become less human, but more human.

As human nature is a bridge between the material world and the spiritual world, it shows particularly well the relation to God of the ordained material Nature. Therefore the redemption of the human race also shows the relation of God with the world, including the material world in which we live now. Redemption shows at the same time what we are, what we should be, and what we shall be. At the midnight Mass of Christmas 2007, Pope Benedict XVI showed how the world, restored by God, is actually best understood in liturgy:

Gregory of Nyssa, in his Christmas homilies . . . applies this passage [“He pitched his tent among us” (Jn 1:14)] about the tent to the tent

of our body, which has become worn out and weak, exposed everywhere to pain and suffering. And he applies it to the whole universe, torn and disfigured by sin. What would he say if he could see the state of the world today, through the abuse of energy and its selfish and reckless exploitation? Anselm of Canterbury, in an almost prophetic way, once described a vision of what we witness today in a polluted world whose future is at risk: "Everything was as if dead, and had lost its dignity, having been made for the service of those who praise God. The elements of the world were oppressed, they had lost their splendour because of the abuse of those who enslaved them for their idols, for whom they had not been created." Thus, according to Gregory's vision, the stable in the Christmas message represents the ill-treated world. What Christ rebuilds is no ordinary palace. He came to restore beauty and dignity to creation, to the universe: this is what began at Christmas and makes the angels rejoice. The Earth is restored to good order by virtue of the fact that it is opened up to God, it obtains its true light anew, and in the harmony between human will and divine will, in the unification of height and depth, it regains its beauty and dignity. Thus Christmas is a feast of restored creation. It is in this context that the Fathers interpret the song of the angels on that holy night: it is an expression of joy over the fact that the height and the depth, Heaven and Earth, are once more united; that man is again united to God. According to the Fathers, part of the angels' Christmas song is the fact that now angels and men can sing together and in this way the beauty of the universe is expressed in the beauty of the song of praise. Liturgical song—still according to the Fathers—possesses its own peculiar dignity through the fact that it is sung together with the celestial choirs. It is the encounter with Jesus Christ that makes us capable of hearing the song of the angels, thus creating the real music that fades away when we lose this singing-with and hearing-with.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Benedict XVI, Homily at Midnight Mass, Christmas 2007: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20071224_christmas_en.html.