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HAUNTING CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARIES: MIRACLES IN THE *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE* OF THOMAS AQUINAS

ABSTRACT. Thomas understands our creaturely being under two contiguous categories: nature and grace, or the natural and the supernatural. In this two-fold understanding of the creaturely whole, miracle names a reality that haunts the boundary between. Is the result seamless harmony? Or seismic activity?

1. Introduction

Miracles and the miraculous only became a primary theme of theological and philosophical reflection late in the game. You could say that “miracle” came into its own in the eighteenth century and in response to the skeptical criticism leveled against it by David Hume among others.¹ In the long preceding centuries, Christian discussions of miracle occurred within the context of what were thought of as other, more elemental themes: providence, grace, justification, Christology, the sacraments. Moreover, if one thinks about the thirteenth century, these more elemental themes are themselves perhaps best pictured as the distillate of attempts to plumb theoretically the allegorical or theological meaning of scriptural “things” or *res*.²

¹ The course of miracles as a theological *locus* in its own right is well surveyed in Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984). For philosophical and theological responses to Hume’s arguments in particular see David Johnson, *Hume, Holism and Miracles* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); and with greater spleen John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² The formulation of an allegorical meaning to scriptural things could be said to take its provenance in the Latin tradition from Augustine’s sacred semiology in *De doctrina christiana*. The sense of theological *loci* as collated and discussed in Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* and in commentary upon their four books as the allegorical sense of scripture in

We do well to remind ourselves of this thirteenth-century situation. The term “miracle” was used in formal theological discourse to name above all a determinable subset or category of scriptural “things.” As a result, miracle impressed itself upon theological minds in the interpretive struggle to understand the “things” there encountered *in their pointing beyond themselves* to Christ and the church.³ We do *well* in this, for it provides us an illuminating context for examining the appearance of miracle within the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas.⁴

Of course, I am suggesting we do more than map the word “miracle” onto the blandly bureaucratic term “category.” That is, I do not want us to deal with miracle as if it were an organizational container meant to hold in well-marked and cross-referenced locales certain bits of reality.⁵

nue see John Van Engen, “Studying Scripture in the Early University,” in *Neue Richtungen in der hoch- und spätmittelalterlichen Bibelexegese*, ed. Robert E. Lerner and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996) 17-38; and Robert Sweetman, “Beryl Smalley, Thomas of Cantimpré, and the Performative Reading of Scripture: A Study in Two *Exempla*,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 256-275.

³ The classic study of the four senses of Scripture remains Henri De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vol. (Paris: Aubier, 1959-1964); but, see, also, Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* 3rd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). For Thomas’ understanding of the allegorical sense see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.10.resp.. There Thomas identifies the allegorical sense with the capacity of the “old law” to act as signifier of the “new law.” But he goes on to sum up that sense of scripture as “ea quae in Christo sunt facta, vel in his quae Christum significant” before moving on to identify the moral sense of Scripture with what within those allegorical things signify in turn what we should do. So while I am claiming that “miracle” as it comes to be thematized by scholastic theologians does so primarily as scriptural “res,” I acknowledge that Scripture was not the only source from which the thirteenth-century theologian drew. Miracles clustered around the saints and their posthumous *relicta*, and wherever one encountered the spectre of martyrdom and its aura of sanctity (e.g., in the context of the Crusades). See in this regard, Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1982).

⁴ The most recent treatment of the theme in Aquinas is Gilles Berceville, “L’Étonnante Alliance: Évangile et miracles selon saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue Thomiste* 103 (2003): 5-74. Berceville is a student of Jean-Pierre Torrel and represents as a result his newer and revisionary approach to reading Thomas. For older neo-scholastic treatments, see Vladimiro Boublik, *L’Azione divina «praeter ordinem naturae» secondo S. Tommaso d’Aquino* (Rome: Libreria editrice della pontificia università lateranense, 1968); and Alois Van Hove, *La doctrine du miracle chez saint Thomas et son accord avec les principes de la recherche scientifique* (Wetteren: Meester en Fils, 1927).

⁵ Descriptions and criticisms of “container logic” are characteristic of the work of George Lakoff. See his *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and more recently with Mark John-

Rather I am suggesting that those bits are recalcitrant and so can only be contained under constraint. They resist such housebreaking, for there is something altogether different, even spooky, about the bits we would consign to this category.

Moreover, the category itself turns out to be a trickster. That is, miracle is profitably imagined as hiding behind the corners of Thomas's conceptual edifice. It seems intent upon jumping out at unsuspecting readers to bellow its characteristic, "Boo!" Indeed it is a spectral presence within the world of Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*, one that confounds a certain conceptual *ductus* or flow that is equally native to the text.⁶ As such, it opens the text up to the what-must-be-said about the world revealed in the scriptures, but which is nearly impossible to say within the limits of Thomas's chosen discourse.

2. Nature and Grace in the World of Creatures

So we ask of Thomas and his *Summa*: what is this world opened up by the scriptures? The answer is deceptively simple: it is a world of creatures. But what is *this* world? It is a God-made harmony or order of beings which harmony or order can be distributed across two ontological fields: nature and grace—the latter in and through its chief created effect, the supernatural. Thomas understands each of these fields to be a gift of God. In both of these gifts, God gives what God has to give: nothing less than God's self, *esse*, albeit ecstatically and proportionate to the natural or supernatural entity in question. The model here is Christological, i.e., the Incarnation, *kenosis*, God's self-emptying by which God-in-Christ descends to join those creatures that are most damaged in a sin-soaked world. This should not surprise. The *Summa* is perhaps best understood as an attempt to prepare Dominican friars for their apostolate *ad extra* via the location of a precise understanding of virtue, vice and Christian living within a systematic, theological, indeed Christological order, which order was associated by scholastic theologians or masters of the sacred page with the allegorical sense of Scripture, that is, as said, the meaning of scriptural "things" as they point beyond themselves to Christ and his church.⁷

son, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

⁶ For the notion of literary *ductus* see Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially 77-81.

⁷ This way of understanding the *Summa* presupposes Van Engen's understanding of the development and purpose of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard as school text in theol-

So both nature and grace can be seen as gifts of God but gifts given unto distinguishable ends. Nature is given so as to make something of or to give substance to all of us creaturely nothings, indeed, to creation itself. And grace is given to draw what we nothings-made-somethings are forward toward what we are meant to be. Thomas establishes this way of looking at the creation most clearly with respect to the human creature.

In 1.94.1, he asks whether the First Human was created in grace. One can, Thomas admits, find strong arguments in the tradition against such a notion. He cites Augustine's *City of God*, however, as the frame for his magisterial response: God established nature and simultaneously (*simul*) gifted it with grace. Thus, there never was a time in which Adam was without grace. Thomas elaborates his subsequent response in terms of what he understands to be a normatively hierarchical ordering of the human person: reason is to be subject to God, the lower psychic powers to reason, and the body to the soul. But, this right ordering is not natural, for had it been, it would have survived Adam's fall into sin. Consequently, the right ordering of the human person is an effect of grace.

Thomas goes on to explore the implications of such a position. What passions would have been present in a right ordered human person (1.94.2)? What virtues (1.94.3)? The first question demands that one define passion. On the old stoic definition, there would have been no passions at all in the right ordered person.⁸ But if passion is taken as a synonym for appetite, there would have been present in the First Human every passion that is properly subjectible to truly God-subject reason. The second question leads to the conclusion that the theological as well as the cardinal virtues were present in the First Human, even before the fall.

So if the world of creatures is constituted by both nature and grace, how are these two ontological fields to be understood in relation to each

ogy, Leonard Boyle's work on the setting of the *Summa*, and Jean-Marc Laporte's work on the Christological order of the *Summa*. It puts these sources together to draw conclusions that the sources' authors would undoubtedly not have foreseen. For Van Engen see note 2 above. For Boyle, see Leonard E. Boyle, *Facing History: A Different Thomas Aquinas* (Louvain-la-neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, 2000) especially 64-106. For Laporte's work see "Christ in Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*: Peripheral or Pervasive?" *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 221-248.

⁸ For the Stoics and the passions see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) especially 316-483; and Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000.

other? Here, of course, one can point to Thomas's oft-repeated maxim: grace does not destroy but rather perfects nature (*In Boethii de trinitate* 2,3). Grace is, in this sense, nature's (proximate) end or term. Nature enjoys its perfection if and only if it is graced, one could say. And because this is so, grace acts upon nature as a final cause acts upon its effect. Final causes, it is to be remembered, are first in the order of causation. Consequently, grace can be said to call nature into being, to rule and measure its stuff, its movements, its intelligible patterns by imbuing each with purposiveness. I should quickly add that it does so unto glory; its perfecting of nature is itself ruled to the final causality of glory.

Such a conception of nature and grace can entail no disharmony. Because nature is ruled to grace, it is conformed and fitted to grace from its very inception. The creation story reveals God's judgment upon the fit: "it is very good," we are told. One must, however, draw a further implication. Pure nature without the structuring dynamic of grace is impossible; without grace there is no nature.

But here we must pause, for such a position does not accord with a venerable interpretation of Thomas on the fall. The position goes something like this: When Adam sinned, grace and its salubrious effects were withdrawn from him, leaving him in the vulnerable and diminished state of pure nature, a state slowly but progressively bent and wizened by subsequent sinful acts and the vicious habits they engendered.⁹

⁹ This way of interpreting Thomas has its roots in the sixteenth-century renaissance of Thomism. It takes its cue from the insistence upon an irreducibly duplex end of human living and flourishing apparent in the work of Cajetan and others. See, Thomas de Vio Cajetan's commentary on *Summa theologiae* 1.23 and 1-2.85.1 in *Divi Thomae Aquinatis doctoris angelici ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum totius theologiae summa, in tres partes digesta, et ad Romanum exemplar collata, cum commentariis R.D.D. Thomae de Vio Caietani*, (Venetiis: apud Franciscum de Francis Senensem, 1596). For the notion of *natura pura* as it came to be developed at one end of this revival, see the article "Natura pura" in *Enciclopedia cattolica* 8: 1689-1691. For twentieth-century proponents of the interpretation I am opposing here see Giacomo Crosignani, *La teoria del naturale e del soprannaturale secondo s. Tommaso d'Aquino* (Piacenza: Collegio Alberoni, 1974) especially 15-32; and Jean Baptiste Kors, *La justice primitive et le péché original d'après s. Thomas* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1930) especially 120 and again 161-163. It must be said that both of the latter theologians acknowledge the incoherence of "pure nature" and yet their account of the fall continues to oppose nature to grace dichotomously and so to act as if "pure nature" were in fact a Thomistic possibility, at least for the purposes of dealing with the effects of original sin. Finally see the fine historical overview provided by Henri de Lubac in his *Le surnaturel: Étude historique* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), i.e., his justly (in)famous revisionary reading of Thomas and the tradition. I find myself deeply indebted to De Lubac in my own ongoing attempts to understand the Angelic Doctor on nature and Grace.

Thomas trains his whole eye upon what he calls "the good of nature" in his discussion of original sin and its effects. In 1-2.85.1, he asks whether the good of nature is diminished by sin. In the next article he asks whether the whole good of nature can be borne away in sin. He answers the first question by distinguishing three ways of understanding what constitutes the good of nature. In the first place, the good of nature can refer to the principles or constitutive elements of nature, inclusive of the properties they entail. In the second place, the good of nature can refer to the inclination to virtue that is a human being's natural disposition. In the third place, the good of nature refers to the gift of original justice. In Thomas's view the third of these goods is an effect of grace and so is taken away by sin. The first good is constitutive of nature itself and therefore cannot be taken away without the annihilation of that nature. Finally, the second good of nature is diminished but cannot be eradicated by sin, for it is rooted in nature, though it only achieves its perfection as an effect of grace.

Since the diminution of nature's good is only meaningful in the second way of speaking of nature's good, Thomas denies the eradicability of the good of nature in 1-2.85.2. He then uses the remaining articles to explore the implications of a proper concept of the diminution of nature's good, exploring *seriatim* nature's wounds (1-2.85.3), privations (1-2.85.4), and death (1-2.85.5). He concludes his *quaestio* by asking whether and in what sense all these implications can meaningfully be called natural (1-2.85.6). The point is that grace *is* nearly absent from his discussion of the effects of original sin. Moreover, in speaking of the removal of original justice in sin, Thomas accounts for the removal precisely *because it is an effect of grace*. It is easy to see how one could understand Thomas's *quaestio* on the effects of original sin to imply that the gift of grace is withdrawn from human nature. Indeed, this withdrawal is precisely original sin's chief effect. All else, i.e., everything discussed in the articles of the *quaestio*, is, in such a view, the implication of the withdrawal of grace from human nature. It is in effect another way of naming the diminution of nature's good.

Such a way of interpreting the effects of original sin is defensible, provided the *quaestio* is thought of in isolation from other sections of the *Summa*. Nevertheless, it is difficult if not impossible to square with grace's relationship to nature as a final cause to its effect. Moreover, Thomas does not in fact state that grace is withdrawn from humankind as a result of original sin but that its supernatural effect upon human nature is interrupted. A new and handicapped order emerges in the

human person via the rupture caused by sin. And yet, though the good of nature is diminished, it is not wholly taken away. This entails the continued presence of grace as structuring dynamic, for no grace, no nature; final causes are first in the order of causation. So grace remains even in the ambivalent order emergent within a postlapsarian world. Its structuring dynamic continues to operate within nature so that it remains structurally whole, though no longer lifted toward its perfection. In other words, by the hidden presence of grace, nature remains what it was always meant to be as a barest beginning. But by the very hiddenness of grace its elevating excess, its supernatural or perfecting effects are removed; nature is unable to become all that it was meant to be in the end or indeed what it had been in its prelapsarian condition. And so its good, i.e., its orientation toward its end, is diminished and right living becomes a difficult thing, wrested, you might say, from the cold hard ground by the sweat of our brows.

3. Miracle in Relation To Nature, Itself and Grace

In the *Summa*, the incarnational pattern of *kenosis* forms the template for all God's interaction with the world of creatures. This is also true of the acts called miracles. Miracles accompany scriptural revelation about God's providence for creation (1.105.6-8). They mark an instrumentality God assigns to angels and saints in the execution of divine care (1.110.4; 1.114.4). They can accompany and hence provide an important perspective from which to examine the justification of the impious (1-2.113.10). They constitute a special gifting of the prophet within the communal life of faith (2-2.178). They punctuate the life of the Saviour, witnessing to the truth of his teaching (3.43-45). Finally, they signify even as they confer the outpouring of grace in the sacraments (3.75-77).

Miracles are events that work palpable effects on the world of creatures. One need only remember the wonders of the world-made-right envisioned by Isaiah (Is. 35, 5-6), recited by Jesus to John the Baptizer's disciples (Mt. 11, 1-6): the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dumb speak. And so a question arises that seems hard to avoid when considering the world of creatures as Thomas understands it, dispersed as it is across the ontological fields of nature and grace: to what field does miracle belong?

As soon as one has asked the question, one wishes one had not. For the uncomplicated image of nature and the supernatural sketched out above begins to change before our eyes. Nature and grace go all fuzzy and out of focus. We might imagine whimsically if a bit invidiously that in the presence of miracle our clear-eyed Dominican becomes afflicted

with double vision. Whatever the case, miracle as it is thematized in Thomas's *Summa* cuts an eerie figure. Indeed, as promised, it confounds the serene *ductus* or flow of Thomas's story of nature and grace by doubling both protagonists, and itself in the process. It disturbs the simplicity of their interaction by generating the uncanny presence of not one, not two, but three *doppelgänger*. Shelley smiles; what conceit!

Let us look our uncanny doubles right in the face. We begin with the field or order of nature and Thomas's discussion of divine governance. In the course of his examination of God's power to change creatures, Thomas asks whether God can do anything outside of the order intrinsic to things (1.105.6); whether all God's works outside of the natural order of things are miracles (1.105.7); and whether there is a proper gradation of miracles along the continuum of greater and lesser (1.105.8).

In the first of these articles, Thomas begins by observing that the effects of a given cause are subject to an order derived from the cause itself. Moreover there are as many such orders as there are causes, and just as causes are themselves subject to an order along the continuum of superior to inferior, so too are the orders derived from them. He offers as example that the domestic order and its causal *paterfamilias* depends upon the civil order and its causal rector that in turn depends upon the royal order and its causal king. So if the order of things is to be considered as derived from and dependent upon the first cause, absolutely speaking, God cannot act against the order of things. If however the order of things depends upon a cause among secondary causes, then God can act outside of the order of things. For God is not subject to such an order; rather, it is subject to God.

Thomas does not choose between these two ways of understanding God's relationship to the order of things. Both capture something true about the ways of God in the world. Already one sees a doubling of vision. Nature itself is doubled and therefore miracle is legitimately understood to have an ambivalent relationship to it. Miracle is properly understood as something that has a cause hidden pure-and-simple and to everyone (1.105.7). God is that cause, and God acts so whenever God acts outside of the order of causes known to us.

This latter description however is still too broad. Creation and the justification of the impious are also enacted by God and outside of the created or secondary causes known to us. Yet they are not miracles, strictly speaking, for they do not pertain to the order of nature in that they cannot be caused by any secondary cause. Consequently, they are not enacted outside of the order of nature. This understanding of mira-

cle, of course, presupposes the order of nature as an order of secondary or created causes. Miracles are those creaturely possibilities that God enacts outside of the order of created natures to which miracles belong. But, since the order of nature is legitimately viewed, absolutely, i.e., as derived from God as first cause, it can also be said that no natural phenomenon is a miracle; for nothing is done outside of the power of God (1.105.8). It is in this light that I claimed that, in the *Summa*, nature is doubled in the face of miracle, though asymmetrically, as miracle can only appear with respect to the one order and not the other.

Another doubling occurs with respect to miracle itself, though in this case the double image is symmetrical. For just as miracle is properly identified with respect to the created order of nature, there are equally phenomena of the field of grace that are properly called miraculous. There is of course an affinity between miracle and grace; grace too names God's immediate action within the world of creatures. What differentiates miracle from grace, however, is that miracle effects changes upon things normally effected by secondary or created causes. Grace works otherwise. God works grace immediately and only God can. Nevertheless, grace too acts as cause. It causes those creaturely events, virtues etc. that are properly called supernatural, and these manifest an order that determines or grounds legitimate theological expectation. However, God can and does at times work outside of this supernatural order. When this happens a supernatural occurrence properly associated with grace is also called miraculous. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, because it is a turning from unbelief to mature or perfect faith in a twinkling instead of in a staged process of maturation or sanctification provides Thomas a case in point (1-2.103.10).

Finally, grace is itself doubled in the context of miracle. For, its supernatural effects are divisible into the miraculous and the non-miraculous. Moreover, miracle understood as an effect of grace extends beyond supernatural miracle to include miracle as it relates to the order of nature. That is, grace can also be divided between what effects recreation unto the perfection of nature and what does not. Indeed, unbelievers and demons alike behold Christ's miracles and remain miscreant (3.43)

4. Concluding Metaphor

What are we to make of all this doubling? Are we to accuse Thomas of a magician's prestigeneration? There are perhaps multiple ways in which we can account for what we have noticed. I will conclude with just one suggestion. I wonder if Thomas is well served by conceiving of

nature and grace as the structural harmony of a thing and its final cause? I admit that *he* does not seem to have felt constrained by this concept. But it does set up expectations of an elegant fit that is called into question by all these doublings. So, maybe, if we are to deal with the complexity we have observed Thomas acknowledging in the *Summa*, we do well to leave Aristotle and his physics behind, and experiment with a different conception altogether, even at the risk of anachronism? Maybe we should imagine Thomas's nature and grace as tectonic plates floating on the molten core of mystery that is God's abiding and active presence within the creation and its creatures? Since tectonic plates float, such a concept entails an expectation of movement. In such a view nature and grace can be counted on to shift shape and position in the unfolding of time. Occasionally, these plates will collide; one passing its edge under the other. When this happens, seismic activity will be set off on the surface of things, transforming the landscape in which they exist. Maybe one better understands the function of miracle in Thomas's *Summa* as the landscape transforming seismic activity revealed by scripture in its allegorical sense, an activity set off by the flotation of nature and grace upon the mysterious liquid of the Creator's care.

Of course, the anachronism is real. In my mind's eye I imagine Thomas throwing up his hands like the German university administrator Paul Gooch is reputed to have once taken around the University of Toronto so as to explain its lushly complex governance. I can imagine Thomas too uttering in wonderment—"Well, that may work in practice, but it will never work in theory." Only too true I suppose. For, as I said at the beginning, in the *Summa*, miracle is that kind of trickster. Bool!