

## NOTE FOR WORD *BEGINNING*

The Greeks had a proverb that the beginning is half of all. And Plato and Aristotle say that it seems to be more than half of all. Hence, if a word is important because it signifies something noteworthy, the word *beginning* is of immense importance.

Moreover, nothing is more necessary in philosophy than to begin well for everything else depends upon the beginning. Hence, *beginning* is a word most necessary for the philosopher to consider and understand.

And if wisdom or first philosophy is about what is first and what is first is a beginning, the wise man must especially consider and understand the word *beginning*. Since wisdom or first philosophy is about first things, one can approach what wisdom is about through the senses of *first* or *beginning*.

Further, the end or goal of wisdom and philosophy is to know the beginning of all things. Hence, to know what the word *beginning* means is a *sine qua non* of the philosophical life.

In addition, we see that the word *beginning* and the words *before* and *after* are intimately connected. For the common thought of *beginning* given by Aristotle at the end of this reading is what is *first* in being or becoming or knowing. And *first* is defined by before and after for the first is not after anything but before all the rest. And in the reading on before and after, Aristotle will distinguish the senses of *before* starting from the common thought of beginning in this reading. For every beginning is the source of some order which is a before and after. (But his ordered distinction of the senses of *before* in the *Categories* could also be used to distinguish senses of *first* or *beginning*.) Since the definition of reason is completed by its looking before and after, we can see how important also is an understanding of the word *beginning* for the whole life of reason. Since every beginning is the source of some order (a before and after), and reason always looks for order, reason also always looks for beginnings.

Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* states that Plato *well* asked whether we are on the road from the beginning(s) or on the road to the beginning(s). And this

excellent question can be multiplied as we come to understand the different meanings of *beginning*. If we take *beginning* in its sixth sense where every cause is said to be a beginning, the question could mean are we reasoning from causes to their effects or are we reasoning from effects toward their causes. But if we take *beginning* in its fifth sense, the question could be are we proceeding dialectically towards the beginnings of some reasoned out knowledge or are we now proceeding demonstratively from the beginnings of some reasoned out knowledge.

And it is in particular useful for understanding and defending the axioms of beginning: *nothing is a beginning of itself, but it is always the origin of something other than itself*. There is always a distinction between a beginning and that of which it is a beginning. But this distinction is not the same for a beginning that is in that of which it is a beginning and a beginning that is outside that of which it is a beginning. When we say that the foundation of a house is the beginning of a house and the carpenter is the beginning of a table, the distinction is not the same. For the foundation is a part of the house, but the carpenter is not a part of the table. The foundation of a house is a beginning of the house of which it is part while the carpenter is altogether outside and in no way a part of the house.

And in the study of the Trinity in theology, it is necessary to see that *beginning* is more universal than *cause*.

It is necessary to distinguish and order the senses of *beginning*. The word or name *beginning* is equivocal by reason of a likeness of ratios. The word *before* which is intimately connected with the word *beginning* is also equivocal by reason of a likeness of ratios.

Words equivocal by reason of a likeness of ratios have as their first meaning that ratio which is most manifest to the senses or closest to the senses. For we name things as we know them and the first road in our knowledge is from the senses into reason. The other meanings are ordered by their closeness or distance in likeness to this first meaning. Hence, it is not by chance that the meanings of a word are also called its *senses*. All the meanings do not come under the senses, but they are understood by carrying over the word by likeness to ratios that are sensible.

The carrying over of the word is found more in Greek and Latin than in English due to our custom of borrowing Greek and Latin words for the later meanings. Thus we are accustomed to speak of the principles of a science rather than of its beginnings. This gets in the way of the mind being carried over in English. Custom is a tyrant sometimes, as Shakespeare said.

The first three words in Book Five come in the order of more universal to less universal as Thomas notes in his *Lectio* on *beginning* and elsewhere:

...principium enim in plus est quam causa, et causa in plus est quam elementum, sicut dicit Commentator, V *Metaph.* Unde omnis causa est principium, sed non convertitur.<sup>1</sup>

For the same reason cause is considered before element and these three (beginning, cause, element) before nature.

In the following text, Thomas distinguishes two relations between a beginning and what is from a beginning:

Oportet autem intelligi aliquam relationem inter principium et ea quae a principio sunt,

non solum quidem relationem *originis*, secundum quod principiata oriuntur a principio,

sed etiam relationem *diversitatis*; quia oportet effectum a causa distingui, cum nihil sit causa sui ipsius<sup>2</sup>

The following text of Thomas is interesting on the first of these relations (of origin):

...primo conicere potuimus originem alicuius ab alio, ex motu:

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<sup>1</sup> *Scriptum Super Lib. I Sententiarum*, Distinctio XXIX, Quaest. I, Art. I, Ad 2

<sup>2</sup> *De Potentia*, Q. 7, Art. 8, corpus

quod enim aliqua res a sua dispositione removeretur per motum, manifestum fuit hoc ab aliqua causa accidere.

Et ideo *actio*, secundum primam nominis impositionem, importat originem motus: sicut enim motus, prout est in mobili ab aliquo, dicitur *passio*; ita origo ipsius motus, secundum quod incipit ab alio et terminatur in id quod movetur, vocatur *actio*.

Remoto igitur motu, actio nihil aliud importat quam ordinem originis, secundum quod a aliqua causa vel principio procedit in id quod est a principio.<sup>3</sup>

The second relation is used by Aristotle in the first book of *Natural Hearing* (the *Physics*) when he points out that those who deny there is a multitude of things also deny there is a beginning. Thomas comments thereon:

Ad positionem igitur principii sequitur multitudo, quia aliud est principium et aliud id cuius est principium; qui igitur negat multitudinem, tollit principia...<sup>4</sup>

Aristotle puts *first* in the common notion of beginning (what is first in being or becoming or knowing). Since *first* is defined by *before*, there is a problem of how the word *beginning* can be used in the Trinity where there is no before and after. This is the occasion for Thomas to point out some subtle distinctions about *beginning*.

In this text, Thomas points out a fundamental distinction in the consideration of a beginning and how this can be applied to the Trinity:

...principium potest dupliciter considerari:

vel id quod est principium, et hoc est prius naturaliter eo cuius est principium;

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<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, Q. 41, Art. 1, Ad 2

<sup>4</sup> *In I Physicorum*, Lectio II, n. 15

Vel secundum relationem principii, et sic est simul naturaliter cum principiato.

Si igitur esse aliquis ab eodem habens quod sit aliquis et quod sit ad aliquid; omnino simul esset naturaliter cum eo ad quod diceretur. Et quia in divinis Pater ab eodem habet quod sit aliquis et quod sit Pater; est simul natura cum Filio, non solum inquantum est Pater, sed simpliciter.<sup>5</sup>

Here is another text of Thomas where he uses the above distinction to show that one person of the Trinity is not before another:

...principium, secundum relationem principii, non est eo prius cuius est principium aliquo modo; sed id quod est principium, naturaliter est prius.

Si autem ille qui est principium, ipsa relatione sit quis, vel persona distincta, omnis prioritas removetur ab eo respectu illius cuius est principium; et ita, cum Filius, ut supra dictum est, ipsa sua relatione sit persona distincta, nullo modo est prior Spiritu sancto....<sup>6</sup>

In the following text, Thomas explains why the Father can be called a beginning of the Son or Holy Spirit, but not a cause:

...Pater, quamvis dicatur principium Filii et Spiritus sancti, tamen non potest dici causa, proprie loquendo: causa enim semper ponit diversitatem naturae, sicut patet in omnibus. Sed principium aliquod a quo aliquid fluit est consubstantialia rei cuius est principium; sicut dicimus, quod punctum est principium lineae, et cor principium animalis, et fundamentum domus; et ideo propter consubstantialitatem Patris dicitur principium, sed non causa.

Praeterea, causatum habet dependentiam ad causam. Sed principium importat originem quamdam, secundum quod dicitur principium, ex quo incipit aliquid.

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<sup>5</sup> *Scriptum super Lib. I Sententiarum*, Dist. IX., Quaest. II, Art. 1, Ad 3

<sup>6</sup> *Scriptum super Lib. I Sententiarum*, Dist. XII., Quaest. I, Art. 1, Ad 1

Item quamvis dicatur principium, non tamen potest dici primum;  
quia ibi non est aliquid prius et posterius...<sup>7</sup>

But for the philosopher, who knows nothing about the Trinity and speaks of beginning as it is found in creatures, the beginning is always before that of which it is a beginning. Thomas touches upon this in the following text:

...quia nomen principii impositum est secundum quod invenitur in creaturis, ubi principium est prius aliquo modo principiato, ideo a prioritate imponitur; sed tamen imponitur ad significandum illud a quo est aliquid. Unde quamvis quantum ad modum significandi divinis non competat, sicut et alia nomina quae a nobis imposita sunt, tamen quantum ad rem significandam propriissime ratio principii ibi competit.<sup>8</sup>

The word beginning has a special connection with the word *one* later in Book Five of which it is a property and *before*, a word found among the parts of one.

...illud cuius ratio consistit in remotione, optime per negationem certificatur, sicut caecitas et huiusmodi:

et huiusmodi est ratio primi, vel ejus quod non est de principio, quia primum est ante quod nihil.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Scriptum Super Lib. I Sententiarum*, Dist. XII., Quaest. I, Art. 2, Ad 1

<sup>8</sup> *Scriptum Super Lib. I Sententiarum*, Distinctio XXIX, Quaest. I, Art. I, Ad 1

<sup>9</sup> *Scriptum super Lib. I Sententiarum*, Dist. XXVIII., Quaest. I, Art. 1, Ad 1