Thinking About Good — Thomas Aquinas on *Nicomachean Ethics* I, *Divine Names* IV–V and *de Ebdomadibus**

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Herbert McCabe taught in many ways, not least *per viam provocationis*. One day in the mid 1970s he provoked something far beyond his intentions with a throwaway remark about *Summa theologiae* I, q.15, the question on 'ideas'. 'It must have been written by Saint Thomas on a platonic off day', he declared, a comment that remained with the present writer to stimulate research in directions that might not have overly pleased Herbert. 'Platonic' and 'platonist' were not usually good words in his vocabulary, profoundly impressed as he was by Thomas's achievement in developing Christian theology in radically new ways using the works of Aristotle, Plato's brightest student and critic.

Thomas Aquinas himself, though, at the midpoint of his career, was convinced that the Platonists, in what they had to say about the first principle of things, were exactly right (*verissima*) and completely in harmony with Christian faith [1]. In fact, in a brief but potent contribution to the 1974 Thomistic Congress for the seventh centenary of Saint Thomas's death, André von Ivanka asserted that as regards 'good', and because of the ontology supporting his understanding of it, Thomas not only 'platonises' but formally contradicts Aristotle [2]. Where Aristotle argues that 'good is not a general term corresponding to a single idea' (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.6, 1096b25) Thomas says that 'all things, in seeking their proper perfections, seek God himself, insofar as the perfections of all things are reflections (*similitudines*) of the divine being' (*Summa Theologiae* I 6, 1 ad 2). Elsewhere Thomas says that 'all things seek, as their ultimate end, to be united with God' (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III.19).

Von Ivanka argues that Thomas adds to Aristotle a metaphysic of participation, already implied in the statement that the perfections of all things are reflections of the divine being. For Aristotle, of course, participation is 'an empty word and useless metaphor' (*Metaphysics* A.9, 992a20–23) whereas a notion of participation is central to Thomas' philosophical theology. Thomas also identifies the ultimate end, which all things seek in and through their seeking of particular ends, and about

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which Aristotle expresses scepticism in the *Ethics* – Thomas identifies this ultimate end with God.

These additions by Thomas to the text of Aristotle are clear enough but he confuses us, says von Ivanka, by attributing to Aristotle the view that the highest good, *summum bonum*, and the highest being, *summum ens*, is not only the first efficient principle but also the first exemplar and the final principle of the universe (*Summa Theologiae* I 6, 4 in c). Furthermore, the argument continues, Thomas replaces Aristotelian 'analogy' with an analogy of being, *analogia entis*, which is always already Platonist. Analogy means only resemblance of function for Aristotle. In *Eudemian Ethics* I.8, 1218a2–36 for example, analogy holds between the ways in which different things seek their respective goods. Aristotle writes: 'to say that all existing things desire some one good is not true, for each seeks its own special good, the eye vision, the body health, and so on' (1218a30–31). Aristotle's text supports a kind of proportionality but as soon as we speak of exemplarism, von Ivanka says, we are on Platonist ground involving not only resemblance of function but ontological dependence of every being on the *summum ens*.

Thomas gives us a Platonised Aristotle then, interpreting the *movet ut desideratum*, 'it moves as desired' of *Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072b3, in a way that allows him to speak of the absolute as the common end of all beings, the universe moved by the same love manifested differently at every ontological level. Aristotle does say that the first mover of necessity exists and as necessary is good (1072b10–11) and that it 'produces motion by being loved' (1072b3). But for Aristotle what is involved here is analogy in the strict sense of the term: 'as' one thing moves and is moved 'so' at another level another thing moves and is moved. His meaning is that the first substance moves the universe by means of the first heaven just as desire moves things on other levels towards their ends which then function at their respective levels as 'unmoved movers'. But in Thomas's Platonised reading of *movet ut desideratum* God moves the universe insofar as he is the object of the desire of all things.

Von Ivanka concludes that nothing could be further from the 'static ontology of Aristotle' than Thomas's idea of the return of creatures to their principle, of effects to their cause (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II.46).

Thomas on Nicomachean Ethics I, especially I.6

Von Ivanka builds his case by quoting from works of Thomas other than his commentary on the *Ethics*. It seems reasonable that we should look to that commentary in the first place to see how Thomas responds to Aristotle's comment there that 'good is not a general term corresponding to a single idea'.

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Ethics I.6, where this comment is made, is one of the places where Aristotle rehearses his arguments against Plato's theory of forms or ideas. But while doing so he makes some concessions that support Thomas in the interpretation von Ivanka characterises as 'platonising'. Aristotle says, for example, that this material really belongs to another branch of philosophy, that 'good' has as many senses as 'is', and that things good in themselves have something common by analogy.

But even if there is a separate and absolute good, Aristotle says, it will be of no practical significance, will not be attainable by humans and is not therefore 'the good we are seeking here'. It is important to remember how precise Aristotle's concern is in these first chapters of the *Ethics*. The 'good we are seeking' is the human good, the practical good, the good of human life overall. Even if there is a good that is a pattern or exemplar, Aristotle concludes, how does it work? The question echoes his puzzlement in the *Metaphysics* at how participation can be taken to be an explanation of anything.

Nevertheless comments like these prove useful to Thomas for his understanding of God as the highest good, *summum bonum*, in whom all goods participate, whom all goods reflect and which is desired in whatever good is desired. Clearly he goes beyond Aristotle, as von Ivanka says, but we must consider how this transition comes about and whether 'platonising' is an adequate description of what Thomas is doing. Let us look at some passages in Thomas's commentary on the *Ethics* to see how he reads Aristotelian texts in what seem like platonist ways.

In paragraph 11 [3] Thomas agrees with Aristotle in denying that there is a platonic unitary good, *unum bonum*, while speaking nevertheless in terms of a highest good, *summum bonum*. For the moment it seems as if these phrases satisfy him as a way of distinguishing the Platonist 'idea of the good' rejected by Aristotle from the notion of a separated and transcendent supreme good in which Thomas believes, of which neoplatonism speaks and which Thomas attributes to Aristotle on the strength of certain texts in the second and twelfth books of the *Metaphysics*.

A thoroughgoing teleological account of the natural world follows with the moving power of the divine intellect guiding all things through their desires [4]. 'That at which all things aim' refers not only to things that knowingly seek their good, but also to things that do so unknowingly through natural appetite. They do not know the good but are moved towards it by the ordering power of the divine intellect. The analogy offered is the same as the one given in the fifth way of demonstrating that there is a God: an arrow flies towards its target not because it knows where to go but because it has been directed there by the archer (ST I 2,3

in c). To tend to the good is to desire it, *appetere bonum*. Here, Thomas says, Aristotle is referring not to some unitary good, *unum bonum*, but to good in general, *bonum communiter sumptum*. But because nothing is good without being a likeness and participation of the highest good, *similitudo et participatio boni summi*, the highest good is somehow desired in every good. So it is the case that 'good is that at which all things aim' – though Thomas now seems to be understanding this phrase quite differently to how Aristotle intends it. In the prologue to his commentary on the Gospel of John, Thomas knows that to speak in this way of all goods as likenesses and participations in the highest good, is a Platonist way of speaking [5].

In paragraphs 30–31 Thomas says that for Aristotle politics is the master science concerned with the good he is seeking in the *Ethics*. Because politics is concerned with a community of goods it is superior to those sciences that are concerned with less than that. Politics is the highest science in relation to the human good and so Aristotle describes it as more divine, *divinius*, because it belongs to the divine to have care of more. In fact Aristotle says politics concerns itself with the best or chief good (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.2, 1094a22), though clearly this is not intended in a platonic sense.

We would expect Thomas to have something to say about this and might wonder what the fate of theology, *scientia divina*, will be here. Sure enough he interprets Aristotle as favourably as he can but then qualifies the sense in which politics is to be regarded as the highest science [6]. Politics is more divine because, having care for more than an individual's interests, it reminds us of God who is the ultimate cause of all goods. Politics has as its highest priority the ultimate end of human life, not absolutely but in relation to other practical sciences concerned with human affairs. This is the direct concern of Aristotle in his *Ethics*, Thomas says, whereas the ultimate end of the universe as a whole is the concern of theology, *scientia divina*, which is therefore primary absolutely speaking.

Thomas is clear enough then about the good Aristotle is seeking in this work. However the clear distinction between a platonic unitary good, *unum bonum*, and Thomas's highest good, *summum bonum*, begins to dissolve, in paragraph 49 for example, where these two goods seem to get confused. The Platonists, Thomas writes, thought there was a unitary good, *unum bonum*, apart from the various sensible goods and that this existed by itself as the separated essence of goodness. All good things owed their goodness to this absolute good, *per se bonum*, insofar as they participate in this highest good, *summum bonum* [7]. But this is exactly how Thomas himself speaks of the matter in paragraph 11, as we have just seen.

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It is easy to imagine, as we look over Thomas's shoulder, the kind of questions coming to his mind about the material with which he was dealing. While repeating Aristotle's rejection of *unum bonum*, he brings in a reference to *summum bonum*. His understanding of the latter in terms of likeness, *similitudo*, participation, *participatio*, and desire, *appetitus*, makes it look very like what Aristotle is rejecting rather than what he is proposing. Thomas cannot interpret the *Ethics* satisfactorily without appealing to what Aristotle says elsewhere. So if, in *Ethics* I.4, 1095a27, Aristotle recounts and rejects the view that there is a good in itself which stands to all particular good things as the cause of their being good, the same Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* II.1, 993b20–30, seems to propose exactly the same kind of argument for being and truth which he rejects in the *Ethics* in relation to good. Thomas uses the *Metaphysics* text to support his fourth way of demonstrating the existence of God, and applies it there not only to being and truth but to goodness also (ST I 2,3 in c). Thomas must be aware, in commentating the *Ethics*, of the similarity between his own view and the one Aristotle is attacking. But to be faithful to 'the Philosopher' he refers to a view – the one Aristotle rejects – that must be carefully understood in view of its 'superficial plausibility' [8].

He makes a further attempt in paragraph 79 to clarify what exactly it is Aristotle is rejecting and he does so by appealing to *Metaphysics* XII.10. There Aristotle explains how the 'good of the universe' may be taken in two senses, as referring to the accumulated goods of all the things that go to make up the universe, or as referring to something existing in the ruler of the universe, as the good of an army may be said to exist in the mind of its commander. So Aristotle's target is not the separated good on which all things depend but the platonic view of the separated good as an idea common to all goods, *bonum separatum esse quamdam ideam communem omnium bonorum* [9].

A difficulty for Thomas is how he may continue to refer to the highest good, *summum bonum*, as the single source and goal of all things without referring to it also as the unitary good, *unum bonum*, and so go beyond what Aristotle says in his *Ethics*. The 'separated good on which all things depend' may well be Aristotle's target there and yet it sounds very like what Thomas wants to say about creation in its relation with God. What Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* XII.10 Thomas takes as support for a *bonum separatum* in a sense different to Plato's (*In XII Metaphysicorum*, par. 2630). In fact he understands it to refer to God (par. 2663).

Perhaps the difficulty lies in how 'separation' is to be understood. Thomas goes on (in paragraphs 84 and 94) to explain how the separated good, *bonum separatum*, which is the cause of all good things, *causa omnium bonorum*, must be thought of as transcendent, something Plato

does not do as Aristotle reports him here. The separated good, as ultimate end of all things, ought to be on a higher level of goodness to that of the things we experience. But the Platonist way of thinking about human beings and the human being as such, or horses and the horse as such, does not allow for this. There is nothing to distinguish the humanity of an individual human being from that of the human being as such. Of course the former exists in matter but as regards intelligibility or *ratio* there is no difference.

Likewise there would be no difference between the absolute good, *per se bonum*, and any particular good as goods, since the same intelligibility or *ratio* would be found in both. Any differences between them would only be with respect to something other than the goodness in which they both share. But it cannot be that the same intelligibility or *ratio* of goodness is found in all the things we call 'good' and this, concludes Thomas, is a further argument against Plato's common idea [10].

Von Ivanka pointed to analogy as one of the key issues in understanding Thomas's Platonising of Aristotle (although from what we have seen already it seems more accurate to describe what we are now reading as 'Thomas Aquinas' rather than simply 'Aristotle' and/or 'Plato'). It is to analogy that Thomas turns in paragraphs 95–96 [11].

Aristotle, although arguing that good is not a general term corresponding to a single idea, nevertheless believes that it cannot be merely by chance that all the things we call good bear the same name. Either they all derive from one good, or all contribute to one good, or – Aristotle's preferred solution – by way of some proportion, *kat' analogian* (1096b28), some similarity across different contexts supports our use of the same name: as sight is good in the body so intelligence is good in the soul.

Thomas follows him and expands on it. Our use of the term good, *bonum*, for many things is not equivocal as if the term meant completely different things, *rationes penitus differentes*, he says. Aristotle indicates three ways in which the same term may be used of a multiplicity of things without equivocation but where the intended meaning, *ratio*, is not exactly the same in each case. Something unites such a class of things, either a common principle or a common goal or some kind of analogy or proportion. The latter may be based on different relationships to a common subject or on the same relationship to different subjects.

The use of good for many things because they have a common principle and a common goal: this is important, Thomas says, for excluding the view that the separated good is only the idea or *ratio* of all good things and not their *principium et finis*, their source and goal. Thomas seems, once again, to go beyond the explicit intention of

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Aristotle's text. But he does pick up on Aristotle's preference for the third mode of predication, that of analogy or proportion, which he prefers, Thomas says, because it is based on a goodness inherent in things, *secundum bonitatem inhaerentem rebus*. The first two modes – referring to *principium* or *finis* – imply a separated good from which nothing is properly denominated, *a qua non ita proprie aliquid denominatur*.

Thomas seems clear then that Plato's *idea separatum* and his own *summum bonum* are quite distinct. The key passage is paragraph 79 where he distinguishes the one separated good from which everything depends from another kind of separated good that would be simply a common idea of all goods. He believes it is Aristotle who provides him with the philosophical facilities needed to explain this distinction and to support his own view about the *summum bonum* even though, at times, his view seems closer to Plato than to Aristotle.

Already one has a sense of Thomas weaving a new garment from the materials available to him and we might well wonder to what extent Christian faith is guiding his interpretations. A key question for Thomas as he sets to work on Aristotle's *Ethics* is how he is to introduce God into a moral theory concerned only with the human being [12]. As a Christian believer he is convinced that the human being has a divine goal or good towards which to live. Bonaventure regarded those who tried to explain away Aristotle's restriction of human happiness to this life as 'philosophers living in darkness'. In fact Aristotle's ignorance of God as efficient and exemplar cause of creation is rooted, Bonaventure says, in these arguments in the *Ethics* against the platonic idea of good. Bonaventure has less difficulty in identifying the *unum bonum* rejected by Aristotle with the *summum bonum* in which Christians believe. Thomas takes a different approach and faces a harder task in trying to interpret Aristotle faithfully and yet in a way that will be compatible with Christian faith [13].

Having looked over Thomas's shoulder as he reads Aristotle, we turn now to his commentaries on two Christian Neoplatonist texts, the *Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Boethius' *De Ebdomadibus*. In both cases he is obliged to think again about the good and to re-consider how Plato and Aristotle assist the Christian theologian in speaking about God as good and source of all good.

Thomas on Divine Names IV–V

Our present interest in Thomas' commentaries on *Divine Names* and *De Ebdomadibus* is twofold: firstly to consider the understanding of 'good' in these works and secondly to see whether Thomas' interpretations may be described as 'platonist' or 'neoplatonist' simply or whether he corrects neoplatonist accounts along Aristotelian lines just as we have seen him

interpreting Aristotelian material in what looks like a Platonist direction.

In *Divine Names IV* 'the good', *tagathon*, is understood as that whose substance, *huparxis*, is good and by whose existence, *aute te uparxei*, goodness is spread into things. By contrast with Aristotle's definition of the good, *tagathon*, as that at which all things aim (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.1, 1094a3) Ps.Dionysius speaks of the good, *tagathon*, as ecstatic, the source of 'beneficent emanations', a source which must overflow as the sun must shine, 'without choice or deliberation' (DN IV.1) [14].

Thomas jumps in immediately to point out that this last phrase must be omitted when the image is applied to God (*In de Div Nom* 271). Ps.Dionysius, to give him his due, adds that God is as much beyond the sun as the archetype is beyond its pale reflection and we are, he says, speaking analogically, *analogos* or *proportionaliter* (DN IV.1).

Nevertheless Ps.Dionysius enters fully into the analogy of the sun and leads us into a familiar Platonist landscape of light, beauty, love, all aspects of the good which radiates goodness on all things, the all-creating and originating source of goodness, the generous source of all good things, and so on. Thomas is drawn in too: 'form is a kind of irradiation coming from a primary clarity', he says, *forma autem est quaedam irradiatio proveniens ex prima claritate* (*In de Div Nom* 360), a phrase one would not be surprised to find in Robert Grosseteste or Albert the Great.

Ps.Dionysius says that all things are within a process of proceeding and returning, that in *desiring* the divine goodness they possess their being and blessedness, in *being conformed* to that goodness they are goodly, and that *as such* they pass on to those below what they have received from the good (DN IV.1; IV.4; IV.7). A familiar neoplatonist triad of remaining-proceeding-returning is identifiable here but possibly also a way of linking this material with Aristotle, inserting within the broader 'ontological' desire or *eros* of Ps.Dionysius the notion of 'the good as attracting' of Aristotle, that at which all things aim.

It is tempting to distinguish the Aristotelian 'good as attractive' from the neoplatonist 'good as ecstatic'. What I am suggesting is that these can be quite easily combined within a vision of the human being (Aristotle's specific concern in the *Ethics*) searching (by appetite, desire or *eros*) for what he or she has already received. It is only because the human creature has already been established in being and integrity by the self-communicating source of all good, that the question of the human good addressed by Aristotle in the *Ethics* arises in the first place. The overall good of a human life which is Aristotle's concern is then one instance of attraction-desire-*eros* within creation as it responds to what Ps.Dionysius calls the yearning of God himself for the beautiful and the good (DN IV.10–15). In this way the Aristotelian 'good as that at which all things

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aim' and the Neoplatonist 'Good seeking good for the sake of good' (DN IV.10) may be brought together.

And this is how Aquinas combines his sources here. *Divine Names IV* contains some beautiful passages in which all known types of causality are referred to the good: it originates, makes, moves, holds together, limits, is loved as a final cause and is paradigmatic (DN IV.7; IV.10). The famous 'metaphysics of prepositions', identified in both Proclus and certain New Testament texts, comes into play – the good is that from which, towards which, through which, in which, by which, for which are all things (DN IV.4, 700AB; *In de Div Nom* 316–317; Colossians 1.17 and Romans 11.36). The good, and the love it evokes, at once binds God to himself, causes him to create, takes God out of himself in ecstasy, *ekstatikos*, in Latin *extasim*, (DN IV.13) and causes him to draw all things back to himself (Ps.Dionysius refers to Galatians 2.20 and 2 Corinthians 5.13).

Thomas is quick to stand back from any emanationist interpretation of this although the term *emanatio* is one he is quite happy to use in relation to creation (ST I 45,1 for example). The kind of reading of Ps.Dionysius he rules out is one that would fail to do justice to the transcendence of God or to God's freedom and understanding in creating. So Aquinas frequently adds the term causally, *causaliter*, within the text of Ps.Dionysius even as he quotes it. This is to ensure that what Ps.Dionysius says is not interpreted in a pantheistic way and also to exclude a Platonist interpretation in which principles such as 'time' or 'being' might be understood as separated principles under God [15].

Perhaps the most striking instance of this correction of Ps.Dionysius is in *Divine Names V* where the statement that God is the being of existing things must, says Thomas, be understood *causaliter* (*In de Div Nom* 630). This maintains the required difference between Creator and created and makes clear, as Thomas says, that not only existing things but the being of existing things is from God. Participation in any other perfection presupposes participation in the first place in being itself. To be a creature, in other words, 'precedes' or 'is deeper than' any characteristic a thing might have.

In speaking about participation Ps.Dionysius, according to Thomas, agrees with the Platonists in some ways and disagrees in others. Although he uses platonic language he is to be interpreted non-platonically (*In de Div Nom* 634). Thus he agrees with them when he speaks in terms of what seem like separate principles of life itself, wisdom itself, being itself, and so on (DN V.5) but he disagrees when he explains that these are all actually one principle. There is not a multiplicity of causal principles but just one, God, who pre-contains all things (DN V.2) [16].

One might well argue that it is 'Catholic faith', *fides catholica* – to

which he so often appeals in his commentary on *Liber de Causis* – that helps Thomas here [17] but one cannot help noticing a contribution from Aristotle that is also crucial. Thomas says that if in a phrase such as 'life itself', *per se vita*, the 'itself', *per se*, is taken to mean real distinction and separation then *per se vita est ipse Deus*, life itself is God. If, however, the 'itself', *per se*, means distinction and separation that is notional, *secundum rationem*, then *per se vita*, life itself, is within living things and is distinct from those things notionally but not really (*In de Div Nom* 634). In other words if there is separation in what might look like a Platonist sense then this can only refer to God and must be understood in a Christian sense. Otherwise it can be understood in an Aristotelian sense, as referring to qualities within individual things.

At this point the impact of what has been termed Aristotle's 'radical ontology' on Thomas's capacity to interpret Ps.Dionysius non-platonically is clear. This radical ontology, *pace* von Ivanka, cannot be separated from Aristotle's theory of knowledge. More than that, it is an essential strand in the Christian neoplatonist ontology received by Thomas from Boethius and Ps.Dionysius among others [18].

Famously, of course, good (DN IV) is more fundamental than being (DN V) for Ps.Dionysius because good extends also to non-beings. The term good, he says, refers to the entire providence of God including even non-being, where other philosophical names (being, wisdom, power, unity, and so on) refer to more universal or particular providences (DN V.1). What does Aquinas make of this idea of a perfection that extends not only to what is but also to what is not? He believes it must refer either to God in which case non-being means not some kind of deficiency but 'transcending all existing things' (*In de Div Nom* 463 and 478) or else it is a way of referring to potential being (*In de Div Nom* 610) which also belongs within God's care [19].

If Thomas were simply a platonist on the good as von Ivanka argues, one might wonder why being rather than good is the fundamental divine name for him when Plato famously placed the good 'beyond being', *Republic 509B*. In fact Thomas says that from the point of view of causality, *bonum* is primary (ST I 5,2 ad 1 and ad 2) whereas from the point of view of understanding or knowledge *esse* is primary (ST I 5, 2 in c). In his commentary on the *Ethics* Thomas agrees with Aristotle in rejecting the view that good is prior to being. Rather is it convertible with it Thomas adds [20].

However in *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia* 7, 2 ad 9, where Thomas puts forward his own understanding of *esse* as the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections, its radical priority for him is clear. *Esse* cannot be determined as potentiality is by actuality, he says,

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but only as actuality is determined by potentiality. For support Thomas appeals not to Aristotle but to Ps.Dionysius and specifically to DN V. It may not be surprising then that the idea of actuality being limited by potentiality is a neoplatonist development of Aristotelian ideas [21].

Thomas on Boethius' De Ebdomadibus

We have seen how Thomas explains Aristotle's preference for analogy from the fact that this kind of predication is based on 'a goodness inherent in things'. Boethius' theological tractate known as *De Ebdomadibus* is concerned with the question of whether things are good substantially or by participation. The context is now explicitly theological since Thomas knew this work as part of Boethius' *Opuscula Sacra*. From its literary form the Leonine editors argue that this commentary does not belong with the earlier commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate* but with the commentaries on Aristotle and Pseudo-Dionysius. So all three works considered here belong to the mature period of Thomas' career, between roughly 1265 and 1272 [22].

It has been argued that the reading of *De Ebdomadibus* was a turning point in the development of Thomas' metaphysical views [23]. In it Boethius explains the range of meanings to be given to 'participation'. Thomas' commentary on this section of the text – *In de Ebd* II, lines 68–113 – is the starting point for both Fabro and Geiger in their accounts of participation in Aquinas. In this work also Thomas met Boethius' distinction between *esse* and *id quod est*. Most importantly for us he is obliged to consider the argument that everything that exists has value as a good while all particular goods are good insofar as they participate in the idea of the good [24].

This already sounds like some kind of combination of Aristotle and Plato. Boethius, of course, wanted to make all of Plato and Aristotle available to the Latins and to show how their philosophies might be reconciled. It is striking then that the only works cited by Thomas in his commentary are Aristotle and Scripture and although the quotes from Aristotle are vague they appear at key points.

Boethius says that everything that is participates in being (*in eo quod est esse*) in order to be, but in something other than being in order to be a particular thing. But being itself (*ipsum esse*) does not participate in anything (*De Ebd* II). Participation only happens when something is [25]. This is another way of saying what we saw already in Ps.Dionysius, that to be a creature 'precedes' or 'is deeper than' any characteristic a thing might have. (The way in which Thomas goes beyond Boethius in his understanding of *esse*, though important for our theme, can only be noted in passing.)

The account of good, the main concern of *De Ebdomadibus*, begins with Aristotle's definition of good as 'that at which all things aim'. All things seek the similar, Boethius says, they seek concord and perfection. In the first place they seek their own perfection or good, and external things in relation to that (*In de Ebd* II, lines 279–286).

Boethius bases his argument on a number of principles or axioms. The first, that whatever is, is good, *ea que sunt bona sunt*, is simply presupposed says Thomas. He interprets the view that everything tends to its like, *omne autem tendit ad simile*, in terms of self-seeking. The principle, described by Boethius as the common view of teachers, *communis sentencia doctorum*, that everything tends to the good, *omne quod est ad bonum tendere*, sounds like Aristotle's definition of good at the beginning of the *Ethics* [26]. This is how Thomas reads it. But it is not the same to say 'all that is seeks (the) good' and 'good is what all things seek'. The first form, favoured by Boethius, lends itself more easily to being understood as referring to a unitary, primary good. Thomas offers an analogy with sound and hearing. Just as *auditus*, hearing is about sound, *appetitus*, desiring is about good. Everything has some desire or appetite even if it is only for its own continued existence and so everything seeks good. This completes the argument and returns us to what Boethius first says here, that whatever is, is good, *ea que sunt bona sunt* (*In de Ebd* III, lines 14–33).

But difficulties follow whether we consider things to be good by participation – in which case it seems that they are not then really good – or to be good substantially – in which case all that is, is God, which, Boethius says, is blasphemous (*quod dictu nephas est* — B III). The question is, Thomas says, whether 'essentially' and 'by participation' must exclude each other [27]. In some senses of participation they must but not in others, for example in how a species participates in a genus. According to Thomas, Boethius is thinking primarily of subjects participating in accidents and, from the examples he gives, strengthens his dilemma to the point of contradiction by showing that beings are neither substantially good nor good by participation. This is against what has already been granted, that all things seek good in tending towards their own perfection and towards other things besides.

This is one of the points at which Thomas turns to Aristotle for help. It is Aristotle rather than Plato who explains how a quality might be predicated of something both substantially and by participation. In the sentence 'the human being truly is that which an animal is', *homo vere est id quod est animal* what is said by participation may also be said substantially (human participates in animal, human is animal). Plato does not help here, says Thomas. It is Aristotle's philosophy that makes

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possible an acceptable account of participation [28]!

In Part IV of *De Ebdomadibus* Boethius considers the solution to his dilemma / paradox. It is one thing for things to be, another for them to be good, he says. He suggests we think about things bracketing their dependence on the first good – 'which of course everybody believes in' – in order to see how their being good might then present itself to us. If things were only good and nothing else, they (or rather it) would not then be a thing, but a principle of things (B IV, lines 26–32). Thomas turns again to Aristotle at this point. The kind of goodness in things about which Boethius is speaking here is their virtue as defined by Aristotle [29].

Boethius had already made reference to God's will in speaking about the goodness of things. It is because their being flows from the divine will that they are said to be good, *quoniam esse eorum a boni uoluntate defluxit bona esse dicuntur* (B IV, lines 33–35). Thomas comments that it is because the *esse* of created things flows from the will of the one who is essentially good that created things are said to be good. Created things are good just insofar as they are but they would not be good in this way if their *esse* did not proceed *a summo bono* (*In de Ebd* IV, lines 111–131). Later he returns to the point saying that if things are good just insofar as they are, this is because it is by the will of the first good, *ex uoluntate primi boni*, that it comes about that they are good (*In de Ebd* V, lines 50–52).

It is necessary, Thomas says, to bring in the notion of analogy and once again Aristotle comes to his assistance. The *esse* of created things is good from its relation to the first good which is its cause and to which it is compared as to its first principle and final end. In the same way something is said to be healthy when ordered to the goal of health or is medicinal when it is from the efficient principle of the art of medicine (*In de Ebd* IV, lines 132–145) [30].

So, Thomas concludes, there is a double goodness in created things. They are good by participation, that is, in their relation to the first good by which their being and whatever else they have from the first good is good. And they are good absolutely, in the way anything that is perfect in being and operation is said to be good. This is a goodness they have, not in virtue of their essential being but by something added, their virtue as mentioned earlier. Their being is not itself good in this way. Only the first being has every perfection in his being itself and so his being alone is absolutely and essentially good (*In Ebd* IV, lines 145–160).

The final section of *De Ebdomadibus* gives Boethius (and Thomas) the opportunity to offer further clarifications on all this. If, says Boethius, a created good were not from the first good (something that is, of course, impossible) then it would not be good as itself, *in eo quod est*. It might still be good by participation in some superadded goodness but, Thomas

agrees, the being of things would not itself be good if things were not derived from the first goodness (*In Ebd* V, lines 22–30).

Does it not follow, then, that all things should be white on the same basis? Here the reference to God's will becomes important once more. Things are white but not as themselves, *in eo quod sunt*, because they are willed by God who, however, is not white. Things are good as themselves, *in eo quod sunt*, because they are willed by God who is good (In Ebd V, lines 72–79) [31].

Must all things then be just because they derive from God who is just? To this Thomas replies that 'good' refers to a nature, 'just' to an act or virtue. Being, *esse*, belongs to us as ourselves, *in quantum sumus*, and so does goodness but not justice. Of course justice is a species of goodness and in God we find every form of goodness. In creatures however, the forms of goodness differ (*In Ebd* V, lines 80–113).

Thomas's commentary on *In Ebdomadibus* raises many questions that cannot be considered here. It may be that he did not finish the work to his own satisfaction. Inconsistencies in how he divides the text are taken by the Leonine editors to indicate that he did not revise it [32]. Our examination of it here has been sufficient to illustrate how Aristotle appears at key points to clarify and support acceptable interpretations of platonic themes. It may be of course that an acceptable interpretation of platonic themes mediated through Aristotelian philosophy is exactly what the term 'neoplatonism' refers to.

Concluding Remarks

In 1932 Julien Péghaire argued that for Thomas Aquinas the causality of good is always final causality – good operating as an end or goal in accordance with Aristotle's definition – and is never efficient causality in a neoplatonist sense. Thomas normally interprets the neoplatonist saying *bonum est diffusivum sui*, good is diffusive of itself, in terms of final causality. On two occasions, *In I Sentences* 2,1,4 and ST III 1,1 the phrase as used by Aquinas seems to imply an efficient causality of the good but Péghaire, brushing these (important) exceptions aside, argued that it is always 'being' and never 'good' that is efficient for Thomas. This is at once Christian and Aristotelian, he concludes so that Thomas is not at all a Platonist on the good. In one 'coup of genius', he concludes, Thomas corrects Plato and goes beyond Aristotle [33].

In 1978 Lawrence Dewan argued that Péghaire's position needed qualification not only in view of the important exceptions he passed over so quickly but more generally because Thomas's account of the causality of the good is more nuanced than Péghaire allowed. The good exerts final causality of course but that kind of causality, as Thomas understands it,

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presupposes efficient and formal causality. All discourse about the good must include the agent as an attendant, Dewan concludes [34].

In 1974 André von Ivanka argued that Thomas is simply a Platonist on the good. I have tried to show how this position too requires serious qualification. I have restricted myself to texts from three commentaries rather than relying, as Dewan does for example, on the magisterial summary of Thomas's views on the good in ST I 5–6. The commentary genre is helpful because it enables us to see Thomas working with his sources, being stimulated and challenged by what he reads, trying to understand, interpreting and correcting. It gives us valuable insight not only about his way of working but about the seams or structural lines of his synthesis, allowing us to see both his indebtedness and his creative originality.

Recent scholarship supports the insight of Victor White – one of Herbert McCabe's admired teachers – that the relationship of Aristotle and Plato in Thomas must be understood synthetically and not exclusively. This is particularly so, White argued, in regard to an acceptable form of exemplarism which requires corrective Aristotelian input [35]. It would not make sense to claim Thomas for neoplatonism simply but neither is it correct to call him an Aristotelian without qualification [36]. It is not enough to say 'Thomas Aquinas is an Aristotelian, or a Platonist, or even a Neoplatonist, on the good'. The story is more complex – and more original – than that.

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1 Prologue to his commentary on the *Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius: see note (14) below.

2 'S.Thomas Platonisant', in *Tommaso D'Aquino nella Storia del Pensiero I: Le Fonti del Pensiero di S.Tommaso*, Atti del Congresso Internazionale (Roma-Napoli – 17/24 Aprile 1974), Edizioni Domenicane Italiane, Napoli, 1974, pages 256–257.

3 For ease of reference to Thomas' commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* – *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* – I use the paragraph numbers in the Marietti edition (Turin and Rome, 1949). The critical text is found in Tome 47 of the Leonine edition, Rome, 1969. On this commentary see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin: sa personne et son oeuvre*, Éditions Universitaires, Fribourg-Suisse / Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1993, pp.331–334 and James C.Doig, *Aquinas' Philosophical Commentary on the Ethics: A Historical Perspective*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht-Boston-London, 2001.

4 *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.1, par. 11 (Leonine 47.1, p.5, lines 165–183).

5 *Super Evangelium S.Ioannis Lectura*, prologus S.Thomae (Marietti, Turin and Rome, 1951) par. 5.
6 *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.2, par. 30–31 (Leonine 47.1, p.9, lines 168–202).
7 *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.4, par. 49 (Leonine 47.1, pp.14–15, lines 74–82).
8 Loc.cit.
9 *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.6, par. 79 (Leonine 47.1, pp.22–23, lines 76–97). See Thomas, *In XII Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio* (Marietti, Turin and Rome, 1950), par. 2627–2663.
10 *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.7, par. 84 (Leonine 47.1, p.25, lines 18–42) and par. 94 (Leonine 47.1, p.26, lines 152–167).
11 *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.7, par. 95–96 (Leonine 47.1, pp.26–27, lines 168–213).
12 Torrell, op.cit., p.333.
13 James C.Doig, op.cit., pp.102–103.
14 I refer to Ps.Dionysius, *On the Divine Names* as 'DN' and to Thomas, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* as *In de Div Nom* with the paragraph number from the Marietti edition (Turin and Rome 1950). We still await a critical edition of this work of Thomas.
15 See my *Ideas in God According to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Leiden, Brill, 1996, page 298.
16 The strongly anti-Platonist statement of DN V.2 seems to be subverted somewhat by what Ps.Dionysius says in DN V.5. The fact that he feels it necessary to return to the issue in DN V.8 and again in DN XI.6 highlights the tension, oscillation, paradox, ambivalence, fluctuation or even contradiction in his theology. These various terms are used by interpreters of Ps.Dionysius depending on how successful they regard his theological synthesis of Proclus and Christianity.
17 See DN IV.1–4, for example, referring to Genesis 1.3–5, 16, 19; Wisdom 8.2; Romans 1.20; 11.36; 1 Corinthians 8.6; 2 Corinthians 5.13; Galatians 2.20; Colossians 1.17 and 1 Timothy 6.16.
18 See Edward Booth OP, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.
19 See *In de Div Nom* 606, 610, 628, 641, 655 and *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate* 2, 11 ad 5 where non-being may be said to be 'being analogically', *ipsum non ens, ens dicitur analogice*. Thomas refers to *Metaphysics* IV.1, 1003b10 where Aristotle writes 'we say of non-being that it *is* non-being'.
20 *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.1, par.9 (Leonine 47.1, p.5, lines 148–153).
21 See W.Norris Clarke SJ, 'The Limitation of Act by Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?', *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952) 167–194. According to DN V.4 the good is the being of all being and the creator of being (see *In de Div Nom* 613), the *substantificator* to all beings and to all levels of beings, which according to DN V.8 it pre-contains in a singular way.
22 I refer to Boethius' text of *De Ebdomadibus* as 'B' with the relevant section number. I refer to Thomas' commentary as *In de Ebd* adding the section and line numbers of the critical text to be found in Tome 50 of the Leonine edition, 1992, pp.231–289. There is now an English translation of Thomas's commentary: *St Thomas Aquinas: An Exposition of the 'On the Hebdomads'*

of Boethius, Introduction and translation by Janice L.Schultz and Edward A.Synan, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, 2001.

23 See James C.Doig, *Aquinas on Metaphysics*, M.Nijhoff, The Hague, 1972 and G.Schrimpf, *Die Axiomenschrift des Boethius (De Hebdomadibus) als philosophisch Lehrbuch des Mittelalters*, Studien zur Problemgeschichte der antiken und mittelalterlichen Philosophie 2, Leiden, Brill, 1966. It should be remembered that Boethius, like Ps.Dionysius, was acquainted with the philosophy of Proclus.

24 See Douglas C.Hall, *The Trinity. An Analysis of St Thomas Aquinas' Expositio of the De Trinitate of Boethius*, Leiden, Brill, 1992, p.26.

25 See Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, p.209, commenting on Boethius' axiom *fit enim participatio cum aliquid iam est*: B II. Chadwick identifies the central concern of *De Hebdomadibus* as 'absolute and relative goodness': pp.203–211.

26 *Ethics* I.1, 1094a2 with *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.1, par. 9–11 (Leonine, p.5, lines 148–183).

27 Note that Thomas replaces Boethius' *substancia* with *essencia*: *In de Ebd* III, lines 45ff.

28 *In Ebd* III, lines 55–63 with *Metaphysics* I.15, 991a28–29 in the background.

29 B IV, lines 26–32. For Aristotle's definition of virtue see *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6, 1106a15–17. Thomas comes back to the point at *In Ebd* IV, lines 145–160.

30 The Leonine editors refer to *Metaphysics* IV.1, 1003a33–b10 (already referred to at note (19) above) but one might consider also the text from *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6, 1096b26–30 with *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* I.7, par. 95–96, considered at note (11) above.

31 The link between the goodness of things and the will of God who is good is considered again in *In XII Metaphysicorum*, par. 2535 and 2631.

32 Leonine 50, p.259. Douglas C.Hall argues that the work is unfinished: op.cit., p.19.

33 'L'axiome 'Bonum est diffusivum sui' dans le néo-platonisme et le thomisme', *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 1 (1932) Section Speciale, pp.5*–32*. Etienne Gilson argued that Thomas gave the phrase *bonum est diffusivum sui* an entirely new sense: *Le Thomisme*, Paris 1948^5, pp.182–86; p.190 note 1.

34 Lawrence Dewan, 'St Thomas and the Causality of God's Goodness', *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 34 (1978) 291–304. See especially p.298 and p.304.

35 Victor White OP, 'The Platonic Tradition in St Thomas', in *God the Unknown* London, 1956, pp.62–71.

36 See Patrick Madigan SJ, *Christian Revelation and the Completion of the Aristotelian Revolution*, University Press of America, 1988.