
The Doctrine of Participation in Thomistic Metaphysics

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The most lively front within current Thomistic debate seems to be on the battlefield of natural law. One party is vigorously contending that the first principles of practical reason are known *per se*, without any special dependence on speculative reason, metaphysics, or the philosophy of nature. The other is equally vigorous in asserting the importance of speculative reason, metaphysics, and the philosophy of nature for discussions about natural law.¹ The result has been an increasingly better understanding of the spectrum of natural law theories, depending on how much advertence is made to speculative reason by a particular theorist, or how much about the natural world can simply be assumed from cultural context, and how much needs to be explained. It is a fine debate, but too windy for my feathers.

I mention this debate here so as to call your attention to a remark by Thomas often mentioned in discussions of natural law, namely, that the natural law is nothing other than the rational creature's participation in the eternal law.² It seems to me that the terms *natural law* and *eternal law* tend to get most of the play when we work on this passage, trying to figure out what the relation of two blocks of content are,³ and then we push along to a yet larger schema in which positive law and divine law are incorporated into the picture. But there are other terms here which get relatively little play: *participation* and *creature*.

It may be that their significance is simply overlooked. "Nature" and "creature" are often taken as interchangeable synonyms. "Rational

1. I refer to the debate between the school of Germain Grisez, John Finnis, Joseph Boyle et al. and the recent criticisms brought by such people as Russell Hittinger, Ralph McInerney, and Henry Veatch.

2. *ST I-II*, 91, 2: "Unde patet quod lex naturalis nihil aliud est quam participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura."

3. For example, Appendix 2, "The Theological Classification of Law," pp. 162-64 of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae*, volume 28, by Thomas Gilby, O.P. (Cambridge, 1966). The frequent uses of *participatio* and its cognates in Thomas's treatise on law almost entirely vanish in the variety of paraphrases employed in this translation.

creature" sounds as though it is simply medievaese for saying "human being" or "person," and "participation" seems a harmless way of saying that we human beings have a powered-down version of a law that would electrocute us were there not an appropriate transformer.⁴ On the other hand, there may actually be some reluctance to take the notion "participation" seriously. Even though the *Index Thomisticus* reports more than 385 instances of its use by Thomas,⁵ it still sounds vaguely Platonic, and so we are hesitant to assign it any technical significance. Only a few Thomists have concentrated on participation, while others keep it at arm's length in their metaphysics.⁶ In my judgment, it is one of the genuinely fruitful ways of entry into Thomistic metaphysics, ranking with approaches that have proven to be helpful by taking as their key the notions of act and potency, the real distinction between essence and existence in creatures, the analogy of being, and the primacy of the act of existing.

I will not attempt here to make a full-scale explication of the famous text on the natural law as the rational creature's participation in the eternal law, but I would like to make three observations for our discussion and to provide some background material on the subject.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 162: "The concept of law is analogical. . . . It is found at various strengths, according to the Platonic principle of the diverse participation of values, a more-and-less of being and truth and goodness which comes when a pure perfection can be communicated in various degrees by causality, not because it can be mixed with something else and, as it were, watered down. So law scales down from the pure and eternal exemplar in the mind of God to the unsteady beat of lust in human nature."

5. *Particeps* 59x, *participatio* 87x, forms of *participare* 239x, plus a tremendous number of other forms in the lemma.

6. There are two famous books on the subject, largely unread by English speaking Thomists. They came out at nearly the same time, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tomaso d' Aquino* by Cornelio Fabro (2nd ed. Turin, 1950; French edition 1961) and L.-B. Geiger's *La participation dans la philosophie de S. Thomas d' Aquin* (Paris, 1942). Both have a good reputation, but do not seem to have made terribly much impact on the general run of Thomistic thinking.

There are also a number of fine, recent books that have taken up the question of participation in Aquinas, including Leo Elder's *Die Metaphysik des Thomas von Aquin in historischer Perspektive* (Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1985) and Jan Aertsen's *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988). See also the brief discussions in Etienne Gilson's *The Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: Mentor-Omega, 1963), pp. 103-112, and Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), pp. 99-110, and the very helpful essay by John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas and Participation" in vol. 17 of the CUA series, *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. J. Wippel (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), pp. 117-58.

Observations

Thomas's use of the term *participation* here is not out of the blue, but has as its background the doctrine of participation in Thomistic metaphysics. In fact, this particular statement is an assertion about the metaphysical grounding of ethics, for it explains that the moral law governing human conduct, natural law, is one of the ways in which "the rational creature" shares in the divine order, that is, God's eternal law. Although "law" seems to us to be primarily a category of social thought, Thomas is taking it metaphysically as the "rule and measure" constitutive of all natures; it is the eternal law which impresses upon all things their tendencies toward their own proper acts and ends (*ST I-II*, 91, 2 c).

As creaturely, human nature is ordered to a divine plan by Providence, and as rational, its very understanding of this order is crucial to the degree of perfection to be achieved in the process of participation. This text thus speaks immediately to one of the questions current in the natural law discussions taking place today as to whether any propositions in ethics depend on propositions in metaphysics, let alone whether there is any systematic dependence. It will be an important project to spell out this relationship in terms of participation, and to remain mindful of it in articulating natural law, a project that I think will involve staying constantly mindful of (1) the human being *as creature*, (2) the ongoing *dependence* of the creature on the Creator, and (3) the *humility* involved in "being measured," in contrast to the *hubris* of some Protagorean conception of "man as the measure" of all things.

A second point to note is Thomas's choice of the term "rational creature's participation." The importance of the creation for Thomistic metaphysics as a difference from Aristotelian metaphysics would never be denied, but I think we still need to bring out the thoroughgoing significance of "creature" in the way that we already sense the significance of "rational." That is, the distinctiveness of rationality to differentiate the human being from the animal world has received much emphasis, but we would do well to emphasize also the fact of creatureliness. This is possible because of a certain antinomy in Thomistic metaphysics; at the level of material beings Thomistic thought insists on the autonomy of finite substances and the genuine efficacy of secondary causes, but it also insists that there is a larger picture in which creatures have only a relative independence and autonomy.

I think that bringing out the creaturely dimension would involve seeing the constant importance of being related to God as our source and our goal. While "being related to God" is true of all creation, the human way of "being related to God" is as "rational creature"—that is, as

participating in some of the higher perfections of divine being, such as being-a-person, which Thomas and all Christian theology take to be the inner relation constitutive of God's own being.⁷ The eternal relation of one divine person to another, that is, their communion with one another, suggests a relational definition of "person" that would give a more lively picture of "human person" than the Boethian definition of person so often quoted. Further, the communitarian aspects of such a definition would resist the individualism typical of our age with a decisive, polemical bite, even while protecting the truths of distinct substance and relative autonomy that at present need no defending.

Third, and more broadly for the future of Thomism, one of the prevalent reasons for the wholesale rejection of Thomism by many is its apparent extrinsicism, the sharp separation of the orders of nature and grace. In fact, the histories of Thomism recently published⁸ have made clear and understandable some of the reasons for the qualified, or even the utter repudiation of Thomism today, particularly in theology. But renewed attention to Thomas's doctrine of participation may lay aside some of those objections and actually show the attractiveness of Thomas's way of thinking when we start to consider grace as the participation of our nature in the divine life, faith as the participation in God's knowledge, and charity as participation in divine love.

The Doctrine of Participation: History

Thomas clearly subscribes to Aristotle's criticism of the Platonic idea of participation (*methexis, metoche*) by denying that there are any separate, self-subsisting Forms of natural things. I take it that for Plato every pure Form (Idea) is a unity able to be "divided over many." Somehow these Forms are *present in* or *present to* the world of becoming, from which they are separate. The "somehow" remains ever unclear, and one of Aristotle's criticisms is that the friends of the clear, crisp Forms always fudge on the "somehow" in their explanations. In some of the earlier dialogues Plato uses verbs like "to be in" or "to be present in." But with the later dialogues the ideas seem to be external to things, exercising formal causality without actually entering sensible objects.

7. See especially John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

8. E. g., Gerald G. McCool, S.J., *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989); Bronislaw Dembowski, *O filozofii chrzescijanskiej w Ameryce Polnocnej* [Christian Philosophy in North America] (Warsaw: Academy of Catholic Theology, 1989).

Aristotle's rejection of the theory of ideas as the intrusion of logical categories into the principles of being includes the rejection of "participation" as the explanation of (1) a thing's coming into being by the entry of a Form from outside and (2) its destruction by the withdrawal of the Form. This explanation would entail that notorious beast, the *regressio ad infinitum*, because an idea and a sensible object that share in the same essence would need yet another form in common, that is, a third reality beyond their own, and so on to infinity. Aristotle also criticizes Plato's confusion of substances with accidents, for Plato gives all of them subsistent reality as Forms, and he finds the participation of mutable objects in eternal forms insufficient to explain the central problem of pre-Socratic philosophy, change and movement.

Participation as a Form of Predication for Thomas

While Thomas does reject the Platonic notion of participation he found in the *Timaeus* and read about in Aristotle, he accepts the notion of participation in his own sense. Its Latin roots mean literally "to take a part of," and this points him to an ontological view: "to receive partially what belongs to another in a universal way," that is, to receive only part of what belongs to another fully, and so merely to share in it without exhausting it.⁹ Beyond the merely etymological point, he wants to use this notion to address the problem of the one and the many.

He reports in his commentary on the *De Hebdomadibus* that there are three acceptable senses for the term. The weakest sense is to use it as a logical term: a less extended concept participates in a more universal one. For instance, "dog" participates in "animal." The term here describes the predication of genus and species.¹⁰ But at the basis of this logical application is a foundation in reality, and thus a second acceptable sense of the term: a subject or a substance participates in an accident, and matter participates in substantial form. A substance can be said to share in accidents, and matter to share in form because substantial and accidental forms, which are common of their very nature, are limited when they are received in this or that subject, and do not exhaust the perfection in question. Here at this level Thomas believes there is *real composition* which can be expressed by participation, whereas at the level of logical explanation, genus and species are not ontological realities but classes of predicates. To have said that there were real participation at that level would be to take the Platonic approach that Thomas joins Aristotle in repudiating. Instead, Thomas regards this sense of par-

9. In *De Hebdomadibus*, lect. 2; In *I Metaph.* 1, 10, 154.

10. See In *VII Metaph.* 1, 3, 1328.

ticipation as perfectly consistent with Aristotle's "predication *per se*," the predication in which one thing is said univocally of something else.¹¹

At the third level, an effect participates in its cause. This is the sense operative when we say that the creature participates in the creator, the finite being in being itself. Fr. Wippel's 1987 article catalogs many texts in which an *esse commune* is shared by substances and accidents analogically, but he also lists many texts in which there is a being that is common in another sense: not predictably common, as existence is to substance and accident, but common in the sense of a unity whose causality extends to all other beings, material and spiritual, and whose perfection (namely, that they exist) they only partially share.

In Thomas's mature doctrine of participation this third sense of participation as an effect's share in the perfection of its cause entails (1) the *genuine composition* of a receiving and limiting principle (the essence) and that which is received (existence),¹² and the role of *imitation* in participation, that is, the way in which the effect resembles or has some likeness to its cause and spends its existence operating according to its created nature, so as to return as far as possible to its Origin, so as to grow in its perfection and likeness to its cause.

Participation as a Form of Causality

In this third area it is crucial to be assured that Thomas does not fall into the Platonic trap while trying to preserve a role for participation in metaphysics. It is important to note that Thomas does not use the term to describe the causality involved in the *generation* of natural things. The causes of generation are nature, art, and chance, and causality here is always univocal. A given horse is the cause that equine nature begins to exist in a newly generated horse, and likewise throughout all of nature, according to the fourfold analysis in terms of matter, form, agent and

11. SCGI, 32: "Omne quod de pluribus praedicatur *univoce*, *secundum participationem* cui libet eorum convenit de quo praedicatur: nam species participare dicitur genus, et individuum speciem . . . omne quod participatur determinatur ad modum participantis, et sic partialiter habetur, et non secundum omnem perfectionis modum."

12. See W. Norris Clarke, S.J., "The Limitation of Act by Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?" *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952): 167-94. Note also the use to which Wippel puts some of Thomas's texts on participation to make an argument for the real distinction between essence and existence in a manner different than the standard proofs: *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 10 of the CUA "Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy" (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), pp. 150-56.

end. An agent in this sense has a particular effect; it causes the form to be in this matter, which is the principle of individuation.

But the cause *per se* of a nature cannot be reduced to that which participates in a nature. If it were, then the individual horse would be the cause of equine nature absolutely, and thus be its own cause. Not possible. For generation, Thomas abides by the Aristotelian set of four causes and does not use participation to name the causality generative of a nature in a new subject. And he explicitly rejects the Platonic notion that ideas external to the subject could generate these newly arising natures.

But it is also significant that Thomas preserves the notion of causality by participation when Aristotle dismisses it, and I think that Thomas's joint philosophical confidence in his proofs for the existence of God and his Christian faith in God as the Creator of a fundamentally good universe are responsible. In fact, I wonder if we do not sometimes deemphasize this cofoundation in faith to avoid the charge of fideism and to make Thomism competitive in the secular market place, when in fact a more prominent display of the fact would be received as a more honest and more intelligible picture of Thomism.

Thomas points out, for instance, that Aristotle's criticism of the model-function of the ideas does not prevent God's wisdom from being the exemplary cause of all things.¹³ He wants to have it signify the derivation of temporal diversity from eternal unity and thus the structural dependence of the many on the one, for he sees the need to refer to a unity to explain a multiplicity.¹⁴ But what Thomas criticizes is the Platonic notion that natural things are generated from separately existing Forms, or that material things are compounded of different forms that separately exist outside the thing.

This latter view comes up with reflection on the *ratio* of "good" since "good," like any of the trans-categoricals, is predicated of diverse categories of being. It is not that Thomas rejects a separated good, namely God, on which all good things are dependent, nor did he think that Aristotle did.¹⁵ But as he specifies in the *De Veritate*: "Plato asserted that those things which can be separated by the intellect are also separate in reality." It is not that natural things participate in God's goodness by some extra form of goodness added to their being, but rather that created things are good because of their own forms, and their existence is a participation in the divine existence, their goodness a transcendental

13. *In I Metaph.* 1. 15. 233.

14. See Anton C. Pegis, "The Dilemma of Being and Unity" in *Essays in Thomism*, ed. Robert E. Brennan (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), pp. 149-84.

15. See *In XII Metaph.*, on the Unmoved Mover.

aspect of being. Goodness is analogically realized in each of the different classes of beings, and in each case God is the exemplary and efficient cause of the goodness which is found in each thing by its formal perfection.¹⁶ This I take to be the heart of Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals, namely, that a being is true, because there is a being which is true in the maximum degree, and a being is good because there is a being which is good in the maximum degree, and so on. It is a position at the basis of the Fourth Way.

How can Thomas use participation in a causal sense that is not the rejected Platonic sense? The answer resides in an explicit doctrine of *creation* which entirely surpasses the Aristotelian framework and involves another type of efficient causality than movement from potency to actuality: creation, not movement from potency to act; exemplary, not formal causality. What I think he is doing is purging the doctrine of participation of all aspects of formal causality, so as to see it as a communication of being, with no trace left of a "form divided among different subjects" as for Plato.

The proper sense of participation in Thomistic metaphysics is the dependence of all things on God. This does not mean that "creatures have a part of God's existence" but rather that "some other nature (not God's nature) is brought out of nonexistence, is made to exist." That is, the one nature of being makes all other things be, through efficient causality. This is a dependence that explains even why natures are natures (namely, that things can only have a nature if they are designed, that is, formed according to an exemplar in a creative, knowing intellect¹⁷) and that accounts for the doctrine of natural inclinations so crucial to the natural law debate (namely, their being-related-to-God includes their directedness back to their origin and goal¹⁸). Thomas can make the Aristotelian doctrine of substantial forms and prime matter a starting point for metaphysics, and agree with any Greek that "from nothing, nothing comes" in the natural order. But he also has a doctrine of creation as an equally important source of his metaphysics, and even if he entertains the possibility of an eternal world on Aristotelian grounds, he is convinced of the complete dependence of every creature on God.

16. *ST I*, 91, 6: "On account of this first that is being and good by its essence, all other things can be called good and being insofar as they share in it by way of a certain assimilation." That God is not the formal cause, see *ST I*, 75, 5 ad 1.

17. While we often understand "art" as an imitation of the action of nature, Thomas pushes this image further back, asking us to see nature in terms of Divine Artistry.

18. In fact, the natural law text with which we began explicitly says "all things in some way participate in the eternal law as they have an inclination to their own acts and ends impressed on them by it."

The discussion of creation in the *Summa*,¹⁹ for instance, as the “emanation” or “procession” of creatures from God, makes two important points, that God is the first cause and final end of all beings and that Thomas prefers to explain this causality in terms of participation.²⁰ His reason: that whose being is what it is solely by virtue of its own essence is the cause of everything else, for anything whose being is other than its own essence is caused to exist by another. This is the compositeness we spoke of before, not just the composition of matter and form in beings of nature, which allows for a tremendous autonomy in the explanation of generation and the science of secondary causes, but a composition of essence and existence in things material and immaterial. This is also the importance of chapter 9 of *De substantiis separatis*, that even immaterial substances are creatures characterized by composition. There is for them no generation such as can be described for material beings,²¹ but there is still a composition of potency and act, of essence and existence.

In the basic sense of participation, all beings *participate* in existence, that is, they share in being and its transcendental properties, more perfectly or less so, since they are caused by the one first being, which is being perfectly. Participation—taking a part, having a limited share of something else which is wholly that—expresses for Thomas the nonidentity of that which is with its being, and the inner ordering of the nature, the thing’s principle of movement and rest, toward that which is the fulfillment, the completion of the movement.

In terms of existence, the generative causes are causes of being only *per accidens*, because the new being that comes about does not come to be out of absolute nonbeing. In the order of nature, “from nothing, nothing comes,” for across the whole realm of categorical being there is always presupposed a preexistent subject. But when we turn to the transcendental plane and consider the coming forth which Thomas calls creation (or using that Neoplatonic term *emanation* so strange to Aristotelian ears²²), the process is not to be conceived of as a mutation or a motion from potency to act, but as another kind of causality, an influx of being from the first principle.²³ In God (this first principle) Thomas finds an identity of essence and existence that makes the compositeness

19. *ST I*, 44-45.

20. See also *SCG II*, 15.

21. That immaterial beings bear no possibility of becoming in themselves, cf. *De Anima* q.1 a.6 ad 8; *ST I*, 61, 1.

22. K. Kremer’s study, *Die neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (Leiden, 1971), is useful here, with caution.

23. Thus the difference between the first and the second among Thomas’s Five Ways.

of existence and essence elsewhere intelligible. This, by the way, I take to be one of the most strongly defended assertions of Maritain's *Existence and the Existent*.²⁴

Exactly contrary to the common supposition of Greek philosophy, that "from nothing, nothing comes," creation differs in principle from the this-worldly process. It presupposes nothing in the thing created, by contrast to the process of this worldly change, whose very explanation comes by an explicitation of the presuppositions of the process. The duality inherent to a *formatio* is replaced by the absolute sovereignty of God who produces creatures with a "received" or "participated being," a being that is composite in contrast to God's own subsistent being. When the effect does not express the fullness of the ontological content of the cause, but does have a share in this perfection, it is said to participate in that cause, and so Thomas speaks of created being as a participation in God's being.

The Problem of Pantheism

Does this bestowal of being imply that the creature has a part in God himself? This seems to have been implied by the pantheism of the Neoplatonic tradition. But while the Neoplatonic tradition takes being as the summit of the intelligible world, yet something still derived from the One, Thomas identifies *esse* with God himself. He drops the mediatory role that being has in Neoplatonism, and as a result, the being of creation is seen as directly created by God, as having a direct participation in the divine order.²⁵

It is precisely by his distinctive meaning for participation that he guarantees the metaphysical distinction between Creator and creature. Created beings do not possess part of God—this is totally excluded by reason of God's transcendence and unicity, by the perfect identity of God's essence and existence, and by the fact that this perfect identity occurs only in God. His point is rather that a limited perfection can only exist because the original exists in all its purity. The transcendental unity of being (that God and creatures share in being analogously) requires us to locate the distinction between God and creatures in a "confinement" or "contraction" of the fullness of being in whatever is created.

Participation then takes place by means of creation, the work of God's efficient and exemplar causality. Creatures are formed according

24. Garden City: Image, 1956, e.g., pp. 35-44.

25. See Aertsen pp. 123ff. In particular, cf. SCG I, 26 (contra Kremer): God is not the formal *esse* for other things or the *esse* by which each of them exists. God would then not be *above* all things, but *inter omnia*.

to the exemplars in the mind of God, with the result that each thing in its own way manifests some aspect of divine fullness in a graduated series of perfections.²⁶ Each limited perfection is only real by the uninterrupted partaking in its source, and this sort of reference to God as *fons et origo* is the metaphysical basis of the inclinations that are so important a part of natural law theory.

Final Causality and the Doctrine of Participation

How does this consideration of participation help us? Let one example suffice at present to suggest that this is an important road for the future of Thomism.

Although the terms *nature* and *creature* tend to be used interchangeably, with reliance on context to provide the necessary qualifications being assumed, explicit attention to participation in an analysis of these terms, such as Jan Aertsen has recently provided in his new book *Nature and Creature*, shows that they have different orientations and directions. Further emphasis on these different orientations and directions could get the natural law debate beyond the question of whether one must intuit *per se nota* goods.

The terminus of generation lies in the intrinsic nature or essence of the thing, while the terminus of creature is being (*esse*), that which the creature has from another, that is, from God, as a gift. Nature suggests what the being is in itself, its specific essence, which is preserved by the eternal recurrence of the same in the causality of generation. What "creature" suggests is the condition of being-related-to-God, (both the radical distinction between God and the creature and the direct relation of creation to God, not some more or less mediated one as in Neoplatonic or gnostic systems), and the religious directedness of all that is back to this Origin, each in the way suited to its nature according to the order or hierarchy of beings.

For natural law discussions, this immediately suggests an *order* of goods *perfective in different ways*, an ordering of the creature to the creator that is in one sense *simply given* by the fact of the participation of composite creatures in existence, but in another sense an ordering that *must be achieved and developed* (participation as imitation) according to a pattern of goals and perfections. Metaphysical consideration of human participation in the life of the divine gives a much different color to what otherwise tends to be a minimalist, least common denominator approach to natural law.

26. Cf. James Ross, "Aquinas's Exemplarism; Aquinas's Voluntarism" in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64: 2 (Spring 1990): 171-98.

That Thomas manages to reformulate some of the doctrines he most valued from Aristotle in the ostensibly Platonic language of participation—but only a corrected version of participation—indicates the virtue he discerned in this approach. And the sense of “valuable inclusion” within God’s providence which “participation” suggests today makes me think that any energy we commit to thinking things through in terms of participation will yield ample fruit.