

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE FOR READINGS NINE, FOURTEEN AND FIFTEEN

These Readings can be approached in part by something Aristotle insists upon in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There he insists upon the importance of beginnings and the necessity of distinguishing them from each other and from other things. Thomas paraphrases this teaching of the Philosopher in his commentary on it:

Et dicit quod homo debet insistere ad hoc, quod singula principia pertranseat, scilicet eorum notitiam accipiendo et eis utendo, secundum quod nata sunt cognosci et studendum qualiter determinantur in hominis cognitione, ut scilicet sciat distinguere principia abinvicem et ab aliis. Cognitionis enim principiorum multum adiuvat ad sequentia cognoscenda. Principium enim videtur plus esse quam dimidium totius. Quia scilicet omnia alia quae restant continentur virtute in principiis. Et hoc est quod subdit, quod per unum principium bene intellectum et consideratum, multa fiunt manifesta eorum, quae quaeruntur in scientia.<sup>1</sup>

There are three beginnings brought out in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Readings: matter, form and the lack of form. And among other things, it is important to distinguish these three from each other, as Thomas says about beginnings in the above passage.

The distinction between form and lack of form, however, does not seem to be in need of elaboration since their distinction is altogether obvious. Since the lack of form is the non-being of form (in a subject capable of that form), to confuse form with lack of form would be to see no difference between being and non-being. This would be to admit that something can both be and not (at the same time and in the same way) which reason naturally recognizes to be impossible.

But men do sometimes confuse matter and form. They confuse the ability that is matter with the act that is form. They imagine to be actual in matter what is there only in ability. (In a similar way, Locke imagined what is in a genus in ability to be somehow actually therein.) The position of Anaxagoras on matter gets into most of the difficulties Aristotle shows in Reading Nine because he falsely imagined what can come to be out of matter to be actually therein.

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<sup>1</sup> *In I N. Ethicorum*, Lectio XI, n. 138

Thomas gives as a reason why Aristotle considers the position of Anaxagoras in particular (rather than that of the other natural philosophers) that his opinion seems to assign a common cause of all the species of motion. But it seems to us that the critique of Anaxagoras' position is even more useful in showing the difficulties one gets into when one confuses the ability of matter with the act that is form. Socrates made a similar mistake in the *Meno* when he maintains that the slave-boy *actually* knew how to double a square before their conversation because the way to double a square comes out of the slave-boy's answers. The slave-boy was *able* to know how to double a square from what he knew already, but that is not to *actually* know it. Indeed when first asked how to do so, the slave-boy is mistaken as to how to do it (when he says double the side). If you know the length and width of a rectangle, you are *able* to know its area. But you do not *actually* know it before you multiply the two numbers.

And in the Fifteenth Reading, Aristotle is reasoning against Plato and perhaps others who confused matter and lack of form. Although Thomas says at the beginning that Aristotle will here exclude the errors coming from ignorance of privation or lack, he says later that they did not distinguish between matter and privation of form and hence attributed to matter what belongs to privation or lack. They are misunderstanding then matter as well as lack. If one does not distinguish between matter and lack or privation, one would seem to be mistaken about both or apt to attribute what belongs to either one to the other.

And in the Fourteenth Reading, the doubts arising from ignorance of matter or passive ability, involves seeing to some extent the distinction of matter or ability both from form or what is (actual) and from lack or non-being or what is not.

We have taken the liberty, then, of considering the Ninth Reading with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth as being together useful for the distinction of the beginnings, matter, form and lack of form.

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