

TELEOLOGY, NATURAL DESIRE AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN THE *SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES*

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ABSTRACT

Teleological reasoning was common among authors of the XIII century. Certainly, the existence of a finalist order among things allowed them to explain both the movement of natural bodies and the movement of the celestial bodies: for these authors all things would move because of final causality. Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles*, which we analyze in the following, reproduces this same reasoning model. Taking as reference the movement of natural bodies, he tries to explain the meaning of a special category of movement, namely: human knowledge. Thus, he states that human knowledge is an expression of a natural appetite of our intelligence, the natural desire to know, which rests only in the knowledge of God, the first cause of the world.

KEYWORDS

Thomas Aquinas, Natural Desire, Desire to know, Teleology, *Summa contra Gentiles*.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Thomas Aquinas, Appetitus Naturalis, Appetitus Naturalis Cognoscendi, Teleologia, *Summa contra gentiles*.

The question about the natural desire to know God had occupied a prominent place in the discussions of medieval thinkers even prior to Saint Thomas.¹ Albert the Great, for example, taught that wherever a natural desire exists there is also a tendency ordered to its end: natural inclinations are not vain, and the natural desire to know God is even less so, because natural desires have their own intelligibility and intrinsic meaning.² Saint Thomas, relying on the words of his teacher Albert, held that there are no inclinations that act in vain,³ and that, to a certain degree, all the natural inclinations of all beings have God as their end.⁴

After Aquinas, authors like Scotus taught that the natural desire was equivalent to an innate appetite inscribed in the nature of intellectual creatures (the Franciscan held that this desire should be understood as a necessary appetite, as a tendency that does not depend on freedom, as an inclination as deep as nature itself).⁵ And Cajetan, for his part, suggested that this natural desire is so radical that it was even prior to any other inclination or movement of the rational potencies.⁶

What we have discussed in the preceding paragraphs is a sample that demonstrates the importance that the problem of the natural desire to see God had in medieval thought. In this article we seek to develop Saint Thomas's proposal and in particular his arguments in the *Summa contra gentiles*. Our intention is to present the meaning that this natural desire has in Thomist anthropology, highlighting the fact that this desire is a natural appetite of the mind, indeed the most radical and primary of the various natural appetites of human reason.

1. Use of an argument taken from physics

As its name indicates, in the *Summa contra gentiles* Saint Thomas is addressing persons who are not Christians, but who admit some of the truths that Christianity proclaims, or, at least, participate in the cultural background provided by the philosophy of Aristotle. In this context, Aquinas seeks to show that the ultimate end of every intellectual creature is *understanding* God. He does so while relying on the thesis that no desire is as sublime as that of understanding the truth.⁷ This desire is

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2. Albert the Great. *In Metaphysicorum*, I, 1, 4. In the same passage Albert explains that the natural desire to know is a kind of principle of knowledge.

3. Thomas Aquinas. *Compendium theologiae*, I, 104, 208.

4. Aquinas's thesis is that all things have an appetite for God, at least implicitly (Thomas Aquinas. *De veritate*, XXII, 2).

5. John Duns Scotus. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, XVII, 2.

6. Thomas of Vio (Cajetan). *In Summa theologiae*, I-II, 113, 10, 1.

7. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 50. It is important to note that, while it is true that the problem of the natural desire to see God occupies a preeminent place in the overall organization of the



only satisfied when the creature attains God (intellectually), He who is the “highest summit” and maker of all things.⁸ Therefore, if the creature does not achieve this end, neither will it attain the greater perfection to which it is inclined.

These affirmations are the subject of an interesting discussion in the context of *Summa contra gentiles* Book III, above all because, in referring to the problem of the end of man, many authors have argued that our *télos télion* is the will of God (qua supreme good). This is a statement that appears to adhere both to common sense and biblical teachings, which place the love of God and not knowledge of Him as the first of the commandments of both the Mosaic and New Testament laws.⁹

Despite this, however, Saint Thomas insists that ultimate happiness must not be sought in anything else than the operation of the intellect.¹⁰ The reason is simple: it is impossible that an act which arises from the will could be the ultimate end.¹¹ Indeed, the good of man qua man consists in his reason being perfect in the knowledge of the truth, and that the inferior appetites obey reason and take their measure from it (given that what is specific to the human being is precisely his rationality).¹²

As a result, Aquinas insists, what human reason wants, as being determined to it by natural inclination, is the ultimate end *et ea quae in ipso includuntur, ut esse, cognitio veritatis, et aliqua huiusmodi*¹³ Nonetheless, this affirmation alone is insufficient for understanding the nature of the so-called “natural desire to see-understand God.” Indeed, this desire is grafted into a complex interweaving of appetites that have their root in intellectual nature, those which, in turn, root themselves in the fertile earth of those most universal desires that are found in every being qua being.¹⁴

With this in mind, in the current work we have preferred to deepen our inquiry into the nature of this natural desire, as well as its relation to the final end of man. We do not seek to start a debate about all of the arguments presented by Saint Thomas in *Summa contra gentiles*. There are already works dedicated to that purpose.¹⁵ Our effort will focus solely on explaining the link this desire has with the problem

Summa contra gentiles, Saint Thomas never investigates this issue directly, but instead discusses it in the context of his explanation of the state that people find themselves in after their death, see: *Contra gentiles*, III, 7.

8. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 50.

9. For example: Saint Augustine. *De civitate Dei*, XIX, and *De Trinitate* XIII. Similarly: Saint Paul. *First Letter to the Corinthians*, XIII.

10. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 50.

11. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, q. 1, a. 1.

12. González-Ayesta, Cruz. *La verdad como bien según Tomás de Aquino*. Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 2006: 340.

13. Thomas Aquinas. *De veritate*, XXII, 5: “whatever is included in it: to be, knowledge of truth, and the like”. Translated by Robert W. Schmidt: Aquinas, Thomas, *Truth Questions 21-29*, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954 <<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/QDdeVer22.htm#5>>.

14. Cambiasso, Jorge Guillermo. *El deseo de entender la verdad en la “Summa contra gentiles” de santo Tomás de Aquino*. Buenos Aires: Educa, 1999: 148.

15. For example: Pacheco, Cipriano Franco. *O desejo natural da visão de Deus expressao de abertura humana ao transcendente, Dissertação Ad Lauream in Facultate Philosophiae apud Pontificiam Universitatem S. Thomae in Urbe*, Rome: Pontificia Università San Tommaso d’Aquino, 2001.



of movement and the telos [end] of the physical world, as well as on the study of the implications for human knowledge of this natural desire to see God. Let's begin with what Aquinas tells us:

*[c]orpus, quod naturali appetitu tendit in suum ubi, tanto vehementius et velocius movetur, quanto magis appropinquat fini: unde probat Aristoteles in I de caelo, quod motus naturalis rectus non potest esse ad infinitum, quia non magis moveretur postea quam prius. Quod igitur vehementius in aliquid tendit post quam prius, non movetur ad infinitum, sed ad aliquid determinatum tendit. Hoc autem invenimus in desiderio sciendi: quanto enim aliquis plura scit, tanto maiori desiderio affectat scire. Tendit igitur desiderium naturale hominis in sciendo ad aliquem determinatum finem. Hoc autem non potest esse aliud quam nobilissimum scibile, quod Deus est. Est igitur cognitio divina finis ultimus hominis.*¹⁶

The first thing that draws the reader's attention about this text, which has a parallel in the *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*,¹⁷ is that all of Saint Thomas's argumentation about God as ultimate end appears to be based on a physical principle that, strictly speaking, refers to the movement of bodies, which accelerate more the closer they come to their natural place. Indeed, Saint Thomas thinks that among bodies there are some that don't have a natural place, as is the case with the celestial bodies, while others do have one. This is how he explains the fact that bodies fall. Recall that we are still many centuries distant from Newton: for the ancients and the medievals, a body falls or rises (as fire does) because it is seeking its natural place.¹⁸ In the case of physical bodies, they fall more rapidly as they draw closer to their natural place. That is, the presence of a uniformly accelerated movement tells us that the body is not moving to infinity, but towards a determined end. When it reaches this goal, it will rest.

Furthermore, Saint Thomas seems to hold that whenever we encounter a movement of this type we can affirm that it is a movement directed to a goal. He then applies this reasoning to the desire to know: since that desire is a type of movement, and since it naturally increases, it will be oriented towards a determined

16. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25: "a body tending toward its proper place (ubi) by natural appetite, is moved more forcibly and swiftly as it approaches its end. Thus, Aristotle proves, in *On the Heavens* I [8: 27a 18], (*De Caelo*) that natural motion in a straight line cannot go on to infinity, for then it would be no more moved later than earlier. So, a thing that tends more forcibly later than earlier, toward an objective, is not moved toward an indefinite objective, but tends toward some determinate thing. Now, we find this situation in the desire to know. The more a person knows, the more is he moved by the desire to know. Hence, man's natural desire tends, in the process of knowing, toward some definite end. Now, this can be none other than the most noble object of knowledge, which is God. Therefore, divine knowledge is the ultimate end of man".

17. The text is as follows: "a natural movement, the closer it gets to its goal, the more intense it becomes." Thomas Aquinas. *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, X, 2, 513 ("[q]uia motus naturalis quanto plus accedit ad terminum, magis intenditur.") Translated by Larcher, Fabian R. Lander. *Commentary on the letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews*. Wyoming: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012.

18. Aristotle. *De caelo*, 276a.



end or goal. And to surprise our contemporaries even more, he indicates that this end can only be God.

Just reading the argument we are commenting on makes the reader's mind want to raise at least the following objections: is it true that bodies move towards a natural place? And even if they do, can one imagine that the greater velocity and strength of a movement says to us that it is closer to that place?

In addition, these objections refer to the realm where the physical principle we indicated above applies. Let's suppose for a moment that the principle is valid, and that in nature there are bodies that move ever faster, according to their increasing closeness to the place that corresponds to them, their natural place. Can we say with such simplicity that the same thing happens in the spiritual plane? It looks like Thomas is taking an invalid step from the world of facts to the field of the human spirit.

2. Things tend toward an end

The idea of natural places has been abandoned by physics for centuries now. A stone does not fall because it seeks its natural place or point of rest, but rather because of the gravitational force that the Earth exercises over it, or because of the deformation of space that the Earth produces. In the case of fire, it tends to rise for reasons that are very different from seeking a place that is above it. Even the manner of speaking has changed: if one examines the language used in the *Summa contra gentiles*, one will discover with surprise that Aquinas is continually saying that material things *pursue* determined ends, as though, just as with human beings, they were able to propose goals to themselves and pursue them. Today, however, stones and other material objects are receptors, not actors. They don't seek anything: they are mere recipients of a series of forces that act on them. Later, in the face of the modern way of explaining the physical world, the language of earlier philosophers seems excessively anthropomorphic.¹⁹

Does that mean that Aquinas's statements have lost all rational support? We think not. First of all, in ordinary language we still use anthropomorphic forms of speech, which make the world we live in more intelligible. We all still speak of the "rising of the sun," of the "growth of the river" or of the "songs of the birds," all of which only make sense by referring to the human world. But even within Newtonian physics there are expressions which are closer to the ancient and medieval ways of speaking of the physical world than one might think at first glance. The case of falling bodies is especially eloquent. In any school physics textbook one finds the doctrine that

19. It bears noting that, as Spaemann says, even though teleological explanation of the natural world can be excessively anthropomorphic, what cannot be denied is that the finalistic explanation of nature is the only one that permits us to —more or less rigorously— understand the functioning of the natural order: Spaemann, Robert. *Persons. The Difference Between "Someone" and "Something"*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006: 156 and following.



bodies fall because they seek to reduce their potential energy to a minimum. It also teaches that kinetic energy increases to the degree that potential energy lessens. Therefore, the movement of falling bodies is uniformly accelerated. An explanation of this type is naturally more formalized than medieval teachings, but it doesn't seem to differ greatly from the idea that falling bodies fall more rapidly to the degree that they approach a kind of natural place.

In any case, the difference between the ancient-medieval and the modern conceptions derives in particular from the context in which each model is found. In particular, what is most significant seems to be the presence that the idea of teleology has in the first of the two. Aquinas explicitly notes that not only is the end of all things the good, and more specifically God, but he also says that all things attempt to make themselves be like to Him.²⁰ He doesn't just mean intelligent beings, but all things, even those which lack knowledge. The difference, in this regard, between man and the physical world is not found so much in the end, but rather in the manner, be it free or necessary, of attaining it, and also in the degree, greater or lesser, to which all can enjoy it. The human being, indeed, can come to understand and love God, even if he will never come to comprehend Him, while the rest of the beings in our cosmos will not achieve even that much.

The reach of the affirmation that beings lacking knowledge act for an end is a topic that has provoked much debate. The arrival of modern science on the scene has relegated final causes to a second plane: everything is explained by efficient causality. Nevertheless, this does not mean that wherever one finds a scientist one also finds a rejection of natural teleology. William Harvey (+1657), for example, the discoverer of the circulatory system, based his reasonings about the movement of the blood on a clearly finalistic approach. In his opinion, the movement of the blood is only understandable on the basis of an explanation of the structure of blood vessels which, as he says, are made *for* this movement. And thus, the greater width of the arteries (with respect to the veins) explains their capacity for inducing blood flow, even against the force of gravity.²¹

The affirmation of finality in the natural world presupposes, in the words of Saint Thomas, the recognition of an intelligence that governs the movement of its beings. And because of this we find that the workings of nature proceed toward their end in an orderly way, as do the actions of a wise man.²² In tending to their

20. Thomas Aquinas. *De veritate*, XXII, 2.

21. Harvey, William. "On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals", *Scientific Papers: Physiology, Medicine, Surgery, Geology, with Introductions, Notes and Illustrations*, Charles W. Eliot, ed. New York: Collier and Son, 1910: 62-147.

22. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 24. ("*impossibile est aliqua contraria et dissonantia in unum ordinem concordare semper vel pluries nisi alicuius gubernatione, ex qua omnibus et singulis tribuitur ut ad certum finem tendant. Sed in mundo videmus res diversarum naturarum in unum ordinem concordare, non ut raro et a casu, sed ut semper vel in maiori parte. Oportet ergo esse aliquem cuius providentia mundus gubernetur. Et hunc dicimus Deum*").

In this way, among natural beings it "contrary and discordant things cannot, always or for the most part, be parts of one order except under someone's government, which enables all and each to tend to a definite end. But in the world we find that things of diverse natures come together under one order, and



perfection, things seek their good, “since a thing is good to the extent that it is perfect. Moreover, by virtue of tending to be good it tends to the divine likeness, for a thing is made like unto God in so far as it is good.”²³

Together with noting that things tend towards an end, Saint Thomas is also pointing out that in all beings there is an appetite for the good.²⁴ This causes greater difficulties than the former issue: even if we can say that the arrow tends to the target to the degree that there is an archer whose intelligence directs the arrow, it will be a bit artificial and forced if we attribute an appetite for the good to all things, even inanimate things. This idea of a natural appetite for the good is also present in the Thomistic text we are commenting on, which begins by saying that the body tends to its own place “with a natural appetite.”²⁵

Today it is hard for us to imagine that there could be appetite in non-rational beings: how could we accept that there is appetite in a stone or a fern? And nevertheless, St. Thomas does not hesitate to say yes to this idea, because, were it not so, those beings would not tend to their maximum perfection. In his commentary on the *Physics* of Aristotle, Aquinas emphasizes that the idea of appetite is linked with that of lack.²⁶ Appetite is a tendency towards a certain kind of good: it is an inclination towards one’s own perfection. But the fact that a certain inclination exists in a determined subject does not necessarily mean that that subject is conscious of this inclination. Only in beings that enjoy intelligence can the tendency towards the good be conscious. In other beings, this tendency or appetite exists in its own way: “[n]ow, it belongs to every being to seek its perfection and the conservation of its being. Each being does so according to its mode: for intellectual beings through will, for animals through sensible appetite, and to those lacking sense through natural appetite.”²⁷

this not rarely or by chance, but always or for the most part. There must therefore *be some being by whose providence the world is governed*. This we call God” Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 13.

23. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 24 (“[n]am per hoc quod tendunt in suam perfectionem, tendunt ad bonum: cum unumquodque in tantum bonum sit in quantum est perfectum. Secundum vero quod tendit ad hoc quod sit bonum, tendit in divinam similitudinem: Deo enim assimilatur aliquid in quantum bonum est.”)

24. The distinction that Saint Thomas makes between natural appetite, sensitive appetite and intellectual appetite is not the same thing as saying that the natural appetite is the exclusive domain of inert beings. We must first bear in mind that the human being also includes tendencies that he shares with other beings, be they inert or ensouled (Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, 94, 2). In the second place, it should be recalled that even at the level of the spirit men have a natural appetite for the good, which is indestructible and which is found at the foundation of all their activity: it would be impossible to choose particular goods if we did not have the appetite for the good in general. As is known, St. Thomas constantly insists that everything that is sought, is sought insofar as it is perceived as good, at least in some aspect. This is important for showing that in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas the natural also plays a role in the spiritual dimension of the human being. Therefore, we can distinguish in the rational appetite a *voluntas ut natura* and a *voluntas ut ratio*.

25. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25.

26. Aristotle. *In libros Physicorum*, I, 15, 136.

27. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 72 (“[c]uilibet autem enti competit appetere suam perfectionem et conservationem sui esse: unicuique tamen secundum suum modum, intellectualibus



In this sense, both the human being as well as other beings tend to the good, that is, they have an appetite for the good. But in the case of the human being the particular goods are desired in a free way. The other beings do not know their end, but nonetheless strive to attain it.²⁸ Their action, in a certain way, is like that of an instrument.²⁹ Nevertheless, even though they lack any knowledge of their end, their directedness towards that end belongs to them as something proper to them, something natural.

What we have discussed up to this point helps us to confirm our analysis of the differences that exist between the medieval and the modern ways of understanding the material world. The point of discord is the role played by teleology in each cosmology. The more one views the world through teleological goggles, the greater will be the role of internal causality in each one of those beings. Thus, expressions like “bodies have a natural appetite for attaining a specific place” will be understandable, even coming into common usage. In contrast, when the teleological model is replaced by one characterized by mechanicism, it becomes impossible to recognize or attribute any appetite in lower beings.

What do we say, then, about the value of the Thomistic affirmation that we cited at the beginning of this article?

[c]orpus, quod naturali appetitu tendit in suum ubi, tanto vehementius et velocius movetur, quanto magis appropinquat fini: unde probat Aristoteles in I de caelo, quod motus naturalis rectus non potest esse ad infinitum, quia non magis moveretur postea quam prius. Quod igitur vehementius in aliquid tendit post quam prius, non movetur ad infinitum, sed ad aliquid determinatum tendit.³⁰

quidem per voluntatem, animalibus per sensibilem appetitum, carentibus vero sensu per appetitum naturalem.”)

28. In this sense, writes St. Thomas: (“[t]amen considerandum est quod aliquid sua actione vel motu tendit ad finem dupliciter, uno modo, sicut seipsum ad finem movens, ut homo; alio modo, sicut ab alio motum ad finem, sicut sagitta tendit ad determinatum finem ex hoc quod movetur a sagittante, qui suam actionem dirigit in finem. Illa ergo quae rationem habent, seipsa movent ad finem, quia habent dominium suorum actuum per liberum arbitrium, quod est facultas voluntatis et rationis. Illa vero quae ratione carent, tendunt in finem per naturalem inclinationem, quasi ab alio mota, non autem a seipsis, cum non cognoscant rationem finis, et ideo nihil in finem ordinare possunt, sed solum in finem ab alio ordinantur.”); “a thing tends to an end by its action or movement in two ways: first, as a thing, moving itself to the end, as man; secondly, as a thing moved by another to the end, as an arrow tends to a determinate end through being moved by the archer who directs his action to the end. Therefore those things that are possessed of reason move themselves to an end; because they have dominion over their actions through their free-will, which is the ‘faculty of will and reason.’ But those things that lack reason tend to an end, by natural inclination, as being moved by another and not by themselves; since they do not know the nature of an end as such, and consequently cannot ordain anything to an end, but can be ordained to an end only by another.” *Summa theologiae*, I-II, 1, 2.

29. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, I, 22, 2.

30. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25: “a body tending toward its proper place (ubi) by natural appetite, is moved more forcibly and swiftly as it approaches its end. Thus, Aristotle proves, in *On the Heavens* I [8: 27a 18], that natural motion in a straight line cannot go on to infinity, for then it would be no more moved later than earlier. So, a thing that tends more forcibly later than earlier, toward an objective, is not moved toward an indefinite objective, but tends toward some determinate thing”.



Within a teleological scheme, these affirmations are valid, although they may need to be corrected in certain aspects. If, in contrast, we adopt a mechanistic view, the affirmations just cited would only be acceptable as metaphors, explanations that seek to reflect in a very elemental way what common sense discovers on the basis of the observation of falling bodies.

3. Final causes in biology. The proposal of Ernst Mayr

In the two preceding sections we have sought to emphasize that Saint Thomas begins with the presupposition that there exists directionality in nature, i.e. that in the natural world everything acts for an end, following a certain order.³¹ Aquinas took this idea from Aristotle, who had spoken in his teaching on physics of the orientation towards ends that characterizes the natural world. He writes:

[i]f then it is both by nature and for an end that the swallow makes its nest and the spider its web, and plants grow leaves for the sake of the fruit and send their roots down (not up) for the sake of nourishment, it is plain that this kind of cause is operative in things which come to be and are by nature. And since 'nature' means two things, the matter and the form, of which the latter is the end, and since all the rest is for the sake of the end, the form must be the cause in the sense of "that for the sake of which."³²

It is clear, then, that the Peripatetics, in their approach to the problem of the teleology of the physical world, offer finalistic explanations of the organic parts and of the behavior of living beings that sound strikingly like modern adaptationist explanations.³³ Even more, when Aristotle and his disciples write about the development of living beings, their explanations, Krieger says, are similar to those used by contemporary biologists, and which lack any reference to a principle

31. This directionality exists in all beings in the natural world: "Again, we should notice that, although every agent, both natural and voluntary, intends an end, still it does not follow that every agent knows the end or deliberates about the end. To know the end is necessary in those whose actions are not determined, but which may act for opposed ends as, for example, voluntary agents. Therefore it is necessary that these know the end by which they determine their actions. But in natural agents the actions are determined, hence it is not necessary to choose those things which are for the end". Thomas Aquinas. *De principiis naturae*, III.

32. Aristotle. *Physics*, 199a 25-30 (Hardie, R. P.; Gaye, R. K. *Physica in the Works of Aristotle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930). Another finalistic explanation is offered by Aristotle concerning the rain: "[t]he efficient, controlling and first cause is the circle of the sun's revolution. For it is evident [... that it] is thus the cause of generation and destruction. The earth is at rest and the moisture about it is evaporated by the sun's rays and the other heat from above and rises upwards; but when the heat which caused it to rise leaves it [...] the vapor cools and condenses again as a result of the loss of heat and the height and turns from air into water: and having become water falls again onto the earth [...] This cycle occurs in imitation of the sun's cycle." Aristotle. *Meteorology*, 346b20-36, translated by Webster, Erwin Wentworth. *Meteorologica*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1931.

33. Lennox, James. "Teleology", *Keywords in Evolutionary Biology*, Evelyn Fox Keller, Elisabeth Lloyd, eds. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1992: 327.



of movement that is extrinsic to the thing itself (such as the First Motor of the Stagirite), but instead admit an intrinsic principle of movement in certain beings³⁴.

The entire natural world, in this way, experiences a kind of dynamism, to such a degree that the order of nature is only intelligible to us on its basis.³⁵ This dynamism does not express itself in an arbitrary way: natural beings present a definite tendentiality, in accordance with a series of spatio-temporal and functional patterns belonging to each being: there exist a great variety of possible processes in function of the concurrence of the different dynamisms, but the processes revolve around specific patterns.³⁶

If this is so, the laws of nature, which are the expression of the tendentiality and regularity of the physical world, contain clear information about the possible course of events, information that expresses the possibilities of this natural dynamism when certain concrete conditions hold. This information, as Artigas says, has a dynamic aspect (patterns of processes) and a structural aspect (patterns of spatial structure); the two aspects are interwoven and integrated into the successive developments of this dynamism.³⁷

Given that in nature we experience the existence of final causality, in the realm of the living, which belongs to the natural world, it will also be possible to identify the presence of an order or teleology. This is the thesis of Ernst Mayr, the German biologist and historian of science, who holds that no other doctrine has so influenced biology as teleology has (one should bear in mind that this doctrine constituted the predominant vision of the world prior to Darwin).³⁸ Furthermore, the belief in a finality in nature (specifically, at the level of the living) still occupies “considerable space” in various recent philosophies of biology.

It hardly needs to be said that the characteristics of all living organisms are, to a certain degree, teleological: the wings of a bird serve for flying; the eyes of animals, for seeing; the kidneys are structured in order to regulate the composition of the blood, etc.³⁹ These bodily structures represent, in some way, a natural capacity for adaptation. This can be seen, for instance, in wings and in hands, in organs like the kidneys, or in behaviors like the “courtship display” of the turkey.⁴⁰

34. Krieger, Gerald. “Transmogrifying teleological talk?”. *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 20 (1998): 7.

35. Artigas, Mariano. *La inteligibilidad de la naturaleza*. Pamplona: Ediciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 1992: 23 and following.

36. Artigas, Mariano. *Filosofía de la naturaleza*. Pamplona: Ediciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2008: 286.

37. Artigas, Mariano. *La inteligibilidad de la naturaleza...: 126-127.*

38. Mayr, Ernst. *What Makes Biology Unique? Considerations on the Autonomy of a Scientific Discipline*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2004: 39.

39. Other examples of this teleology of the human body are the preservation of bodily temperature or homeostatic reactions in general, as well as all the other functional structures designed anatomically and physiologically for fulfilling a certain function. For more on this issue: Ayala, Francisco. “Teleological Explanations in Evolutionary Biology”. *Philosophy of Science*, 37 (1970): 8-9.

40. Dobzhansky, Theodosius. *Evolution*. San Francisco: Freeman, 1977: 328.



Given this explanation of final causes in biological science, the idea of a teleology of nature, despite its strongly theological foundations, has been a thesis shared even by authors who do not believe in the hand of God but who do believe in a progressive tendency of the world towards an always-growing perfection,⁴¹ a kind of tendency or inclination of things towards their own perfection (an idea which, by the way, has a strong presence in the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle and Stoic philosophy). The teleological vision became increasingly strong within philosophy, beginning with the Greeks and continuing up to the 18th and 19th centuries, retaining its place when Christianity constituted its primary source of support.⁴²

In Mayr's opinion, keeping in mind the concept of a *scala naturae*, understood as the inclination or tendency of natural objects towards their own perfection, there were few philosophers that didn't believe in progress and improvement. Even scientists like Lamarck had believed in something like a natural finalism.⁴³

Consequently —and despite the fact that in the era of evolutionist synthesis (primarily the first half of the 20th century) there were virtually no biologists who gave credence to final causality— the belief in the teleology of the natural order was able to discover, outside the field of philosophy of biology, a terrain that was even more favorable. Thus, as Mayr points out, almost all the thinkers who wrote about evolutionary change in the 100 years following 1859 were convinced finalists. Further, all three philosophers closest to Darwin —Whewell, Herschel, and Mill— believed in final causes.⁴⁴

In sum, the refutation of a teleological reading of the natural world developed by scientists of an evolutionist stripe did not eliminate philosophy's concern about a constitutive finality of nature. Behavior directed towards an end is found everywhere in the organic world; for instance, the majority of the activities linked with migration, the hunt for food, courtship, ontogeny and all the phases of reproduction are characterized by this orientation to ends.⁴⁵

4. Ways of understanding the Thomist argument

Now that these clarifications have been made, we can enter into the problem that arises from applying the indicated principles to the specifically human realm. Can we believe that in our spirit and in its operations it also happens that *igitur vehementius in*

41. Mayr, Ernst. *What Makes Biology Unique?...*: 41.

42. Mayr, Ernst. *What Makes Biology Unique?...*: 41.

43. Mayr, Ernst. *What Makes Biology Unique?...*: 41.

44. Mayr, Ernst. *What Makes Biology Unique?...*: 43.

45. Mayr, Ernst. *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology. Observations of an Evolutionist*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1988: 45.



*aliquid tendit post quam prius, non movetur ad infinitum, sed aliquid determinatum tendit?*⁴⁶

Let us return to the root of the problem: if teleology exists, then it will be possible to recognize analogies between what happens in the material world and what happens in the human realm. Nonetheless, we will have to determine the measure to which those analogies apply and, therefore, the value of the above-mentioned principle as an argument. An argument that is used to support something as different as the thesis that the progressive character of the desire to know shows that it is not in vain, and, even more, that God is its natural objective.

There are various ways of understanding the linkage between the movement of bodies and the progressive character of the desire to know. Nevertheless, simplifying a little, we can reduce to two the positions that might apply in this subject matter. The first and strongest could begin by asserting that, since in physics uniformly accelerated movement also indicates the presence of an end point, the movements of that nature which are present in the human being must also lead us to the same consequence.

Next, we note that the progressive character of the desire to know is a species within uniformly accelerated movements. We need only apply to the desire to know the consequences that follow from the previous rules and thereby deduce the existence of an object in which this desire to know finds its repose. It has to be said, however, that the weakness of this type of reasoning lies in the fact that it presupposes innumerable premises that are far from being unquestionable. Even among those who maintain a teleological vision of the universe, the univocal application of these principles will surely awaken much resistance. These difficulties do not arise just because of the modern way of understanding nature; rather, they can also be supported by many Thomistic texts where Aquinas brings together and makes his own the Aristotelian teaching that diverse objects should be studied by methods that are similarly diverse.

The second way of understanding the problem has less logical force, but is more persuasive. It consists in understanding the text of book III of the *Summa contra gentiles* in a weaker fashion. According to this approach, Saint Thomas would be fundamentally asserting two facts: first, that there exist uniformly accelerated movements in nature; and second, that the desire to know increases in the human person. From this point the argumentation can continue: in physics, the existence of a movement of this kind is an indicator that there exists an end point for that movement. Otherwise, this type of movement would not exist (in fact, not all movements are of this type). What happens in physics is not accidental; rather, it is yet another example that shows that nature does nothing in vain. Stated in another way, to accept that in the material world there may exist uniformly accelerated movements that lead nowhere would involve postulating a certain regression to infinity.

46. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25, 13: "a thing that tends more forcibly later than earlier, toward an objective, is not moved toward an indefinite objective, but tends toward some determinate thing".



As is apparent, Saint Thomas's explanation of the desire to understand God begins with a consideration of natural movement, i.e. what occurs in the physical world. This leads us to think that, for Aquinas, the central case of natural desire is that of an appetite associated with the movement of bodies. Only in a derivative sense can it be applied to the desire of the soul to know God or the First Cause. In this way, when he speaks of the natural character of movement in the physical world, as well as of the natural character of the appetite to know God, the primary sense of "natural" or "nature" to which he is referring is the one that applies to physical realities. It is from this starting point that he passes to the explanation of human appetites.

In Thomist thought this application of the physical sense of nature to other areas of reality seems to be a constant. This is also true for Stoic philosophy which, in dealing with the natural law, does so with a strongly cosmological emphasis. But is this naturalistic explanation of the moral possible for St. Thomas? We think it is not. In contrast to what he does in the rest of the topics he studies, in the realm of morality the concept of nature does not find its primary meaning in physical realities. It is true that Aquinas the theologian speaks of "natural inclinations," affirming that there are universal tendencies that are common to human beings and non-human things, but the fact that the moral law is natural does not mean that it functions in the way scientific laws do.

Having made this assertion, we can ask ourselves: aren't there movements similar to natural movement in other dimensions of reality? And if there are, will it not also be the case that those movements constitute a powerful indication that they are directed towards a determined place? Let us suppose that we agree that "[t]he more a person knows, the more is he moved by the desire to know," isn't that progressivity also a distinctive characteristic of the movements we were mentioning? And if nature never acts in vain, that is, if things have a finality: would it not be reasonable that the desire for knowledge would also be oriented towards an end, and that if that end did not exist it would produce a true frustration of that tendency?

If we argue in this manner we perhaps lose rigor, but we have the advantage of seeing that the principle "a thing that tends more forcibly later than earlier, toward an objective, is not moved toward an indefinite objective, but tends toward some determinate thing" is found in physics by simple observation of the fall of bodies; however, it has an application that is broader than that discipline alone. Not because physics applies to the entire human world, but because the human spirit and the relations of bodies are two zones of reality, and the principle cited is constitutive of all the real—and not just physics—at least when things are viewed from a teleological point of view. That is, we are not claiming here that physics applies to what goes beyond it, but rather that even physics is subjected to certain principles that are applicable to the entirety of reality.

In short, we are affirming the possibility of a metaphysic, that is, of suprasensible principles. Nonetheless, there is an important difference between the probative value of the principle "a thing that tends more forcibly later than earlier, toward



an objective, is not moved toward an indefinite objective, but tends toward some determinate thing” in the two fields. In physics it is applicable because otherwise we would have to accept a regression to infinity. In the human field, to the contrary, it applies because the alternative is not reasonable, since it would mean accepting that the world is a tease and lacks meaning. But this lack of meaning is possible, or at least we can affirm it: in fact, many of our contemporaries do so.

What we have discussed up to now shows that the Thomistic argument in *Summa contra gentiles* III, 25 can be understood in diverse ways according to the strength and univocity that are attributed to his claims. The less univocal these affirmations are, the more defensible the argument will be in the face of criticisms by modern and contemporary thinkers. At the same time, however, the argument will have less probative value.⁴⁷ Going to extremes, it does not seem that this argument has a merely metaphorical value for Saint Thomas. But we also cannot read him in a univocal manner, as a rationalist would do.

At base, this brief text is related to the very character of *Summa contra gentiles* in which it is integrated. If it is a case, as is usually claimed, of a work that is intended to support those who are going to evangelize non-Christians, we would have to understand it as one among a stock of arguments—perhaps like what the Aristotelian *Topica* does. These arguments, naturally, are only sketched out and it would be task of the reader to adapt them to the argument that he is involved in. In that case, the interlocutor would be a non-Christian who accepts the teachings of Aristotle. It is not accidental, then, that the bases of the argumentation are Aristotelian: the principle of movement of heavy bodies, on the one hand, and the natural and progressive character of the desire to know. If we add to this a teleological context through which to see the world—which every Aristotelian would agree to without any problem—then we have a situation where the conclusions would not be difficult to accept by an interlocutor like the one St. Thomas has in mind.

Naturally, a question comes to the fore: what is the value of all of this if the interlocutor is not an Aristotelian? Aquinas did not know of this problem, because the question of the truth of the Aristotelian theory only arose with the advent of modern science. Nevertheless, we believe we can say that, with some modifications, and attributing a less apodictic character to his assertions, his argument is plausible.

5. Human knowledge and the natural desire to know

This final section is dedicated to the study of the principal implications for human knowledge that this affirmation of a natural desire to know would have. Aquinas's idea is a clear application of the Aristotelian principle of the desire to understand the truth that appears in *Metaphysics* A 1. It is also an analogous version of the desire

47. In order to see the importance of the intellectual contexts in which these diverse arguments are developed, it will be illustrative to consult: Smith, Barry. “Zum Wesen des Common sense: Aristoteles und die naive Physik”. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 46 (1992): 510 and following.



to know causes, or of the desire for happiness, that St. Thomas discusses in other passages of the *Corpus thomisticum*.

The Thomistic argument begins with the affirmation of God's existence, *qua* first object of desire.⁴⁸ This object moves all things by love,⁴⁹ as Aristotle teaches in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*. For this reason, it has been thought that what is characteristic of God seen as First Mover is His condition as "appealing." Some authors have noted that, for these purposes, "appeal" and "desire" refer to the same reality in the work of St. Thomas.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the terms "appetite" and "appeal" have a more generic and undetermined meaning, in the sense that they can be applied even to beings which lack knowledge. For their part, the terms "desire" as a noun and "to desire" have, in general, a meaning that is more specific and determined, being usable, *stricto sensu*, with those beings that have knowledge.⁵¹

Saint Thomas himself proves that the notion of "desire" necessarily implies a form of knowledge. As he observes, even non-sentient creates act via a type of intellectual apprehension, not that which it itself can attain, but rather the knowledge of the first motors, that order each thing to its end: and therefore without knowledge they have no delight nor joy at all.⁵² Similarly, if the First Motor is our principal object of desire, as well as the end of all things, that motor must be a type of kind of knowing agent that, at least, attracts things towards itself because of its own knowledge.

Given that the desire to know is what responds to the problem of the end of man, this movement of the subject is the root of all appetite. In the case of the human being, St. Thomas believes that this desire is related to the hunger of the creature to become like the divine substance,⁵³ which is explained by the fact that everything desires its own perfection.⁵⁴ Now, a thing is perfect by its form, since it exists by its form, and a thing is perfect insofar as it is. But since the form of the effect is a likeness of the form of the agent,

ya que todo agente obra algo símil a si mismo, el mismo agente es apetecido y tiene razón de bien, porque la razón por la cual es apetecido es para participar en esa similitud, recibiénola

48. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 37.

49. Thomas Aquinas. *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*, XII, 9.

50. For example: Laporta, Jorge. "Pour trouver le sens exact des termes appetitus naturalis, desiderium naturale, amor naturalis, etc. chez Thomas d'Aquin". *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 48 (1973): 57 and following.

51. Cambiasso, Jorge. *El deseo de entender la verdad en la "Summa contra gentiles"...*: 156.

52. Thomas Aquinas. *Scriptum super Sententiis*, I, 1, 4, 1.

53. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, II, 43.

54. In this sense, St. Thomas writes: "since every agent produces something similar to itself, the same agent is desired and has the ratio of the good, because the reason that it is desired is in order to participate in that likeness, receiving it or imitating it. Therefore, if this agent is the divine Agent, all things desire His likeness." *Summa contra gentiles*, II, 81 ("[i]n qualibet re quae potest pertingere ad aliquam perfectionem, invenitur naturalis appetitus illius perfectionis: bonum enim est quod omnia appetunt, ita tamen quod unumquodque proprium bonum.") "[t]hen, too, in every thing capable of attaining certain perfection, we find a natural desire for that perfection, since good is what all things desire, yet in such fashion that each thing desires the good proper to itself."



*o imitándola. Por lo cual, si este agente es el Agente divino, todas las cosas apetecen a su semejanza*⁵⁵

As a manner of proving the argument, St. Thomas states that everything created, and not just man, attempts to liken itself to the divine goodness. He writes,

*[o]mnis res per suum motum vel actionem tendit in aliquod bonum sicut in finem, ut supra ostensum est. In tantum autem aliquid de bono participat, in quantum assimilatur primae bonitati, quae Deus est. Omnia igitur per motus suos et actiones tendunt in divinam similitudinem sicut in finem ultimum.*⁵⁶

Despite this, creatures do not attain the good (which is their perfection) as it is in God, although each one of them copies, in its own way, the goodness of the First Cause. For God it is the same thing to be, to live, to be wise, to be blessed, and to be whatever else seems to belong to perfection and goodness. This does not occur in creatures, which are not their own being. Therefore, if created things are good insofar as they exist, and because none of them is its own being, none of them is its own goodness. Rather, each of them is good by participation in goodness, just as it is being by participation in existing being itself.⁵⁷

The reason for recognizing that creatures aspire to likeness with the divine substance is rooted in the fact that that substance is its cause. Things tend to the divine likeness because it is supremely good, as has been said. Now, it is as a result of the goodness of God that He confers being on all things, for a being acts by virtue of the fact that it is actually perfect. Later Saint Thomas concludes, and so, things tend toward the divine likeness by the fact that they are causes of others.⁵⁸

The relation between the ordering of reality by a First Mover, the fact of divine causality and the idea of likeness to God, is seen most clearly in the case of the human being. As Aquinas observes, the human being naturally desires to know the cause of any known effect. Now, human understanding knows universal being. He desires, in fact, to know his own cause, which is God alone. But nobody attains to his ultimate end as long as his desire is not quenched. [*n]on sufficit igitur ad felicitatem humanam, quae est ultimus finis, qualiscumque intelligibilis cognitio, nisi divina cognitio adsit, quae terminat naturale desiderium sicut ultimus finis*⁵⁹

55. Cambiasso, Jorge. *El deseo de entender la verdad en la "Summa contra gentiles"...*: 226. It is important to note that God Himself is the one who has embedded his likeness in creates things: *Summa contra gentiles*, II, 45.

56. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 19: “[f]urthermore, everything tends through its motion or action toward a good, as its end. Now, a thing participates in the good precisely to the same extent that it becomes like the first goodness, which is God. So, all things tend through their movements and actions toward the divine likeness, as toward their ultimate end”.

57. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 20.

58. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 21.

59. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25: “Therefore, for human happiness, which is the ultimate end, it is not enough to have merely any kind of intelligible knowledge; there must be divine knowledge, as an ultimate end, to terminate the natural desire”.



Given that the knowledge of God is the final end of knowledge and of human action,

*[f]inis igitur intellectus est finis omnium actionum humanarum. Finis autem et bonum intellectus est verum: et per consequens ultimus finis primum verum. Est igitur ultimus finis totius hominis, et omnium operationum et desideriorum eius, cognoscere primum verum, quod est Deus.*⁶⁰

This allows us to conclude that the natural desire that Aquinas is referring to has a determined object. It is not an abstract or disconnected appetite. This movement ends with the intellectual grasp of the First Cause.⁶¹ Human happiness, in this sense, does not consist in an act of the will. Blessedness only exists in rational creatures, as opposed to the delectation of the appetite, which we even see in creatures lacking reason.

Finally, we arrive at the question about the nature of this desire. For despite what has been discussed so far, some authors think this appetite is not linked in any way with the vision of God.⁶² Saint Thomas himself seems to incline towards this reading in *De veritate* q. 22, a. 7. However, this is not a datum that is contrary to our interpretation. On the contrary, in the text of *De veritate* Saint Thomas is referring to the problem of justification, and not to the issue of the human end. When he turns to that topic he does not hesitate to assert that the natural desire of the human being is the vision of the first cause.⁶³

In regards to the nature of this desire, a first possibility is that it is a “desire of the will.” If this is true, the natural desire to see God would be an elicit-conditional movement that belongs to the realm of psychology,⁶⁴ and that is preceded by intellectual apprehension. Its conditional character is explained by the fact that it consists in a desire which can express itself in the following terms: I would desire to see God if that were possible.⁶⁵

60. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25: “the end of the intellect is the end of all human actions. ‘But the end and good of the intellect are the true;’ consequently, the supreme truth is the ultimate end. So, the ultimate end of the whole man, and of all his operations and desires, is to know the first truth, which is God”.

61. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25.

62. Gaboriau, Florent. *Thomas d’Aquin en dialogue*. Paris: Fac, 1993: 81 and following.

63. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 57. The perfection of the understanding depends on the human being having achieved the knowledge (or vision) of God. This desire is a natural desire, which materializes as admiration-desire, and which is grounded in the self-evidence of the principle that the knowledge of the ultimate causes of reality is good for the human being. Its natural character is shown by the fact that once we comprehend the existence of God, the desire to know His essence arises *naturaliter*, without any deliberation: Feingold, Lawrence. *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*. Rome: Sapientia Press, 2010: 44.

64. Laporta, Jorge. “Les notions d’appétit naturel et de puissance obédientielle chez S Thomas d’Aquin”. *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 5 (1928): 257 and following.

65. Pacheco, Cipriano Franco. *O desejo natural da visão de Deus...*: 35.



In the second place—and this is the interpretation we believe to be correct—this desire that is natural to man would be equivalent to a “desire of reason,” understood as a metaphysical reality.⁶⁶ This means that this kind of appetitive movement derives from the action of the First Mover in man, which imprints, in conformity with the nature of each being, the tendency towards or necessity of seeing the deity. It represents, in this sense, a basic and constitutive inclination of human life, a form of tendency that marks one of the goods that constitute the integral development of every human being: the truth.

6. Man as *capax Dei*

The natural desire to see God and the natural capacity of reason to know Him are a demonstration that man truly is *capax Dei*.⁶⁷ This expression, which apparently was first used by Rufinus, was intensively developed by Saint Augustine,⁶⁸ who turns it into a central problem for Christian philosophy. Hence, when Thomas Aquinas discusses the meaning of this expression, he is following on a rich tradition of thought. Beginning with Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, and integrating the contributions of the Fathers of the Church and of the great masters of Dominican and Franciscan theology about man as *imago Dei*, he unites this truth with Aristotle’s teaching about the natural desire to know, possessed by every man because of his condition as a rational animal.

Aquinas affirms that all beings seek their own perfection, and that the perfection of each being is dependent on its nature. Thus, the plenitude of each thing must be appropriate to its substantial form, and for humans their substantial form is the intellect. Now, if the intellect were not able to know God, who is, says Saint Thomas, the principle of perfection of all things, it would not experience the natural desire we have been discussing in this article. This natural desire would thus be in vain, and contrary to nature’s manner of behaving, for nature never acts vainly.⁶⁹

The definition of man as *capax Dei* has a strong theological and supernatural root, because, as Saint Thomas states, *capax Dei* means *capax aeternae vitae*⁷⁰ (he also speaks of *capax gratiae* and *capax beatae cognitionis*). However, it seems to us that the meaning

66. Laporta, Jorge. *Les notions d'appétit naturel et de puissance...*: 257-277.

67. For an examination of the relationship between the issues of man as *capax Dei* and of the natural desire to see God, Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae* I, 93, 2 and I-II, 3, 8.

68. Saint Augustine. *De Trinitate*, XIV, 8, 11.

69. Saint Thomas says: [*q*]uia naturale desiderium nihil aliud est quam inclinatio inhaerens rebus ex ordinatione primi moventis, quae non potest esse supervacua. Thomas Aquinas. *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, I, 2, 21, translated by Litzinger, C.I.: Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary of the Nicomachean Ethics*. Chicago: Regnery, 1964: “a natural desire is nothing else but an inclination belonging to things by the disposition of the first mover, and this cannot be frustrated”.

70. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, I, 23, 1.



of this human capacity can be understood more simply as the capacity to know the truth (and the truth of truths): the human being is capable of God insofar as he is able to know the truth. To conclude: man is *capax Dei* because he is *capax veritatis*.

What is interesting about this argument is that it permits relating the theology of St. Thomas to his philosophy and epistemology. Man is *capax Dei* because of a divine gift. God has freely given him that capacity, and understanding this is a question of theology. But interpreting this condition as the capacity to know the truth, and, as Aquinas thinks, to know the full truth or the first truth, is something that demands a purely rational argument. Indeed, Aquinas thinks that what we know solely by natural reason is that God is above all things that exist and that He is the principle of all that exists. The thesis of Saint Thomas is as follows:

secundum quod naturam alicuius rei ex eius proprietatibus et effectibus cognoscere possumus, sic eam nomine possumus significare. Unde, quia substantiam lapidis ex eius proprietate possumus cognoscere secundum seipsam, sciendo quid est lapis, hoc nomen lapis ipsam lapidis naturam, secundum quod in se est, significat, significat enim definitionem lapidis, per quam scimus quid est lapis. Ratio enim quam significat nomen, est definitio, ut dicitur in IV Metaphys. Sed ex effectibus divinis divinam naturam non possumus cognoscere secundum quod in se est, ut sciamus de ea quid est; sed per modum eminentiae et causalitatis et negationis [...] Et sic hoc nomen Deus significat naturam divinam. Impositum est enim nomen hoc ad aliquid significandum supra omnia existens, quod est principium omnium, et remotum ab omnibus. Hoc enim intendunt significare nominantes Deum.⁷¹

When Aquinas explains what it means to say that there is a natural desire in man to see God, which means that he is *capax Dei*, he begins with the idea that this natural desire depends on a natural inclination, present in all creatures, to unite themselves with their principle, which is God.⁷² In addition, in the case of man, this desire expresses the natural tendency that he has to beatitude or happiness.⁷³

In the previous section I said that the natural desire discussed in *Summa contra gentiles* cannot be understood apart from the explanation of the natural desire to know that Saint Thomas gives in his *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*. In its operation, the human intellect receives a kind of “push” towards the knowledge of the *quid* of the things that surround him. Human knowledge is, thus, the perception of the *quid*, and not the perception of the external and inessential attributes of the thing.

71. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, I, 13, 8: “we can name a thing according to the knowledge we have of its nature from its properties and effects. Hence, because we can know what stone is in itself from its property, this name “stone” signifies the nature of the stone itself; for it signifies the definition of stone, by which we know what it is, for the idea which the name signifies is the definition, as is said in Metaph. IV. Now from the divine effects we cannot know the divine nature in itself, so as to know what it is; but only by way of eminence, and by way of causality, and of negation [...] Thus the name “God” signifies the divine nature, for this name was imposed to signify something existing above all things, the principle of all things and removed from all things; for those who name God intend to signify all this”.

72. Thomas Aquinas. *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*, I, 1.

73. For example, in *Summa theologiae* we read that man is *capax summi boni* (I, 93, 2) and is *capax beatitudinis* (II-II, 25, 12).



This “push” is what Aquinas has called “the natural desire to understand the why of things.”

This desire originates with wonder, and does not rest until the mind is able to grasp the essence of the cause. This is why the natural desire to know is related to the problem of the happiness of the human being. Part of happiness involves the mind’s grasping the essence of the First Cause: this is the way a human being attains his perfection. Man is only fulfilled when the intellect receives God as the object of its desiring.⁷⁴

In consequence, in his acts of knowledge man experiences a radical inclination to know the First Cause of all things. This inclination is due to the action of God Himself, who orders and defines the inclinations of each being according to what is most appropriate to its essential structure. In the case of the human being, God does not just impose certain natural inclinations, e.g. to the preservation of one’s own life, or to life in society. Rather, He also provides man with a special capacity to attain to God: to see Him, to love Him, to know Him *personally*. Therefore, by his nature, and because of the nature of his intelligence, the human being is capable of God. He is able to receive God in himself by the path of knowledge.

What does it mean to say that the human being is capable of God? Here it means that he is able to know God without any violation or even modification of the nature of his intellect, or of his nature in general. God as an object of knowledge is related to man as the infinite relates with the finite; nonetheless, the human being that sees God continues to be a man. The human being, despite his finite nature, has the potency to possess the infinite and rest in it.⁷⁵

Finally, even though all things seek to unite themselves to God, only the human being is *capax Dei*, because only he can love God and know Him.⁷⁶ Only the human being is made in the image and likeness of God, and only he can attain to a personal relationship with the Creator:

[a]d secundum dicendum quod similitudo imaginis attenditur in natura humana secundum quod est capax Dei, scilicet ipsum attingendo propria operatione cognitionis et amoris. Similitudo autem vestigii attenditur solum secundum repraesentationem aliquam ex impressione divina in creatura existentem, non autem ex eo quod creatura irrationalis, in qua est sola talis similitudo possit ad Deum attingere per solam suam operationem. Quod autem deficit a minori, non habet congruitatem ad id quod est maius, sicut corpus quod non est aptum perfici anima sensitiva, multo minus est aptum perfici anima intellectiva. Multo autem est maior et perfectior unio ad Deum secundum esse personale quam quae est secundum operationem. Et ideo creatura irrationalis, quae deficit ab unione ad Deum per operationem, non habet congruitatem ut uniatur ei secundum esse personale.⁷⁷

74. Thomas Aquinas. *Sententia libri De anima*, III, 9, 726.

75. Rhonheimer, Martin. *The Perspective of Morality. Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011: 79-80.

76. Thomas Aquinas. *De veritate*, XXII, 2. It is worth emphasizing that for Saint Thomas, all rational beings know God in every cognition, because just as nothing can be seen as good except by its similitude with the first goodness, nothing is knowable other than through its similarity with the first truth.

77. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, III, 4, 1: “The likeness of image is found in human nature, forasmuch as it is capable of God, viz. by attaining to Him through its own operation



7. Final considerations

At the beginning of our article we showed how St. Thomas applies the argument from natural movement to the problem of the knowledge of God *qua* ultimate end of human life. What Aquinas wanted to do is highlight the fact that the spiritual development of human beings is not found in an activity of the will or of the appetites, but rather in an act of reason, and, in particular, in the act of vision-intellection of the greatest object of knowledge that exists.

The relation between knowledge and natural movement isn't arbitrary. Just as a body tends to its proper place by natural appetite, the more rapidly and forcefully it moves the closer it gets to its end; similarly, our intelligence experiences a greater impulse or desire to know the greater knowledge of reality we have. Since we are spiritual and personal beings, human beings have a thirst for knowledge that is unquenchable. Reality demands our attention, it is there waiting to be known. For example, we can point to that urge that certain European explorers of the 18th and 19th centuries felt to know all the regions of the world that were, until then, unknown to Europe.⁷⁸

In this sense, the thesis that supports St. Thomas's idea is that, in order to desire to know, it is necessary to know something. And thus, the more one knows, the greater impetus this natural desire to know will have. This impulse,⁷⁹ which, as Spaemann says, is a sign that reason is the form of life of the human being,⁸⁰ can only be understood as a desire for knowledge of causes. This is a natural desire unleashed by wonder in the face of what is, and which pushes him onwards with his search for knowledge.⁸¹ This appetite does not rest until the intelligence has grasped the essence of the causes. It follows that the grasping of the essence of the First Cause forms part of the human *felicitas*.

Therefore, it is sufficient for the human being to experience the good of knowledge in order that that natural desire will affect him with greater strength. Given that, the more it nears its natural place, the truth of truths, the more our reason moves faster towards it.

of knowledge and love. But the likeness of trace regards only a representation by Divine impression, existing in the creature, and does not imply that the irrational creature, in which such a likeness is, can attain to God by its own operation alone. For what does not come up to the less, has no fitness for the greater; as a body which is not fitted to be perfected by a sensitive soul is much less fitted for an intellectual soul. Now much greater and more perfect is the union with God in personal being than the union by operation. And hence the irrational creature which falls short of the union with God by operation has no fitness to be united with Him in personal being".

78. Vázquez, David. *La virtud de la studiositas y el conocimiento. Un estudio desde Santo Tomás de Aquino*. Pamplona: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2012: 14 and following.

79. For a review of the relationship there is between desire and impulse in Thomas Aquinas, Mondin, Battista. *Dizionario enciclopedico del pensiero di San Tommaso d'Aquino*. Bologna: Studio Domenicano, 2000: 198.

80. Spaemann, Robert. *Persons. The Difference...*: 89 and following.

81. Rhonheimer, Martin. *The Perspective of Morality...*: 77-78.



In short, this explanation is similar to the one that Plato gives for the origin of love: just as love is the child of abundance and of scarcity, in the same way what characterizes human knowledge is a kind of tension between knowing and not knowing. The desire to know God is an experience of this kind of movement: without a little knowledge one could not desire the knowledge of the causes, not even the closest causes. Nevertheless, to the degree that this desire is sated, that is, to the degree that one distances oneself from scarcity, our reason moves with greater strength and rapidity towards the intellection of the Cause of causes.

Similarly, when one first actualizes the desire to know, one is not completely unknowing. Absolute ignorance is not conscious of itself, and, as a consequence, it doesn't direct itself to anything. Therefore, there is something of wealth in our manner of experiencing the desire of happiness, because reason would not work to know God if it didn't already possess a form of knowledge in act. And thus, writes Saint Thomas, the more things one knows the more the desire to know affects him.⁸²

82. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 25.

