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TRANSCENDENCE, POWER, VIRTUE,
MADNESS, ECSTASY—
MODALITIES OF EXCESS IN AQUINAS

Peter A. Kwasniewski

A well-known characteristic of St. Thomas as a thinker is his pursuit of
commonality within diversity by unfolding structures of analogous predi-
cation. Whether the terms be transcendentals such as being, one, good, or
ture, qualitative perfections such as wisdom or justice, or fundamental con-
cepts such as act and potency, motion and rest, he strives to articulate a core
meaning that can be employed in different situations, applied to diverse ob-
jects. And there is still room for amazement when one sees just how con-
natural an approach and how thorough a process this is for Aquinas. Not only
the major metaphysical candidates but a whole host of their lesser attendants
receive this honorable treatment. In the present article, I wish to draw atten-
tion to the network of meanings Thomas discerns in—and at the same time
feels confident to invest in—the vocabulary of excessus. While single mean-
ings of excessus have attracted attention (for example, its role in discussions
of the nature of God and his transcendence over creation), no one has written

It is only to be expected that a fairly common noun like excessus and the
verb from which it is formed, excedere, will have a broad range of applica-
tions.1 Although Thomas never takes it upon himself to order the meanings

1 For more common uses of excessus, I shall quote only representative passages. Existing
English translations render excessus and excedere with a variety of near-synonyms—"exceed,"
of course, but also "surpass," "transcend," "excel," and "go beyond." I will usually write "ex-
cess" and "exceed" to make plain the underlying connections. Unless otherwise noted, original
texts are from the Leonine critical edition, cited by volume and page number. Translations are
either my own or are based upon the following: Catena aurea: A Commentary on the Four
Southampton, 1997); Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago,

per prius et posterius, as he does with other key terms when, for example, he arrives at the philosophical lexicon of the fifth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, it is possible to distinguish areas of usage which have a common core meaning. Whenever one thing surpasses or goes beyond another or is surpassed or gone beyond by another, we have an instance of *excessus*, just as when one thing falls short of another or is fallen short of by another, we have an instance of *defectus*. All excess is according to some quantity, whether dimensive or virtual, i.e., quantity of body or quantity of power. The ratio of excess consists in magnitude. As one would therefore expect, *excessus* and its verbal forms are often used in their most literal sense, viz., as regards bodily quantity and measurement. Four is in excess of three; the weight of lead exceeds the weight of wood; the velocity of a galloping horse exceeds that of a running man. Thus we read in the *Metaphysics* commentary:

Heaviness and rapidity have something in common with their contraries—namely, because one contrary is found in the other; for the heavy is in some way light, and the reverse; and what is rapid is in some way slow. For each of these terms is twofold. In one way, said absolutely, as *heavy* is said of anything that has an inclination to be borne towards the center, without taking into


6 In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio [In Metaphys.]: 5.1 n.749 (Marietti, 208): "In praecedenti libro determinavit Philosophus quod pertinent ad considerationem huius scientiae, hic incipit determinare de rebus, quas scientia ipsa considerat. Et quia ea quae in hac scientia considerantur, sunt omnibus communia, nec cuncturum uni vel, sed secundum prius et posterius de diversis, ut in quarto libro est habitum; ideo prius distinctum intentionem nomen, quae in huius scientiae consideratione cadunt. Secundo incipit determinare de rebus, quae sub consideratione huius scientiae cadunt, in sexto libro."

7 Hence, *excessus* can simply signify abundance—there is more than enough for everyone, goods are present "in excess"—as when Thomas explains two features of the heavenly city: *Super secundum epistolam ad Thessalonicenses lectura [Super Thes.]*; likewise for all references to the scriptural commentaries 1.2.20 (Marietti, 2:195): "Hic sanctorum commendat, et quantum ad essentiam, per participationem gloriae Dei, cum dicit glorificari, etc., et quantum ad eius excessum, ibi et admissibilis."

8 *Summa super Sententiae Magistri Patri Lombardi*, lib. IV [IV Sent.] 49.2.3 (Bussa, 1:685e): "Excessus autem omnis est secundum aliquam quantitatem. I will discuss shortly the relevance of the distinction between dimensive and virtual quantity. I-III Sent. and IV Sent. 1–22 will be cited by page number from the Mandonnet and Moos edition (Paris, 1929, 1933, 1947); IV Sent. 23 ff. will be cited by volume, page, and column number from the Bussa edition.

9 *Summa theologica* (ST) 2-2.134.1 (10:89).

consideration how much it has of such an inclination; and in this sense "heavy" does not refer to the genus of quantity, nor is it susceptible to being measured. In another way, "heavy" is said by way of comparison with another, namely, what exceeds another in the aforesaid inclination; as when we say that earth is heavy in comparison with water, and lead in comparison with wood. It is therefore by reason of this excess that some notion of quantity and measure is found. Similarly, "rapid" is spoken of in two ways. In one way absolutely, of anything that has any motion. In another way, of something that has an excess of motion. And in one way the notion of quantity and measure properly apply to it, in the other way they do not."

The quantitative meaning of *excessus* is adapted to other contexts, too, as when Thomas joins Aristotle in criticizing those who claim that the species of things are numbers: "for it will follow [from this position] that diverse species do not differ substantially, but only according to the excess of one species over another," as though *res naturales* were a gradual continuum of accidentally distinct items rather than a graded hierarchy of essentially distinct natures. Yet things are intimately connected with number, for they are constituted in "number, weight, and measure" by the divine Wisdom (cf. Wisdom 11:20), and their natural forms and proper definitions have the distinctness and immutability of integers.

**THE DIVINE EXCESSUS BEYOND ALL KNOWING**

The steady climb from the creaturely excessiveness we are familiar with to the uncreated excess proper to God is neatly outlined in a passage of Aquinas's
commentary on the Pseudo-Dionysian On the Divine Names. The matter of inquiry is why, and how, the name "great" may be applied to God. Thomas first notes the different ways in which excessus, which magnus implies, is found in creatures. These ways are then stretched to the infinite, as befits God:

He [Dionysius] attributes the name "great" to him, according to a certain ratio of likeness: first, as regards his substance; second, as regards his effects. Now it is manifest that "great" is attributed to creatures according to the ratio of excess: for those things are called great which are found to exceed others. Excess in created things, however, can be looked at in several ways. In one way, according to the dimensions of length, breadth, and depth; and according to this, something is said to be "great" in comparison to another, insofar as it super-exceeds its quantity; and thus God is called "great" simply speaking, insofar as his greatness is spread out and super-extended beyond every magnitude; and "spread out" is said by way of a likeness to humid things, like air and water, while "super-extended" by way of a likeness to dry and solid bodies. In another way, excess in created things can be looked at according to place, and thus a place is said to be greater which contains more. Hence, [in this way too] God is called "great" simply, insofar as he contains all places. Third, excess is found in things according to number, and in this way too, God is called "great" simply, insofar as he surpasses every number, because every number proceeds from the divine Wisdom that distinguishes things, in whose power it is to produce the many differences of things. Now among things, that seems to be most infinite which exceeds everything. But nothing found among created things is termed "infinite" in such a way that it fails to be in some respect finite, namely, according to species.10

10 For a thorough treatment of Thomas’s debt to and appropriation of the works of Dionysius, see Fran O’Rourke, Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas (Leiden, 1992).

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God exceeds all created being, for he is contained by no place but present in every place. He is not differentiated in a finite manner, as are natural things by their number-like forms, but contains in himself the numerical diversity of all things in a perfect simplicity. It is for this reason that God most of all deserves the name "one": "'One' is attributed to God . . . because he himself is all-unitive according to the excess of his singular unity." This meaning of excessus is entirely positive, indicating pre-eminence in perfection, maximal being, that which is greatest in some genus or altogether transcends a genus as its principle; and this is the intended meaning when Thomas speaks of a knowledge of God per excessum, as will be evident in what follows.

In a more extended sense, excessus is found in powers (capacities, abilities) or in natural processes, where the power or process is understood to have definite boundaries which can be either fallen short of or surpassed; on the other side, an object which is disproportionate to a power is said to exceed that power. Commenting on Psalm 50:9, "The uncertain and hidden things of thy wisdom thou hast made manifest to me," Thomas mentions both excess and defect in regard to man’s power of knowing:

Something can be known to be true of God which nonetheless remains unknown to us for two reasons—either on account of a defect or on account of an excess. On account of defect, something which depends on the future is unknown to us, because [for us] it does not yet have determinate truth. On account of excess, the divine substance is unknown to us, and [any other] things which exceed our capacity.11

Excessus in reference to dimensionless quantity and measurement is not infrequently paralleled by a reference to another sort of quantity, namely, that of power (quantitas virtutis or virtualis)—how much active potency a power has for operation.12 A clear example of such a parallel arises in the context of a

11 DDN 13.2 n.971 (Marietti, 363): "Unum attribuitur Deo . . . quia ipse est omnia unive secundum excessum suae singularis unitatis . . . ."


13 On the notions of virtus and virtual quantity, see O’Rourke, Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas, 155–85.
discussion of the manner in which quantity is found in the threeeness of the divine Persons:

Quantity is twofold. One is called "quantity of mass" or "dimensive quantity," which is found in corporeal things only, and so has no place in the Divine Persons. But the other is called "quantity of power" [virtus], which is seen in connection with the perfection of some nature or form. It is this [latter sort of] quantity which is signified when something is said to be "more" or "less" warm, inasmuch as it is more perfect or less perfect as regards hotness. Such quantity of power [virtus] is seen first of all at its root, that is, in the very perfection of the form or nature, and thus one speaks of "spiritual greatness," as one speaks of heat as "great" because of its intensity and perfection. And thus Augustine says in De Trinitate VI that "in those things which are great not by reason of their mass, that thing is greater which is better"; for the more perfect is what one calls "better." Secondly, however, quantity of power [virtus] is seen in the effects of form. And the first effect of form is being [esse], for every thing has being in accordance with its form. The second effect is operation, for every agent acts by virtue of its form. Thus, quantity of power is seen as regards being and as regards operation; as regards being, inasmuch as those things which are of a more perfect nature have a greater duration; and as regards operation, inasmuch as those things which are of a more perfect nature are more powerful as regards action.14

Explaining the meaning of comprehendere in reference to the soul’s cognitive powers, Thomas in the commentary on the Sentences employs the same distinction to articulate the limits of man’s knowledge of God:

"To comprehend" means, as it were, "to grasp all at once," i.e., to lay hold of; and therefore something is properly comprehended when it is laid hold of at once, i.e., with everything that belongs to it. Hence, it is necessary that every comprehended thing be enclosed within the one comprehending. Prop-


erly [speaking], however, content is enclosed within a container; and therefore it is necessary that what is comprehended be contained in the one comprehending. Now, just as something bodily is said to be contained in another because it does not exceed any of the container’s bounds according to dimensive quantity, as wine in a cask, so something is said to be contained by another spiritually when it stands under its power and in no way exceeds that [container]. And therefore something is said to be comprehended by knowledge when the thing known stands under the act of the knowing power and does not exceed it.

All excess, however, is according to some quantity. According to this quantity, a knowable thing is said to exceed the knowing power according as it is knowable by that [power]. Now a sensible thing is known both according to dimensive quantity (because the sense-power in knowing uses a bodily organ, by reason of which it knows all sensibles that are reduced to dimensive quantity) and according to quantity of power (as is evident in proper sensibles, which are qualities), and therefore even the comprehension of sense is impeded both on account of excess in dimensive quantity (as it is impeded from comprehending the whole earth), and on account of excess in quantity of power (as there is not so much power in the eye for knowing as there is brightness in the sun to be known).

In contrast, an intelligible thing is not known by the intellect under the ratio of dimensive quantity except per accidens, insofar as it receives from sensation, from which it follows that it understands along with the continuous; and according to this, the intellect is impeded from the comprehension of an intelligible thing on account of its excess of quantity, just as it is impeded from comprehending an infinite line or number. But speaking per se, an intelligible thing is compared to the intellect according to the ratio of the quantity of power, by the very fact that the proper object of the intellect is a "what"; and therefore in those things which are separated from sense, the intellect’s comprehension is not impeded except by an excess of quantity of power; and this is when the intelligible is [something] more knowable than the intellect knows or can know.15

15 IV Sent. 49.2.3 (Bussa, 1:685c–686a): "Comprehendere dicitur quasi simul prendere, id est capere; et ideo illud proprium comprehenditur quod simul capit, id est omnibus quae ejus sunt. Unde oportet quod omne comprehensus includatur in comprehendente; includitur autem proprium contentum in continent; et ideo oportet comprehensus contineri in comprehendente. Sicut autem dicitur corporalis aliquid in alto contineri, quia non excidit continens ex ulla parte secundum quantitatem dimensivam, ut vinum in dolio, ita dicitur contineri aliquid ab aliquo spiritualiter, quod substat virtuali ejus, et in nullo excidit ipsum. Et ideo tunc dicitur aliquid per cognitionem comprehendi, quando cognitionem stat sub actu virtutis cognoscentivae, et non excidit ipsum. Excessus autem omnis est secundum aliquam quantitatem. Secundum hanc autem quantitatem dicitur cognoscibile excedere potentiam cognoscitivam, secundum quam cognoscibile est ab ipsa. Sensibile autem cognoscitur et secundum quantitatem dimensivam, propter hoc quod
The divine nature cannot be comprehended by any intellectual creature, for as its being immeasurably exceeds finite being, so does its intelligibility exceed the capacity of any finite power of knowing. God is known per excessum: we must predicate all pure perfections infinitely of him and simultaneously place brackets around our limited way of signifying, understanding that he exceeds all of our creature-derived concepts. Hence, Thomas speaks of three ways of knowing God in natural theology, to which correspond three ways of naming him: per negationem (or per remotionem, per ablationem), per causalitatem, and per excessum—the last having been especially developed by Dionysius, the great authority on the naming of God:

There are things that exceed both the field accessible to the senses and the field to which the imagination extends, namely, whatever things are altogether independent of matter both for their being and for their being understood. Accordingly, the knowledge of such things, in regard to the act of judgment, ought to have its term neither in the imagination nor in the senses. Nevertheless, from things apprehended by sense or by imagination, we can arrive at a knowledge of those [immaterial] things, whether by way of causality, as from effects may be considered the cause that is not commensurate with the effects but exceeds them; or by excess; or by remotion, when we separate from such sensus in cognoscendo utitur organo corporei, ratione cujus cognoscit sensibilia omnia quae reducturunt ad quantitatem dimensionem; et secundum quantitatem virtualem, ut patet in sensibilibus propriis, quae qualitates sunt; et ideo etiam comprehendendo sensus impeditur et propter excessum quantitatis dimensione, sicut impeditur ne comprehendat totam terram; et propter excessum quantitatis virtualis, sicut impeditur ne comprehendat claritatem solis: quia non est tanta virtus occi ad cognoscendum, quanta claritas solis quae est cognoscibilis.

Intelligibile autem non cognosciur ab intellectu sub ratione quantitatis dimensionis nisi per accidents, inquantum scilicet accipit a sensu; ex quo sequitur quod intelligatum cum continuo, et secundum hoc intellectus impeditur a comprehensione intelligibili propter excessum quantitatis; sicut impeditur a comprehensione lineae vel numeri infiniti. Sed per se loquendo, intelligibile comparatur ad intellectum secundum rationem quantitatis virtualis, eo quod proprium objectum intellectus est quid; et ideo in his quae sunt separata a sensu, non impeditur comprehensio intellectus nisi per excessum quantitatis virtualis; et hoc est quando intelligibile plus est cognoscibile quam intellectus cognosceret possit vel cognoscat.

In ad 2 of this article, Thomas shows how Augustine’s definition of “comprehension” mentions both kinds of quantity. Thomas discusses God’s infinite excessus above the created mind in numerous places; a fine text is DP 8.2 (22:220–23).


17 Super De Trin. 6.2 (50:165.117–32): “Quedam uto vero sunt quae excedunt et iis quod cadit sub sensum et quod cadit sub imaginacione, sicut ulla quae omnino a materia non dependunt, neque secundum esse, neque secundum considerationem, et ideo talium cognitio secundum iudicium neque debet terminari ad imaginacionem neque ad sensum. Set tamen ex his quae sensus vel imaginacione apperituntur in horum cognitionem deueminus, vel per ulla causalitatis, sicut ex effectu causa perpenditur quod non est effectu commensurata sed excellens, ut per excessum, vel per remotionem, quando omnino quae sensus vel imaginatio apperit ad rebus huiusmodi separatam. Quos modos cogoscendi divina ex sensibilibus posit Dionysius in libro De diuinis nominibus.”

18 DDN 1.1.n.32 (Marietti, 10): “est ab omnibus segregata supersubstantialiter, id est secundum supersubstantialem Deitatis excessum.”

19 DDN 1.1.n.14 (Marietti, 7): “convenit ipsis, scilicet Deo soli, attribuere supersubstantialiter scientiam ignorantiae supersubstantialitatem, id est supersubstantialitatem divinam ignorantam; quae quidem supersubstantialitates non ignorantae est propter aliquum sequum defectum, sed propter suum excessum, quia scilicet est super rationem et intellectum creatum et super ipsum substantiam creatam quae est obiectum commensuratur intellectui creato, sicut essentia increata est proportionata scientiae increatae. Et ideo sicut essentia divina est supersubstantialia, ita et eius scientiam supersubstantialem dixit. Semper enim ennot operatum cognoscitur virtutum, virtutum cognoscenti proportionatum esse.” Thomas applies this doctrine of proportion not only to our knowledge of God, but to any knowledge of the essentially superior by the essentially inferior, as when he comments on Prop. 9 of the Liber de causis, n.214 (Marietti, 60): “Intelligentiae vero sunt maioris unitatis et simplicitatis quam res inferiores; cuius signum est quae quaeque sunt intra intelligibimet habentia cognoscitivum virtutem, non possunt attinere ad cognoscendum intelligentiae substantialium propter excessum simplicitatis ipsius, per quam etsi rationem sensus corporum defecta ad cognitione rei intelligibilis.”

20 DDN 1.1.n.9 (Marietti, 9): “Sic igitur, secundum quod quiserandum similitudo est rerum creaturar ad Deum, nomina a nobis imposita de Deo dici possunt, non quidem sic sicut de creaturar, sed per quendam excessum, et hoc significat quod dicti, quod Deus est supersubstantialium substantia; et similius quod subdit quod est intellectus non-intelligibilis, id est non things everything that sensus or imagination apprehends. And these are the modes of knowing the divine from sensibles that Dionysius lays down in On the Divine Names.”
ing of Christ's perfections takes a parallel course: "he is above mind and above all life, because he exceeds all knowledge and every act of life." Such "super" names are given

remotely through a certain excellence, like super-good, super-substantial, super-alive, super-wise, and whatever others are said of God by way of remon-
tion, on account of his excess. With these names should be classified all causal names, that is, those that designate God as source of the procession of perfections emanating from him into creatures, namely, good, beautiful, existing, endowed with generative life, wise, and whatever others, through which the cause of all goods is named from the gifts of his goodness.22

The lush profusion of causal names might be summed up in the phrase superexcedens totum creaturum.23 The Dionysian affirmation of real likenesses between creature and Creator enclosed within (and to some extent subverted by) ever greater likenesses meets with Aquinas's unqualified acceptance. For example, "father" and "son" said of God must be conceptually separated, per modum excessus, from the fleeting fatherly and filial instantiations found in creatures.24 This is as much as to say that not only is God truly Father and truly Son, but in God fatherhood and sonship exist with an infinite depth and density in comparison to which their creaturely participations are barely audible echoes, albeit echoes of varying length and beauty. The same account is given of Scripture's applying repudiated names to God:

God, who is the cause of all, supereminent to all, has the fullness of goodness above all others. Therefore in order to signify this excess by which he exceeds everything, he is called in Scripture "Holy of holies" and the rest of them, i.e., King of kings, Lord of lords, and God of gods; for in this manner of speaking is signified a sort of emanation from a superior cause, so that it would be understood, when "Holy of holies" is said, that the holiness in every other emanates from him, and so on for the other [names]. An excess is also signi-
quales sunt intellectus qui intelliguntur a nobis; et est verbum non-dicibile, idest non qualia sunt verba quae a nobis dicuntur."

21 DDN 2.5 n.205 (Marietti, 64): "est super mentem et super omnem vitam, quia excedit omnem cognitionem et omnem actum vitae."

22 DDN 2.1 n.126 (Marietti, 40–41): "ea quae dicuntur de Deo, removit per excellentiam quandam, ut superbonus, supernubstantiale, supervivum, supersapiens et quaecumque alia dicuntur de Deo per remotionem, propter sui excessum; cum quibus, dico, connumeranda sunt omnia nomina causalia, idest quae designant Deum ut principium processionis perfectionum quae emanant ab ipso in creaturas, sic: bonus, pulchrum, existens, vitae generativum, sapiens et quaecumque alia per quae causa omnia bonorum nominantur ex dono suae bonitatis."

23 DDN 2.5 n.203 (Marietti, 64); see ST 1.12.12.

24 DDN 2.4 n.184 (Marietti, 57): "Et Pater et Filius sunt segregati per modum excessus ab omni paternitate et filiatione quae est in creaturis, secundum participationem rerum divinarum." fied, according to which God is separated from everything, as though superior to every existing thing, so that the meaning of "Holy of holies" would be "the Holy One exceeding every holy one"; for it is in this way that the ones who are holy and divine and lordly and kingly exceed the ones who are not such. And furthermore, just as participations exceed participations, as holiness [exceeds] the one who is holy, in this way he is stationed above all existing things—he who is above all existing things, by the fact that he is a certain in-
participable cause of all participations and [all their] participations: for the cause exceeds the caused.25

Because perfections in God infinitely exceed their likenesses found in crea-
tures, one must say he is beyond those perfections as we know and name them. It is this that an elegant phrase of Pruder's evokes: "the inexhaustible excess of unimitated imitability."26 The separation of God from created being is secundum totale excessum—an absolute, comprehensive excess, allowing no room for some aspect of being according to which God and the creature come together, in all strictness, as one—and philosophically: knowledge for its part must therefore be content with falling short of what is most worthy to be known.27 In no way does Thomas worship a God constrained by being: "God
is said to be non-existent, not because he falls short of existing, but because he is above all existences. 28 A higher path opens up which carries one beyond intellect, beyond being as we grasp it. 29 At this juncture, one becomes acutely aware of the connection between On the Divine Names and The Mystical Theology. 30

But since God is beyond all possessions of this sort, it is necessary that we throw ourselves into God, in order to know him according to remotion from every intellectual operation, i.e., from everything by which he comes into our intellect—and this, precisely because we cannot intellectually see any differentiation or life or substance which can be perfectly compared to that cause which is separated from every thing according to a total excess. For nothing comes under the vision of our intellect except some created and finite being, which in every way falls short of uncreated and infinite being; and therefore it is necessary that we understand God to be beyond every "that" which we can apprehend by intellect. 31

As God utterly transcends finite being and thus all conceptions of the created mind, the metaphysician, making all the necessary negations, can attain at best a dim and exiguous knowledge of divine things. For whenever the intellect "makes any determination in that which it understands of God, it falls short of the way in which God is in himself." 32 Paradoxically, it is owing to

the very luminosity of its mind that the intellectual creature can be at once aware of God and aware that God eludes its every effort: "the divine light, although infused in them, exceeds all minds, because by its own substance it is always a super-excess." 33 The only way to come to a living and positive knowledge of the God who "dwells in thick darkness" 34 is to throw oneself into his very excessiveness and to live his own life ("nos immittamus nos in Deum"). 35 As the first page of Dionysius's The Mystical Theology instructs the disciple,

Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By going out of yourself in pure and absolute ecstasy, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of divine darkness which is above everything that is. 36

Rising to union is not the fruit of human effort, but the gift of divine generosity. As Aquinas writes, "his essence is unknown to the creature and exceeds not only the senses, but also every human reason and even every angelic mind, in regard to the natural power of reason and of mind. Hence it is not possible to approach him except by the gift of grace." 37 This is not to de-


33 DDN 4.4 n.331 (Marietti, 109): "posit id quod perint ad excessum et eicit quod lumen divinum excidit omnes mentes, licet in eas diffundatur, quia semper superexcessus est per suam substantiam." Cf. Super De Trin. 1.2 ad 3 and Sent. 8.1.1 ad 4.

34 Scripture connects darkness and hiddenness, light and manifestation, with God. "Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (Exodus 20:21); "The Lord . . . has said that he would dwell in thick darkness" (1 Kings 8:12); "Verily thou art a hidden God, the God of Israel" (Isaiah 45:15); "God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5); "the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:15–16).

35 If, as Duns Scotus says, God's being is as an infinite, indeterminate ocean of substance (ST 1.12.11), the created mind must plunge into this divine ocean in order to know God as he is in himself, in his incommunicable singularity (ST 1.13.9, 13.11 ad 1). This uniquely singular and all-pervading fullness of being is not something "out there" but indwells within the mind (ST 1.8.1, 8.2 ad 3, 8.3 ad 4, but especially 43.3, on the indwelling of the Trinity in the just soul).


37 DDN 7.4 n.729 (Marietti, 274): "Eius enim essentia est ignota creaturae et excidit non solum sensum, sed etiam omnem rationem humanam et etiam omnem mentem angelicam,
value philosophical knowledge, as though it were worthless; it is rather to highlight its poverty in comparison with the experiential knowledge of sharing a common life. Although the philosopher, clearing away the debris of false imaginings and opinions, slowly gains a darksome knowledge of the "nature" of the one who infinitely transcends his concepts, the attainment of divine wisdom must be the gift of uncreated Wisdom, unattainable and unerved by the creature as such.

Here can be glimpsed a point of great importance in Thomistic anthropology. C. E. Rolt expresses it in the language of unification: "There is a higher merging of the self and a lower merging of it. The one is above the level of personality, the other beneath it; the one is religious, the other hedonistic; the one results from spiritual concentration and the other from spiritual dissipation." When a man is borne out of himself by an extasis or excessus a seipso initiated, sustained, and carried to its goal by God, he is made partaker of something proper to God, something in excess of created nature. In this way, even as the theological virtues are superhuman because by them man is lifted up into communion with God’s truth and goodness, so mystical experience and the life of charity are beyond (natural) living, beyond (natural) wisdom, beyond (natural) goodness, since they participate in the infinite excessus of life, wisdom, goodness which is the divine nature. When, by contrast, a man is pulled out of himself by an extasis or stupor such as fleshly desire or anger can provoke, he is made partaker, as it were, of some lower nature, that of a brute animal. He leads a life outside of himself, outside of what is proper to quantum ad naturalem virtutem rationis et mentis; unde non potest alter convenire aliqui, nisi ex dono gratiae."


"ST 1-2.61.5 and 1-2.62. On ecstasy as a result of participating in grace, see above all DDN 7.5 n.739 on the extasis of truth, and DDN 4.10 on the extasis of love. On extasis as an effect of love and especially of charity, see also III Sent. 27.11 obj. 4 and ad 4; ST 1-2.28.3; De perfectione spiritualis vitae, cap. 10; and Quodlibet 3.6.3 corp. For an overview of Thomas’s doctrine of ecstasy, see my "ST, Thomas, Extasis, and Union with the Beloved," The Thomist 61 (1997): 587-603.

"For examples of debasing ecstatics mentioned by Aquinas, see DDN 7.5 n.739, in which the unbeliever falsely taunts the believer as "sicut extasim passum, idest sicut fatuam et sa alienatum" (Marietti, 278); Super II Cor. 5.3 n.179, where drunkenness is contrasted with a divine transport; In Metaphys. 4.12 n.678, where Hector’s unconsciousness is called an extasis; ST 1-2.28.3 obj. 1, which assumes that lovers are often out of their minds; the body of the same article, where a downward fall of the mind, such as occurs in furious or demented people, is identified as one type of cognitive extasis; and ST 2-2.175.2 obj. 2, which cites Gregory contrasting the prodigal son’s wandering and impurity of mind made him fall beneath himself with the Apostle Peter’s being "beside himself" when he saw the angel delivering him from prison.

In general, an excessus is perfective or fruitful when it leads man beyond himself into God, and corruptive when it leads man to trespass the boundaries of what is good for him, physically or spiritually. "That which proceeds from a tree against the tree’s nature," remarks Aquinas, "is not called its fruit, but rather a certain corruption."

Excessus in Natural "Virtues"

Excessus plays a central role in Thomas’s analyses of natural and human virtues, most often in a negative sense, but sometimes also from the more

"On this contrast, and on the ecstaticism of Aquinas’s understanding of reason, see my "Divine Drunkenness: The Secret Life of Thomistic Reason," forthcoming in The Modern Schoolman.

"Super De Trin. 3.1 ad 5 (50:109.259-71): "uiue re secundum rationem est bonum hominis in quantum est homo, uiue autem preter rationem potest uno modo sonare in defunctum, sicut est in illis qui uiuunt secundum sermonem, et hoc est hominis malum; alio modo potest sonare in excessum, ut cum duina gratia homo adducitur in id quod est supra rationem, et sic preter rationem uiue non est hominis malum, sed bonum supra hominem. Et tales est cognitio corum que sunt fidei; quanquam et ipsa fides non omnibus modis sit preter rationem: hoc enim naturalis ratio habet, quod assentientium est his que a Deo dicentur."

"ST 1-2.70.4 ad 1 (6:464): "id quod procedit ab arbo contra naturam arboris, non dicitur esse fructus eius, sed magis corruptio quaestiria." Thomas has in mind a malignant growth or boil that comes forth on a branch as the external sign of an internal disease. This thing would indeed grow from the tree, but it would be against its nature, which is to produce fruit. Hence such a growth is more a corruption, a diminishment of the tree’s health, than a fructus. Taking the English word "produce," which as verb means to bring forth and as noun means the fruits brought forth, one could make Thomas’s point by a play on words: "What a sick tree produces is not produce."
positive perspective of virtus as an ultimum or extremitas, an excellencia not unrelated to the notion of excessus. The philosophical source connecting virtus with ultimum is a text from De caelo 1.11 (281a2–27), "when we speak of a power to move or to lift weights, we refer always to the maximum...we feel obliged in defining the power to give the limit or maximum," which gives Thomas occasion to offer the following extended paraphrase in his commentary:

If a thing is capable of something great—for example, if a man can walk a hundred stades or can lift a great weight—we always determine or describe his power in terms of the most he can do, as we say that the power of this man is that he can lift a weight of a hundred talents or can walk a distance of a hundred stades, even though he is capable of all the partial distances included in that quantity, since he can do what goes above them. But his power is not described by these parts: we do not determine his power as being able to carry fifty talents or walk fifty stades, but by the most he can do, so that in this way the power of each thing is named with respect to the end, i.e., with respect to the ultimate, and to the maximum of which it is capable, and with respect to the strength of its excellence. Thus, it is plain that one who can do things that excel, necessarily can also do things that are lesser...yet it is to what is excelling that a thing’s virtue is attributed, i.e., a thing’s virtue is gauged in terms of what is most excellent of everything that can be done. This is what is said in another translation, “virtue is the limit of a power,” in other words because the virtue of a thing is determined according to the ultimate it can do. And this applies also to the virtues of the soul: for a human virtue is that through which a man is capable of what is most excellent in human works, i.e., in a work which is in accord with reason.44

In line with the physical-cosmological context of the De caelo passage, Thomas submits natural virtutes to a similar analysis. From these discussions, much can be gathered that sheds light on the notion of excessus mentis and extasis, not least because Thomas, sharing with other medieval theologians a predilection for symbols, was quick to perceive likenesses at every level between the natural, the human, the angelic, and the divine. Thomas’s analysis of the element of fire is a particularly good example. Fire is a certain excessus calidi, and its peculiar properties belong to it propter excessum caliditas: “the fourth element placed in order above the air is not properly called fire, for ‘fire’ signifies excess of heat and is, as it were, a certain burning and stirring up; just as ice is not an element but is a certain excess of cold within frozen water.”45 Thomas gives as a reason for Heracleitus’s favoring of fire this element’s excessus virtutis, by which it can transform other things into itself:

But neither fire nor any other of the elements can be infinite, because it would be impossible for any of the elements to exist, beyond the one that was infinite, because that one would everywhere fill up the whole. Again, were there some finite [element], it would have to be changed into the infinite one on account of the excess of its [that element’s] power, just as Heracleitus manifestly claimed that at some time all things must be converted into the element of fire, on account of the very great excess of its power.46

Explaining in his commentary on Dionysius the difference between beauty in creatures and beauty in God, Thomas appeals to the difference between fire and the sun, which is reputed the principium of all fires. His answer is phrased in terms of a distinction between excessus in genere and excessus extra genus, which yields the rationale for the Neoplatonic language of “super-[perfection]” that has already been touched on:

Now excess is twofold: one within a genus, which is signified comparatively or superlatively; another outside of a genus, which is signified by the addition of this preposition, “super”; for example, when we say that fire exceeds in

44 In libros Aristotelis De caelo et mundo expositio [In De caelo] 1.25, §4 (3:101a): “Si contingat aliquam rem posse in aliquud magnum, puta quod alios homi ambetu per centum stadia, aut possit levare aliquum magnum pondus, semper determinamus sive denominamus eius potentiam per respectum ad pluriplum in quod potest; sicut dicimus potentiam huius hominis esse quod potest levare pondus centum talentorum, aut quod potest ire per spatium centum stadiorum, quavis possit omnes partes ipsam in quantitatem constantes, sicutem potest in id quod superhundat. Nec tamen denominatur ab illis partibus, puta quod determinatur eius potentia quia potest ferre quinquaginta talenta, aut iri quinquaginta stadia; sed per id quod est maximum: ita scilicet ut potestius uniuscuiusque denominetur per respectum ad finem, ideo et per ultimum et per maximum ad quod potest, et per virtutem sua excellentiae. Sicigitps etat quod ille qui potest in ea quae excellunt, necesse est quod possit etiam in ea quae sunt infra.... Sed tamen virtus rei non attribuitur nisi excellentiae, idest, secundum id attenditur virtus rei, quod est excellentissimum omnium eorum in quae potest. Et hoc est quod dictur in aliis translatione, virtus est ultimum potentiae, quia scilicet virtus rei determinatur secundum ultimum in quod potest. Et hoc etiam habet locum in virtutibus animae: dictur enim virtus humana, per quam homo potest in id quod est excellentissimum in operibus humanis, scilicet in opere quod est secundum rationem.”


46 In Metaphys. 11.10 n.2336 (Marietti, 552): “Sed neque ignis, neque aliquid aliud elementorum potest esse infinitum: quia impossibile est quod aliquid elementorum esse, praeter id quod est infinitum, quia illud in ipsum se convertatur.” Et ita etiam se est aliquid finitus, opus est quod convertatur in illud infinitum, propter excessum ipsius virtutis; sic Heracleitus manifeste posuit quod aliud omnino sint convertenda in elementum ignis, propter minimum excessus virtutis eius.” The same line of argument is used at In octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis expositio [In Phys.] 3.8, §9 (2.126b), where again Heracleitus is mentioned.
hotness by an excess within the genus, whence it is called "hottest"; whereas the sun exceeds by an excess outside of the genus, whence it is not called "hottest" but "super-hot," because hotness is not in it in the same way but in a more excellent way. And although this twofold excess does not come together at the same time in created things, yet in God it can be said at the same time that he is "most beautiful" and "super-beautiful"; not that he is in a genus, but that to him may be attributed everything that is in each and every genus.48

Understanding fire and its properties in this way, Thomas in his commentary on Isaiah can readily appeal to fire as a symbol of God and to its transformative power as an illustration of the effects of divine love in the soul and in the world.49 Just as fire transforms other matter into itself or at least communicates a share of its form to other things according to their capacity for receiving it (as the teapot and the water in it receive a share of the flame's hotness), so God's love poured into the heart transforms the lover into a likeness of the one he loves; and as it belongs to fire to set other things on fire, to resist the cold and dry the damp, so it belongs to the lover of God to show the intensity of love Thomas calls zelus, which seeks mightily to repel anything contrary to the beloved's good: "zeal for thy house hath consumed me" (Psalm 69; John 2:17). Thomas agrees with Dionysius's exalted estimation of the fittingness of fire as a symbol: "The first order of the first angelic hierarchy approaches to divine properties in the manner, in a way, of a maximum excessum; hence they are named 'seraphim' from the property of fire, which maximally signifies divine properties, as Dionysius says."50 In an objection arguing that love is a passion that wounds the lover, we read "'Fervor' designates a certain excess in hotness—a destructive excess. But fervor is caused by love, for Dionysius places 'hot' and 'cutting' and 'super-fervent' among the various properties pertaining to the love of the seraphim."51 This line of thinking is developed in the Summa theologiae:

The name "seraphim" is not imposed from charity alone but from an excess of charity, which the word "ardor" or "fire" implies. Hence Dionysius (Celest. Hier. 7) expounds the name "seraphim" according to the properties of fire, in which there is an excess of heat. Now in fire three things may be considered. First, the movement, which is upwards and is continuous. Through this is signified that they are moved unfailingly towards God. Second, the active force, which is heat, which is not a property found in fire in the same way as it is in other things but rather as having a peculiar sharpness because it is most penetrating in acting, and reaches even to the smallest things; and [it does this], moreover, with super-exceeding fervor. And through this is signified the action of such angels, which they exercise powerfully upon their subjects, rousing them to a like fervor and cleansing them wholly by their fire. Third, in fire one may consider its brightness. And this signifies that such angels have in themselves an inextinguishable light, and that they perfectly enlighten others.51

Let the foregoing suffice as an illustration of Thomas's understanding of natural virtues and the various excesses they exhibit or symbolize.

47 DDM 4.5 n.343 (Marietti, 114): "Excessus autem est duplex: unus in genere, qui significatur per comparativum vel superlativum; alterius autem, qui significatur per additionem huius praepositionis: super; puta, si dicamus quod ignis excedit in calore excessum in genere, unde dicimus excedit excessus extra genere, unde non dicimus calidissimus sed supercalidos, quia calor non est in eo, sed est in eo esse superlativum." Et cetera sexta duplex excessus in rebus causatis non simul convenit, tamen in Deo simul dicuntur et quod est pulcherrimum et superpulcherrich, non quod sit in genere, sed quod ei attribuatur omnino quae sunt eiuscumque generis." See also Super De Trin. 1.2 ad 4 (50:85.170–73): "Deus autem quaemus non sit in genere intelligibilium quasi sub genere comprehensum, ut poterit generis naturam participans, perteinet tam ad hoc genus ut principium." 48 The most ample discussion of fire as divine symbol is found at Super Isaiam 10 (28:76.330–77.363), where Thomas gives twelve reasons why God may be called fire, grouped around four characteristics of fire—its subtility, brilliance, heat, and levity. Thus God is subtle in substance, knowledge, and manifestation; he is bright in his effects on intellect, affection, and action; he is like heat by warming to life, cleansing, and destroying; he lifts all to himself, dwells in heaven, and is unmixed with baser things. Briefer accounts are found at Super Isaiam 33 (28:148.136–42), where three reasons are given (fire purges, sets other things on fire, and condemns), and at Super Heb. 12.5 (Marietti, 2:495), where fire is said to have, among sensible things, more nobility, more brightness, more activity, more altitude, and more purifying and consuming power. At Super Isaiam 30 (28:140.324–36), Thomas offers five reasons for applying the symbol of fire to charity: it illuminates, boils up or heats ["exhausta"], turns things towards itself, makes one ready to act, and draws upwards. Super ler. 5 (Buza, 5:101a, 8) gives five reasons why the word of the Lord is said to be a fire: it illuminates, sets aflame, penetrates, melts, and consumes the disobedient. It is noteworthy that such descriptions of fire regularly accompany Thomas's depiction of the effects of love. For example, in both Ill Sent. 27.1.1 ad 4 and ST 1.2.28.5, he speaks of how intense love causes fervor or burning, how it melts or "liquefies" the heart, and how it makes the lover penetrate into the inmost recesses of the beloved.


50 ST 1.2.28.5 obj. 3 (6:201): "'Fervor designat quemdam excessum in caliditate, quia quidem excessus corruptivus est. Sed fervor causatur ex amore: Dionysius enim, vint cap. Cael. Hier., inter ceteras proprietates ad amorem Seraphim pertinentes, ponit calidum et acutum et superfervens.'"

EXCESSUS IN HUMAN VIRTUES

A natural or entitative virtus (e.g., the power of fire to heat and burn) is an excessus or something "of surpassing power" in some genus (e.g., of hot things). An operative habit, e.g., a moral or intellectual virtus, is an excessus in a different sense: it is fullness of perfection by which the innate undeveloped potency of some power of the soul is rendered capable of—and in some cases actually inclined to—its maximal exercise. The doctrine of the De caelo passage, linked with other characteristically Aristotelian tenets (virtue is the ordering of something perfect to what is best for it; virtus makes a man as well as his work good; human happiness is the active attainment, in accord with virtue, of the best of all things for man), provides the foundations for Thomas's understanding of the necessity of having and exercising virtues in order to be happy. When virtue is understood according to its essence, "it bespeaks the ultimate of a power, because it designates the completion of a power." It is so called "not because it is always something belonging to the essence of a power, but because it inclines to the ultimate that a power is capable of." When Thomas wishes to show that magnificence is a virtue, he appeals to this doctrine:

eius, quae est calidum. Quod quidem non simpliciter inventur in igne, sed cum quaedam acutitate, quae maxime est penetrativus in agendo, et pertingit usque ad minimam; et iterum cum quaedam superexcedit ad fervore. Et per hoc significtur actio huiusmodi angelorum, quorum in subditos poterent exercent, eos in similem fervore excitant, et totaliter eos per incendium purgantes. Tertio consideratur in igne claritas eius. Et hoc significt quos huiusmodi angeli in seipsis habent indistinguibilem lucem, et quod alios perfecte illuminant." Thomas continues by saying that the cherubim are named a quodam excessu scientiae.

52 Thomas frequently quotes the dictum "virtus dicitur dispositio perfecti ad optimum"; in the Sentences commentary alone, for example, at I Sent. 1.1 obj. 11 (33); II Sent. 26.4 ad 2 (678), 27.2 ad 9 (700); III Sent. 23.1.3 (707, §58), 24.3.3 (775, §92); and IV Sent. 46.1.1.2 ad 1 (Bussa, 1.660b). Though this point is found most explicitly in Aristotle's Eudemian Ethics 2.5 (1222a6–10), Thomas deduces the dictum from Physics 7.3 (246a10–247a20). Cf. In Phys. 7.5, §6 (2.339b–340a). "Virtus enim universaliter curmurit in rei est quae bonum facit habentem, et opus eius bonum reddit. ... Similiter pulchrum et macies dicuntur ad aliquid (et simillit macies pro dispositione, qua aliquis est expediens ad motum et actionem). Huiusmodi enim sunt quaedam dispositiones eius quae perfectum in sua natura per comparisonem ad optimum, idest ad finem, qui est opera." Aristotle, Ethics 2.6 (1106a14–23).

53 De virtutibus in commune 1.1 ad 6 (Marietti, 709b–710a): "poste intelligiti essentialiter; et sic virtus dicitur ultimum potentiae, quia designat potentiae complementum; sive id per quod potentia completur, sit alius a potentia, sive non." Cf. II Sent. 10.3 (262): "virtus dicitur ultimum in re de potentia"; and III Sent. 23.1.3 ad 2 (708, §68): "virtus dicitur ultimum potentiae in eodem genere, quod est genus principii respectu ejus ejus dicitur potentia vel virtus."

54 De virtutibus in commune 1.9 ad 15 (Marietti, 733a): "virtus dicitur esse ultimum potentia..." "Virtue" is said with reference to the ultimate that a power is capable of—not the ultimate on the side of defect, but rather on the side of excess, whose ratio consists in magnitude. And therefore to do something great, from which the name "magnificence" is taken, properly pertains to the ratio of virtue. Hence, magnificence names a virtue.55

And when he sets about explaining why a distinct order of angels is denominated virtutes, the same idea is in the background:

"Virtue" can be taken in two ways. First, commonly, considered as the medium between essence and operation, and in that sense all the heavenly spirits are called "heavenly virtues," as also "heavenly essences." Secondly, as meaning a certain excessus of strength; and thus it is the proper name of an angelic order. Hence Dionysius says (Celest. Hier. 8) that "the name 'virtues' signifies a certain virile and immovable strength"; first, in regard of those divine operations which befit them; secondly, in regard to receiving divine gifts. Thus it signifies that they undertake without any fear the divine [tasks] pertaining to them, which seems to pertain to strength of mind.56

On the other hand, excessus in a negative sense is the contrary of defectus in matters admitting of a medium, and in this way excessus or superabundantia is contrasted both with any defectus or diminutio and with the medium of conformity to reason that the virtues place into passions and operations.57 Here, excess or defect is said in reference to conformity with the laws that govern human action, namely, reason and the divine law.58 In terms of confor-
acculus lumen a Deo derivatur”; and 68.8 ad 2 (6:455): “per hoc quod homo bene se habet circa rationem propriam, disponitur ad hoc quod se bene habeat in ordine ad Deum.”


62 ST 1-2.64.3 (6:415): “bonum ac aliquis rei constitut in medio, secundum quod confinatur regulae vel mensurae quam contingit transcendere et ab ea definere.” Aristotle introduces the idea at Ethikas 2.2 by making a comparison: it belongs to the nature of virtues “to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health (for to gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things); both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it” (1104a11–17).

63 This is in the context of the discussion of Christ weeping over the death of Lazarus (Super Ioan. 11.5 n.1535 [Marietti, 260]), which is interpreted as a demonstration on the part of Christ of the truth of his humanity: “Socti enim dixerunt quod nullus sapiens tristatur. Sed valde inhumanum esse videtur quo quietis alicuius non tristetur.” Cf. ST 1-2.59.3 ad 3 (6:382): “tristitia immotestra est animae aegritudinem; tristitia autem moderata ad bonum habitudinem animae pertinet, secundum statum praevisiti vitae.”

64 ST 1-2.59.2 and 5; ST 2-2.123.10.

MODALITIES OF EXCESS IN AQUINAS

count the passion is vicious. Now, the names of the passions are sometimes taken from [their] superabundance, as “anger” is said of not just any [anger] but a superabundance, in which case it is vicious. And in the same way, too, daring, when meaning a superabundance [thereof], is accounted a sin.65

Thomas establishes that covetousness is a sin in the same way, appealing explicitly to the principle of commensuration:66

Wherever there are things whose good consists in due measure, evil necessarily ensues through excess or diminishment of that measure. Now in all things that are for the sake of an end, the good consists in a certain measure, since the things that are towards an end must be commensurate with it, as, for instance, medicine is commensurate with health, as is clear from the Philosopher (Politics 1.6). Now external goods have the ratio of “useful for an end,” as said above. Hence it is necessary that man’s good with respect to them consists in a certain measure—namely, that a man seeks, according to a certain measure, to have external riches, insofar as they are necessary for him to live in keeping with his condition. And therefore sin consists in an excess over this measure, namely, that he wishes to acquire or retain these things beyond a due manner; which pertains to the ratio of covetousness, which is defined as immoderate love of possessing.67

While the moral virtues offer the readiest examples, all the virtues and vices without exception are analyzed in terms of excess, defect, and mean, although exactly what this trio labels will vary notably from one class of operative habits to another. As we have seen, the excess, defect, and mean of
moral virtues concerned with passions have reference to the interior condition of the agent, the ordering of his soul’s powers under the governance of reason (thus, here one speaks of the medium rationale); with justice, they are brought into the ambit of the medium rei, the establishment of equality or due proportion in exchanges of things owed, with the intellectual virtues, they refer to exceeding or falling short of the being of things, which measures speculative and practical truth in the created intellect; with the theological virtues, there cannot even be a fixed medium, much less an excessus, on the part of the object believed, hoped in, loved, since it is absolute truth and infinite good; but there can be defectus or excessus per accidens with reference to man’s state of life or condition of soul. For our topic, the theological virtues offer the most interesting perspective. As just mentioned, because these virtues have no mean and no excessus, a Christian can never believe, hope, or love as much as he ought, and yet even doing what little he can suffices to keep him in contact with the infinite object as attained by these virtues. Yet this object is never given to man in such a way that it would become his own; it always remains the being, the truth, of God, in which the creature is granted a share by divine pleasure. It is quite in keeping with the basic meaning of ekstasis, a “standing outside oneself,” to see faith, hope, and charity as ecstatic virtues both in their essence, for they make man share in the divine nature, and in their exercise, for they drive man towards God in a motion that never comes to a static term where “everything is done that can be done.” Hence Thomas remarks: “the good of such virtues does not consist in a mean but increases the more we approach to the summit.”

There is, then, considerable flexibility in how excessus, defectus, and medium are understood for each virtue, or put differently, what should be identified as the extremitas in either direction. A concise comparison of the negative and positive senses of extremitas in the context of moral virtues is found in the response to an objection occasioned by the De caelo definition of virtus. The objector argues: “It would seem that moral virtue does not observe the mean. For the nature of a mean is incompatible with that which is extreme. Now the nature of virtue is to be something extreme; for it is stated in De caelo 1 that virtue is the ultimate of a power.” Thomas responds:

Moral virtue has goodness from the rule of reason, while for matter it has passions or operations. If therefore we compare moral virtue to reason, so, according to that which is of reason, it has the ratio of one extreme, which is conformity; while excess and defect have the ratio of the other extreme, which is deformity. But if moral virtue be considered according to its matter, so it has the ratio of a mean, insofar as it leads the passion back to the rule of reason. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethics 2) that “virtue, according to essence, is a mean state,” insofar as the rule of virtue is imposed on its proper matter, “but it is an extreme according to the best and the excellent,” viz., according to conformity with reason.

Earlier we saw that excessus could be regarded as perceptive when it leads man beyond himself into God. It is in this sense that anything undertaken in excess of the common mode of virtue, such as consecrated virginity, evangelical poverty, and the renunciation of one’s own will by a vow of obedience, is held worthy of praise, insofar as it enables one to strive more intensely for spiritual goods and the heavenly kingdom: “he who gives all that is his in order to fulfill the counsel of Christ is not prodigal but does a perfect act of virtue. . . . And one should make a similar response about virginity and other things of this sort, in which is seen an excess above the common mode of virtue.” More generally, Aquinas holds that “some moral virtues are perfected by tending to the extreme.” So, too, the infused moral virtues are

68 “Things” here also include acts of the soul. For example, acts of worshiping God are justly owed to him on account of his excellence, acts of thanksgiving are owed to whomever gives something good to us, etc. Because Thomas takes the scenario of commutative justice (exchange between equal persons of equalizable goods) as paradigmatic for all virtues that are “parts” of justice, he organizes the subordinate virtues according as they more or less perfectly exhibit this commutative ratio (ST 2-2.80). God’s infinite excessus is the basis for Thomas’s argument that the ratio of justice is found least perfectly in the most important justice-virtue, religion, by which we make an inevitably finite return to a God who deserves infinite worship and thanks (ST 2-2.81).

69 ST 1-2.64.4.

70 Ibid. (6:416): “Et sic bonum talis virtutis non consistit in medio, sed tanto est melius, quanto magis acceditur ad summum.”

71 ST 1-2.64.1 obj. 1 (6:412): “Videtur quod virtus moralis non consistat in medio. Utrum enim regnavit rationi medi i. Sed de ratione virtutis est ultimum: dicitur enim in De caelo, quod virtus est ultimum potentiæ.”

72 Ibid. ad 1 (6:412): “Virtus moralis bonitatem habet ex regula rationis: pro materia autem habet passiones vel operationes. Si ergo comparatur virtus moralis ad rationem, sic, secundum id quod rationis est, habet rationem extremito unius, quod est conformitas: excessus vero et defectus habet rationem alterius extremiti, quod est disformitas. Si vero consideretur virtus moralis secundum suam materiam, sic habet rationem mediæ, inquantum passionem reducit ad regulam rationis. Unde Philosophus dici, in Ethic., quod virtus secundum substantiam medietatis est, inquantum regula virtutis ponitur circa proprietatem materiam: secundum optimam etiam et bene, est extremitas, scilicet secundum conformitatem rationis.”

73 Libri contra impugnantes De cultu et religionem: [Contra impugnantes] 6 ad 10 (41:1A102.744–50): “qui omnia sua dat propter Christi consilium impleendum, non est prodigus, sed perfectum actum virtutis fecit. . . . et similiter est dicendum de virginitate, et de aliis huissimo, in quibus videtur excessus supra communem modum virtutis.”

74 ST 1-2.64.1 obj. 3 (6:412): “quaedam virtutis morales perfecluntur per hoc quod tendunt ad extremum.” In the reply, as well as in the reply to the second objection, Thomas grants this point to be true but explains how any moral virtue that is extreme in terms of its “quantity” (i.e., how much it does or expects, as one sees with magnificence on the one hand and poverty.
distinguished from naturally acquired moral virtues by the different acts to
which they lead, springing from different motives: while natural temperance
aims at moderating pleasures of touch according to the good of man in this
life, supernatural temperance mortifies the flesh by abstinence, in order that a
man may grieve over sin, free his soul for contemplation, and please God by
the holocaust of his life. In the striking article (1-2.61.5) in which Thomas,
introducing the Neoplatonic authorities Macrobius and Plotinus, initiates a
transition from the realm of political virtues to theological virtues—adding, in
a sense, a Platonic corrective to the prior Aristotelian perspective—we find a
discussion of the virtues that carry man beyond the confines of the natural
order and lead him into the realm of God. The point of departure is
Augustine’s statement that the soul needs to follow God in order to give birth
to virtue. Thus the exemplar of human virtue must pre-exist in God, as do the
ratioes of all things; and so we may speak of “exemplar virtues” in God
(e.g., God’s “fortitude” as his unchangeableness). Moreover, since human
beings are naturally social, the cardinal virtues having their exemplar in God
can exist in us according to a natural mode, as political virtues whereby we
act well in merely human affairs. Thomas furnishes the reader with a herme-
neutical key to his treatise on virtue by noting that up to the present moment
he has been speaking of the cardinal virtues in this sense—at the natural, po-
litical level. Yet there is something more:

But because it pertains to man that he should also do as much as he can to
draw himself to divine things, as even the Philosopher declares (Ethics 10.7),
and as Scripture often admonishes us, as in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, as your
heavenly Father is perfect,” we must place certain virtues between the politi-
cal, which are human virtues, and the exemplar, which are divine virtues. Now
these virtues are distinguished according to diversity of movement and term.
Thus, certain ones are virtues of those who are on their way and tending
towards the divine likeness, and these are called purifying virtues. In this man-
ner, prudence counts as nothing all things of the world in its contemplation
of divine things and directs all the thoughts of the soul to God alone, while tem-
perance, so far as nature allows, relinquishes what is required for the use of
the body; it belongs to fortitude, moreover, to keep the soul unafraid of going
out [excessus] of the body and rising up [accessus] to heavenly things, while
justice is the whole soul giving consent to the way thus proposed. Again,
certain ones are virtues of those who have already attained to the divine like-

ness, and these are called virtues of a purified soul. In this manner, prudence
gazes upon God alone; temperance knows nothing of earthly desires; fortitude
has no knowledge of passion; and justice, by imitating the divine mind, is
joined to it by an everlasting covenant. And such are the virtues that we say to
be in the blessed or in others who are most perfect in this life.

Infused and fostered by God, such superhuman virtues and the ecstatic life
they create carry the human person to the height of perfection (“tota anima
consentiat”), the inmost participation of divine eternity and blessedness (“sola
divina intuitu, cum divina mente perpetuo foedere societur”).

Nevertheless, something like what I have called the “Platonic corrective” is
found in Aristotle when he distinguishes between ordinary virtues and vices
and the rare extremes of bestial vice and divine or heroic virtue: “If, as they
say, men become gods by excess of virtue, of this kind must evidently be the
state opposed to the brutish state; for as a brute has no vice or virtue, so nei-
ther has a god; his state is higher than virtue, and that of a brute is a different
kind of state from vice.” Regarding the notion of heroic or divine virtue,
Thomas comments:

The human soul is a mean (or: middle) between the higher and divine sub-
stances with which it shares intelligence and brute animals with which it
shares sensitive powers. Just as therefore the affections of the sensitive part
are sometimes corrupted in man even to the point of likeness to dumb animals,
and this is called brutishness, beyond human vice and incontinence; so also the
rational part in man is sometimes perfected and strengthened beyond the usual
mode of human perfection, as though in likeness to separated substances, and
this is called divine virtue, beyond ordinary human virtue and continence. For

76 ST 1-2.61.5 (6398): “Sed quia ad hominem pertinet ut etiam ad divina se trahat quantum
potest, ut etiam Philosophus dicit, in X Ethic.; et hoc nobis in sacra Scriptura multiplice
commendatur, ut est Iulio Math. v, 'Estote perfecti, sicut et Pater vester caelestis perfectus est';
necessis est ponere quadam virtutum medias inter politicas, quae sunt virtutes humanae, et ex-
emplares, quae sunt virtutes divinae. Quae quidem virtutes distinguuntur secundum diversi-
sitatem motus et termini. Ita scilicet quod quaedam sunt virtutes transcendent et in divinam
similitudinem tendentiam: et haec vocantur virtutes purgatoriae. Ita scilicet quod prudencia om-
nia mundana divinerum contemplatione despicat, omnesque animae cogitationem in divina
sola dirigat; temperantia vero relinquat, iniquum natura patitur, quae corporis usus requirit;
fortitudinis autem est ut anima non terreatur propter excessum a corpore, etneconsum ad su-
pemnis; justitia vero est ut tota anima consentat ad hunc propositi viam. Quaedam vero sunt
virtutes itam assequantium divinam similitudinem: quae vocantur virtutes iam pargati animi. Ita
scilicet quod prudencia sola divina intuitu; temperantia terrenas cupiditates nesciat; fortitudo
passiones ignoret; justitia cum divina mente perpetuo foedere societur, ea scilicet imitando.
Quas quidem virtutes dicitius esse beatorum, vel aliquorum in hac vita perfectissimorum.” See
also ST 1-2.65.2, where it is stated that only infused virtues deserve to be called virtues
absolutely speaking, while all acquired virtues deserve the name only relatively.

77 Aristotle, Ethic. 7.1 (1145a24-27).
the order of things is so arranged that the mean between different parts touches both extremes. Hence, too, in human nature there is something that comes into contact with what is higher, something that is conjoined to what is below, and something that stands in a middle way.78

Thomas correlates what Aristotle refers to as divine or heroic virtue both to special helps given by God to men in their natural condition and, more aptly, to the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

Gifts have something greatly beyond what belongs to the common notion of virtue, insofar as they are certain divine virtues perfecting man so as he is moved by God. Hence the Philosopher in Ethics 7 places above common virtue a certain heroic or divine virtue, according to which some are called divine men.79

All the virtues of man perfect his self-motion: theological virtues cause within him knowledge of, motion towards, and union with God; intellectual virtues perfect his reason in its acts; moral virtues perfect the appetitive powers in their obedience to the dictates of reason.80 The gifts of the Holy Spirit, however, are for the soul to receive and be led by the motion or prompting of God himself, so that God is the artist, the teacher, the sun, and man the tool (organum) to be used, the pupil to be guided, the moon to be illuminated.81

When, however, radical or “excessive” ways of living are undertaken for the wrong reasons, in the wrong circumstances, etc., they become excessive in the morally bad sense. As Aquinas explains, “virginity abstains from all sexual matters, and poverty from all wealth, for a right end, and in a right manner, i.e., according to God’s command, and for the sake of eternal life. But if this is done in an undue manner, i.e., out of unlawful superstition, or again for vainglory, it will be superfluous [=in excess].”82 In such texts we encounter again a negative excessus, something bad, unhealthy, unnatural. Any result disproportionate to what a nature intends, or any failure to attain what is intended for something by its maker, is said to go beyond, or exceed, the process leading to it. Corruption or defect is praeter naturalum et thus an example of quidam excessus:

For nothing that is “beside nature” is everlasting, since what is beside nature is subsequent to what is according to nature. This is plain from the fact that in the generation of anything, whatever is beside nature is a certain excess, i.e., a corruption and defect of that which is according to nature (for example, monstrosities are certain corruptions and defects of a natural thing). But corruptions and defect are naturally posterior, just as lacking is subsequent to having.83

More particularly, sickness and sin are disharmonious and ugly because they are secundum excessum a propria natura of the body and of the soul:

Theologians praise the Godhead as wise and beautiful, because all existing things in which a proper nature is found to be preserved without corruption are filled with all divine harmony, i.e., perfect consonance or order to God, and are, moreover, filled with a holy comeliness; when he says “harmony,” it refers to the wisdom to which it belongs to order and give measure to things; but when he says “comeliness,” it refers most of all to beauty. Now, by the very fact that something of harmony or comeliness is diminished, corruption befalls things according to an excessus from [their] proper nature—like sickness in bodies, and sin in the soul.84

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78 Sententia libri VIII Ethicorum [Sent. VIII Eth.] 1 (47:381, 91-107): “anima humana medietas inter superiores substantias et divinas, quibus communicat per intellectum, et animilia bruta quibus communicat in sensitivis potentis; sic ert ergo affectiones sensitiva partis aliquando in homine corrumpuntur usque ad similitudinem bestiarum et hoc vocatur bestialitas super humana malitiam et incontinentiam, ut eam rationalis pars quandoque in homine perficitur et conformatur ultra communem modum hominum perfectionis, quasi in similitudinem substantiatis separaturum, et hoc vocatur virtus divina supra humanam virtutem et continentiam, ut eam se habet rerum ordine, ut medium ex diversis partibus attingat utrumque extremum, unde et in humana natura est aliquis quod attingit ad id quod est superius, aliquis vero quod conligiatur inferiori, aliquis vero quod medio modo se habet.”


80 ST 1-2.68.1.

81 ST 1-2.68.1 corp. and ad 3, 68.2, and 68.4 ad 1. On the notion of holy men and women as organa of God or of the Holy Spirit, see the text just cited (ST 1-2.68.4 ad 1); ST 3.25.6; and Super Iohann. prologue. The human nature of Christ is also related to several times as organum Dei or by a similar phrase (e.g., III Sent. 12.2.1; IV Sent. 48.1.1 ad 5; S. CCC 4.41 [15:141], Sed cum); ST 1-2.112.1 ad 1; Compendium theologiae 1.211). Thomas comments on the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a number of other places, e.g., Super Iohann 11 (28.79-80, 210) and Super Gal. 5.6 (Marietti, 1:635-38); for an overview, see M.-Michel Labourdette, “Donus du Saint-Esprit—Saint Thomas et la theologie thomiste,” Dictionnaire de spiritualité 3:1610-35.

82 ST 1-2.64.1 ad 3 (6:413): “Abstinet enim virginitas ab omnibus venereis, et paupertas ab omnibus divitiis, propter quod oporet, et secundum quod oporet; idest secundum mandatum Dei, et propter vitam aeternam. Si autem hoc fiat secundum quod non oporet, idest secundum aliquam superstitionem illicivit, vel etiam propter inamor gloriae; erit superfluum.” Cf. Contra impugnantes 6 ad 10 (41,102,746-48): “si autem non debito fine aut alii circumstantis indebitis omnia dare dignus est.”

83 In De caelo 2.4, 6 (3:137a): “Nihil enim quod est praeter naturam, est sempiternum: quia illud quod est praeter naturam, est posterior et quod est secundum naturam: quod quidem patet ex hoc quod in generatione exuit et est, id quod quod es praeter naturam est excessus quidam, idem corruptio et defectus, eius quod est secundum naturam (sicut videmus quod monster sunt quaedam corruptions et defectus rei naturalis); corruptio autem et defectus est naturaliter posterior, sicut privativum quam habitus.”

84 DON 1.2 n.59 (Marietti, 19): “laudant Deitatem theologi sicut sapientem et pulchrum,
P. A. Kwasniewski

PSYCHOLOGICAL EXCESSUS: MADNESS OR LOSING ONE'S MIND

The link between sin or sickness and excessiveness, between bodily or mental disease and the trespassing of nature (propria natura), brings us to a final and quite distinct sphere of meaning. Within this final category—mental, psychic, or spiritual excessus—the positive and negative uses of the term stand furthest apart, separated by an abyss that stretches their connection almost to the breaking point. The excessus of mental disease is the worst and most destructive for man, fearful as death; the excessus of divine inspiration and charity is the best and most perfective, surpassing all creaturely hopes.

Insanity or madness is the most obvious instance of a psychological excessus, and with his customary realism Thomas finds frequent occasion to mention it, usually in conjunction with sleep, drunkenness, fury, lust, stupidity, or other things that deprive a person, to one degree or another, of the use of reason. While insanus means sick, unhealthy, unsound, insanitas typically refers to mental sickness in particular. There are other words, too, that indicate madness or the loss of one’s mind, among them amentia, dementia, furor, and mania. Thomas had at least two very good pastoral reasons for discussing this whole matter: whether insane persons should be permitted to receive the sacraments, and to what extent insanity, in any of its forms, diminishes culpability for sin.

An indication of Thomas’s understanding of insanitas may be found in a discussion of how the virtue of mercy, as a part of temperance, moderates the use of punishment by keeping it within reasonable bounds. Here Thomas points out the mental unsoundness of those who take delight in punishment:

Unsoundness [insanitas] bespeaks the corruption of health. Now just as bodily health is corrupted by the fact that the body falls away from the rightful constitution of the human species, so too insanitas in the soul is so called from the fact that the human soul falls away from the rightful disposition of the human species. This happens both in terms of reason itself, e.g., when someone loses the use of reason, and in terms of the appetitive power, e.g., when someone loses the human affection according to which a man is naturally a friend to every man, as is said in Ethics 8. Now the insanitas which shuts off the use of reason is opposed to prudence. But when someone takes delight in punishing a man, this is also called insanitas, because in this way it is indicated that he is devoid of the human affection upon which mercy follows.

Insanitas is here divided into that which consists in the loss of the use of reason and that which consists in the absence of the affection that ought to be operative. Cognitive and appetitive insanitas are brought together in a discussion of how reason can be unseated by violent passion. Reason can be overcome through a certain bodily change by which reason is in a way fettered, nor is free to go forth into its act, even as sleep or drunkenness, owing to some change worked on the body, fetter the use of reason. And that this takes place in the passions is clear from the fact that sometimes when passions are very intense a man completely loses the use of reason; for many have lapsed into insanity on account of an abundance of love or anger.

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be false because he was incapable of understanding them" ("maxime amoenitatem esse idioti qui ca qua a philosophorum propositura falsa esse asserent propter hoc quod ea capere non potest").

87 ST 2-2.157.3 ad 3 (10:269): "insanitas dictur per corruptionem sanitatis. Sicut autem saniitas corporalis corruptur per hoc quod corpus reddit a debita componitae humanae speciei, sua etiam insanitas secundum animam accipitur per hoc quod anima humana reddit a debita dispositio humanae speciei. Quod quidem contingit et secundum rationem, puta et aliquid usum ratiocinis admittit: et quantum ad vim appetivam, puta ad aliquid admitter affectum humanum, secundum quem 'homo naturaliter est omni homini amicus,' ut dictur in VIII Ethic. Insanitas autem quae exclusit usum ratiocinis, oppositor prudentiae. Sed quod aliqua delectetur in poenam hominum, dictur esse insanitas, quia per hoc videtur homo privatus affecto humano, quem sequitur clementia."

88 The same division between an excessus in the apprehensive part of the soul and an excessus in the appetitive part appears in Thomas’s treatment of estasis (ST 1-2.28.3) and raptus (ST 2-2.175.2).

89 ST 1-2.77.2 (7.63): "per quandam immutacionem corporalem, ex qua ratio quoadammodo ligatur, ne libere in actu exeat: sicut etiam somnus vel ebrietas, quandam corporali transmutatione facta, ligant usum ratiocinis. Et quod hoc contingat in passionibus, putet ex hoc quod ali-
Recalling that Thomas welcomes Aristotle’s metaphor of reason as ruler or king within the soul, one appreciates why a massive bodily immutatio or transmutation at the level of the passions, amounting to a violent revolution in the soul’s government, can result in the weakening or obliteration of reason’s rulership. If Thomas is no dualist, he nevertheless underscores the duality of possible human nature and the resultant possibility of one or the other “nature” holding sway: sometimes a man’s whole soul is uniformly, as it were, sensualized or intellectualized, “because either the sensitive part is totally subjected to reason, as occurs in the virtuous, or on the contrary reason is totally absorbed by passion, as happens in those who have gone mad.”

This alarming situation is a more intensified form of something quite ordinary, namely, the “fettering” of reason during sleep. Aquinas sees a likeness between dreaming and madness: “in us deception occurs, properly speaking, according to [the faculty of] phantasia, through which we sometimes adhere to the likenesses of things as though they were the things themselves, as is clear in those who are sleeping or mad.” During sleep, reason, no longer magister acti regens, cedes first place to the imagination which is then free to roam unfettered. Truth and falsehood become strangely vague, place and time lose their logic, judgment turns unreliable, self-awareness (and the self-possesstion related to it) disintegrate. Something similar takes place in drink-

quando, cum passiones multum intendentur, homo amittit totaliter usum rationis: multi enim propser abundantiam amoris et irae, sunt in insaniam conversi. 90

90 Cf. ST 2-2.47.12 (8:360): “Regere autem et gubernare propste rationis est. Et ideo unusquisque inquantum participat de regime et gubernatione, itantum conveniet sibi habere rationem et prudientiam.”

91 Cf. ST 1-2.56.4 ad 3 and 58.2.

92 Cf. ST 1-2.77.1 (7:68): “passio quandoque quidem est tanta quod totaliter auffert usum rationis, sicut patet in his qui propter amoris vel irae insaniant.”

93 ST 1-2.10.3 ad 2 (6:88): “cum in homine duae sint natuæ, intellectuæ scilicet et sensiva, quandoque quidem est homo aliquis uniformiter secundum totum animam: quia sic intelleget vel pars sensitiva totaliter subicitur rationi, sicut contingit in virtutibus; vel e converso ratio totaliter absorbetur a passione, sicut accidit in amantibus.”

94 ST 1.54.5 (5:53): “deception autem in nobis propriè fit secundum phantasmam, per quam interdum similudinibus rerum inhaeremus sicut rebus ipsis, ut patet in dormientibus et in amantibus.” This is said in contrast to the metaphorical way in which perverse phantasia is attributed to the demons: “phantasia protivara attribuitur daemonsibus, ex eo quod habent falsam practicam existimationem de vero bono.” Thomas often quotes Dionysius’s statement that evil in the demons is threefold: “furor irrationalis, demens concupiscientia et fantasia protéura” (DM 16.1 obj. 3 [23:279-275-7]), sometimes substituting the phrase “concupiscientia amoris” for the second, as at Quaesitones disputatue de potencia (DP) 6.6 obj. 3 (Marietti, 172a). In the DP he replies (Marietti, 176a): “Utur autem metaphors nomine furor is et concupiscientia pro voluntate inordinata, et nomine phantasiae pro intellectu errante in eligendo.”

95 For a philosophical account of what is occurring in the dream-state, see F.-X. Maquart, “Le rêve et l’extase mystique: Étude philosophique et théologique,” Études carmélitaines 17.1 (1932): 41-81, esp. 47 ff. Maquart explores Thomas’s account of the suspension during sleep of the normal functioning of the sensus communis and the vis cogitativa; the unfettering of the imagination, the loss of free will and the collapse of truthful reasoning. In the dream-state, “l’exubérante activité de l’imagination trouve le champ libre et impose, par suite de l’abdi-

96 Children, too, are said to be lacking the full use of reason; hence we find texts that compare the mad and frantic to them. With children, of course, there is no question of another power taking over, but rather of a power, reason, that has not yet taken charge in nature’s due course. Cf. ST 2-2.88.9 obj. 1 and ST 3.68.12 obj. 2.

97 ST 1-2.77.1 (7:64): “Impedimentum enim iudicium et apprehensionis rationis propter vehementem et inordinatam apprehensionem imaginacionis, et judicium virtutis aestimativa ut pater in amantibus.”

98 Sent. VII Ethic. 3 (47:392-177-93): “aliquando enim est habitus solutus, ut statim possit esse in actum cum homo voluerit; aliquando autem est habitus figatur in quod non possit esse

ing beyond sobriety, or in getting worked up into amorous passion or seething anger: in such cases, too, the rulership of reason is thrown down while some inferior power takes charge. For Aquinas, imagination has disconcerting potential: “the judgment and apprehension of reason, as well as the judgment of the estimative power, can be obstructed owing to a vehement and disordered apprehension of the imagination, as is clear in madmen.” A sleeping or drunken or raging man’s habits, like those lingering to little purpose in a madman’s soul, are not ready to go into act:

Sometimes a habit is so responsive that it can go into act immediately when a man wishes. But other times the habit is so bound that it cannot go into act. Hence in one sense a man seems to have a habit and in another sense not to have it, as is evident in one sleeping, a maniac, or a drunkard. Men are disposed in this way when under the influence of the passions. For we see that anger, sexual desires, and certain passions of this kind obviously change not only the animal [i.e., psychic] motions but the external body, for example when the body gets heated up by them. And sometimes these passions grow to such an extent that they lead people to madness. And so it is plain that the in-

peticulars.”
Accordingly, bad things done by sleeping, furious, amorous, or drunk men, once they have passed well into their conditions of amentia, can no longer be imputed to them as free agents responsible for their deeds. The active role of reason being suppressed, there is no willing of the deed: to fall beneath reason is to fall beneath responsibility. At the peak of amentia, one cannot even speak of continence or incontinence, because the very judgment of reason, in comparison with which the conqueror of passion is called continent and the vanquished incontinent, ceases to be present to the mind. A reason chained in actum, unde quodammodo videtur habere habitum et quodammodo non habere, sicut patet in dormienti vel manicaco aut etiam ebrius. Et hoc modo sunt dispositi homines dum sunt in passionibus; videmus enim quod inre et concupiscientiae venerateorem et quaedam huiusmodi passiones manifestae transmutent et corpus extirpis et non solum animales motus, puta cum ex his incalxset corpus; et quandoque tantum increasent huiusmodi passiones quod quosdam in insanias deducunt. Et sic manifestum est quod incontinentes simul inventoris dormientis, aut maniacis aut ebriosis, quod quiclibet habebit habitum scientiae practicse in singularibus ligatum. As usual, Thomas allows bodily changes a wide range of influence; a disturbance of passion can be so strong as to obstruct altogether the use of reason (cf. ST 1-2.10.3). See also the texts in nn. 99–101.

99 ST 2-2.154.5 (10:229): "id quod aptit homo dormiens, qui non habet liberum iudicium rationis, non imputatur ei ad culpam: sicut nec illud quod aptit furious aut amens." Similarly, women who are taken advantage of by men owing to being asleep, drunk, or mentally unstable are guiltless, unless beforehand they intended this to occur: JH Sent. 33.31 ad 6. Cf. ST 1-2.886 ad 2. As Thomas always points out when treating of culpable vs. non-culpable ignorance, a person is responsible for placing himself in a situation known to be likely to weaken the use or judgment of reason.

100 Cf. ST 1-2.6.7 ad 3 (6:62): "si concupiscientia totaliter cognitionem alterreter, sicut contingit in illis qui propter concupiscientiam flunt amens, sequeretur quod concupiscientia voluntarium tolleret." The direct proportion between concupiscence and involuntariness explains how culpability for a particular act may be diminished: DM 3.9 (238:87–208–21): "ex aliqua corporal transmutatione ligatur usus rationis, ut vel totaliter nihil considerer unde quod non liber considerare possit, sicut patet in dormientibus et freneticis. Per passions autem fit aliqua immutatio circa corpus, etsi quod interium aliq propter iram vel concupiscitetur etsi aliquan huiusmodi passionem in insaniam inciderint. Et ido, quando huiusmodi passiones sunt fortes, per ipsum transmutationem corporalem ligant quodammodo rationem ut liberum iudicium de particularibus agendis non habet. Et sic nihil habetur aliquo scirem secundum habitum et in uniusclare, per infirmitatem pecare." Relying on the same principle, Thomas maintains in Quodlibet. 2-13.12 ad 2 (25:286.68–84) that the guilt incurred by a badly-formed conscience is obviated by madness. Cf. ST 1-2.76.3 ad 3.

101 ST 2-2.156.1 (10:259): "Sic vero passiones adaeque inessent quod totaliter asserent usum rationis, sicut accidit in his qui propter vehementiam passionum amens incurrenc, non remaneant ratio continentia neque incontinentiae: quia non salvatur in eis judicium rationis, quod continent servat et incontinentes desertit." Thus, in an objection against the insane, which argues that since they lack the use of reason their intention can only be disordered (ST 3.6.12 obj. 1), the mistake is easy to see: if there is no use of reason, there is, morally speaking, no intention at all. Hence Thomas responds that, provided the person has made no indication to the contrary, the Church's intention suflices and may substitute for their lack of intention.

down by some other force can no longer perform its function as interior standard or light.

While sexual desire is an obvious instance of a passion whose excessive vehement can lead to mental breakdown or the loss of one's mind, ira (anger) and furor (raging, wrath, rancor) also hold a prominent place among the causes by which reason is overthrown and some degree of amentia suffered. Appealing to Seneca, Thomas writes that "other more vehement passions lead man away from right reason more than desire for pleasures of touch, like fear of deadly dangers, which stupify man, and anger, which is like insanity."102 Seeking to prove that anger is the most grievous of sins, an objector argues that "anger is most of all harmful, because it draws man away from reason, through which man is lord of himself; for Chrysostom says that 'anger differs in no way from madness; it is a demon while it lasts, indeed more troublesome than one harassed by a demon.'"103 Although Thomas does not agree that it is most grievous in itself (hatred of the good and envy at the good are, ceteris paribus, worse sins), he grants that anger has a peculiar imputativeness, a strength and quickness of movement, by which it is capable of overwhelming a man, getting the better of his reason: "owing to anger especially, some have fallen into fury and insanity, which pertain to folly."104 Anger skewers judgment: "Gregory says that what is right seems perverse to a mind drunk with fury."105 Because they could not tolerate insults, Alcibiades put up a good fight, the great-souled Achilles went mad from anger, fearing nothing, and Ajax killed himself.106 Intense anger can give rise to a fearlessness somewhat like the rare vice of impaviditas, which Thomas, following Aristotle, associates with insanity and even with an entire nation: "It does not happen except in insane persons or in some who lack the sense of pain that they should fear
nothing—say neither earthquakes nor floods nor other such things, as is said
to happen in those who are called Celts, which is the name of a people.” 107
Similarly, a man who is unmoved by injuries done to himself is either a
mighty lover of God or thoroughly witless:

To be unmoved when one is injured is sometimes due to the fact that one has
no taste for worldly things, but only for heavenly things. Hence this belongs
not to worldly stupidity but to divine wisdom, as Gregory says. Sometimes,
though, it is the result of a man’s being simply stupid about everything, as
may be seen in madmen, who do not discern what is injurious to them, and
this belongs to folly simply. 108

At various places Thomas, following Aristotle, Gregory of Nyssa, and
Damascene, distinguishes the different kinds of anger, which will permit us to
discern their relationship to madness. There is an anger that is quickly aroused
(fel or fella), an anger that lingers over wrongs (mania), and an anger that
rages until it has taken revenge (furor), each presupposing the former and
going beyond it, each one step further from a rational frame of mind:

The three kinds of anger posited by Damascene as well as Gregory of Nyssa
are taken from those things that cause anger to increase. This happens in three
ways. In one way, from facility of the movement itself; and such anger he calls
fel, because it is quickly aroused. In another way, on the part of the grief that
causes anger, which lingers some time in the memory; and this pertains to
mania, which is derived from manere. Thirdly, on the part of that which the
angry man seeks, viz., vengeance; and this pertains to furor, which never rests
until it punishes. Hence the Philosopher (Ethics 4) calls some angry persons
acuti [cholerics, akrocholoi], because they are easily angered; some he calls
amaris [bitter, pikrois], because they retain their anger for a long time; and some
he calls difficiles [ill-tempered, chaleptoi], because they never rest until they
have punished. 109

As we are dealing here with different sets of terminology—one from a
Latin version of the Nicomachean Ethics, another from translations of the
Eastern Fathers, with a dose of confusion from medieval Latin’s fluidity—the
terms tend to be interchangeable in meaning and application, as Thomas recog-
nizes.110 Whether or not he succeeds in classifying the species of anger
given by the auctoritates, what is more relevant at present is his observation
that wrath or rage (furor) means ira accensa, anger kindled to a blazing
pitch.111 Just as “zeal implies an intensity of love,” so furor implies “an
intensity of anger,”112 and as jealousy for the beloved can make a lover go mad, fur-
or has power to throw the vengeful into amentia. Scripture may use the name
of “wrath” to signify metaphorically God’s unerring justice,113 but an ethicist
uses it to name the condition of a man beside himself with irascible passion,
which is deadly for the order of reason: “that man perishes in wrath of soul
who, on account of his wrath, cuts out wisdom and justice, which are the
soul’s chief goods.” 114

By allowing reason and its goods of wisdom and justice to be thwarted, the
furious man abandons what distinguishes him from and places him over the

vel in aliquo qui non habet sensum doloris, quod scilicet nihil timeat, putatque suae terrae motum
neque inundaciones neque aliquid taliun, scit dicitur accedere quidbuis qui vocantur
Celtae, quod est nomen gentis.”

108 ST 2.2.46.1 ad 4 (8:345): “non moveri inuriatis quandoque quidem contingit ex hoc quod
hominis, non sapiunt nove, sed sola cælestia. Unde hoc non pertinet ad stultitiam mundi, sed
ad sapientiam Dei, ut Gregorius ibidem dicit. Quandoque autem contingit ex hoc quod homo
est simpliciter circa omnia stupidos; ut patet in amicitias, qui non discernunt quid sit inaniura.
Et hoc pertinet ad stultitiam simpliciter.”

109 ST 1.2.46.8 (6:298–99): “tres species irae quos Damascenus poni, et etiam Gregorius
Nyssenus, summantur secundum quae dant irae aliquod augmentum. Quod quidem contingit
tripliciter. Uno modo, ex facilitate Ipsius motus: et tale iram vocat fel, quia cito acceditur.
Allo modo, ex parte tristitiae causantis iram, quae diu in memoria maneat: et haec pertinet ad
mania, quae a manendo dicitur. Tertio, ex parte eius quod iratus appellat, scilicet vindictae: et


111 Sent. III. Sent. 26.1.3 (822, §45): “furor autem intensionem irae.”

112 Super Lib. 3 (26.26.549–54): “Et quoniam innocens sin tamen venit super me indignatio,
ideo poena a Deo—ira enim in Deo non accipitur pro commutacione animi sed pro punitio-
tione—in quo non recogissent adversitates huius mundi non abscindit divino putatur.” 

irrational animals,²¹⁵ becoming like a beast dominated by its instinctive passions:

For nothing prevents something which is good in a particular manner from being called “bad” with respect to a certain nature, insofar as it is opposed to the perfection of the nobler nature; just as to be raging is a certain good with respect to a [watch-dog], but an evil with respect to man who has reason. Nevertheless it is possible that there should be in man, according to his sensible and corporeal nature which he shares with brutes, a certain inclination to raging, which is evil for man.²¹⁶

Corresponding inversely to the ways human nature can be elevated by grace to a sharing of the divine life (deificatio) are the various ways man can fall beneath his humanity into a bestial or brutish life. A barbaric or “rude” manner of life fomented by a lack of reasonable laws is one way of becoming generally brutish, although not necessarily to a very great extent; an uncontrolled eruption of feelings, for example in mourning the dead, is another and more transient way to become less than human; immense growth in vice is yet another, and certainly the worst, for which reason we disgrace the vicious by calling them “beasts” or “monsters” who “bear within their human bodies the heart of a beast.”²¹⁷ As the *De Regno* teaches about tyrants: “A man governing without reason according to the lust of his soul in no way differs from a beast. . . Men therefore hide from tyrants as from cruel beasts, and it seems that to be subject to a tyrant is the same thing as to lie prostrate beneath a raging beast.”²¹⁸ Man becomes brutal or bestial whenever and to the extent that the order of reason, by which he is constituted in his natural dignity, is lost. It is in this way that any sinful act, whether of anger, lust, gluttony, pride, or some other vice, can rightly be described as “subhuman” behavior which, if sufficiently grave and repeated often enough, leads at last to a bestial character for which living beneath or below reason has become conatural, a “second nature.” Such a man is then called, by way of opprobrium, a dog, a pig, a bear, or whatever beast he is most like. Commenting on Aristotle’s notion of bestial vice, Thomas argues that the harmony of human affections can be perverted in such a way that it does not go beyond the limits of a human life (and this is incontinence or human wickedness, comparable to a sickness from which one can naturally recover), or it can be altogether corrupted, so that it goes beyond the limits of a human life, “in likeness to the desires of some brute animal, say a lion, bear, or pig, and this is what is called brutishness. And it is just as if the make-up of a man’s body had been changed into the make-up of a lion or a pig.”²¹⁹ If the sinner’s evil-doing grows to the point where it gravely violates or jeopardizes the common good of society, he cedes his right to be a protected member of the political community. Civil authorities may, and sometimes must, deal with him as with a dangerous animal, “for a bad man is worse than a beast and is more harmful.”²²⁰

²¹⁵ ST 2-2.47.6 obj. 2 (8.353): “Præterea, homo excedit res irrationales secundum rationem, sed secundum alia cum eis communicat. Sic igitur se habent uliae partes hominis ad rationem sicut se habet homo ad creaturas irrationales. Sed homo est finis creaturarum irrationium ut dictur in 1 Politic. Ergo omnes uliae partes hominis ordinantur ad rationem sicut ad finem.” Thomas does not dispute this part of the objection.

²¹⁶ De substantiis separatis 20 (40.D77.79–88): “nihil enim prohibet aliquod quod est particularior bonum alii aut naturae, in tantum dicitur in quantum regunt perfectioni nobilianis in biblioribus naturae, sicut fariusque esse quoddam bonus est cani, quod tamen malum est homini rationem habenter: possibile tamen est in homine secundum sensibilibet et corpoream naturam in qua cum brutis communicat, esse quodnam inclinationem ad furem qui est hominem malum.” Comparable is “Thomas’s assertion at ST 1-2.55.3 ad 2 that a lower power can be “perfect” in vice, even though such a perfection is evil simply speaking with respect to human nature, and hence cannot be called a *virus humana*.”

²¹⁷ Sent. VII Ethic. 1 (47.380–81.62–74): “uno igitur modo potest contingere perversitas in tali consonantia ut quod non exeatur extra limites humanae vitae et tunc dicetur simpliciter incontinentia vel malitia humana, sicut et aptitudinis hominum corporalibus in qua salvari potest natura humana; alio modo potest corrumpi contemporanea humanarum affectionum ita quod progradiat ultra limites humanae vitae in similitudinem affectionum alienus bestiae, puta leonis, urae aut porci, et hoc est quod vocatur bestialitas et est simile sicut si ex parte corporis complexio aliacis mutaretur in complexionem leoninam vel porcinam.”

²¹⁸ ST 2-2.62.4 ad 2 (9.68): “homo peccando ab ordine rationis recedit: et ideo decidunt a dignitate humana, prout scilicet homo est naturaliter liber et proprium seipsum existimus, et incidit quodammodo in servitute bestiam, ut scilicet de ipso ordinatur secundum quod est utile aliis; secundum illud Psalm. ‘Homo, cum in honore esset, non intellectus comparatur aequi iustitiae;’ et Prov. xi 12 dicuntur: ‘Qui stultus est servit ispexit. ’ Et ideo quamvis hominem in suam dignitatem manentem occidere sit secundum se malum, tamen hominum pecorem occidere potest esse hominem, sicut occidere bestiam: peior enim est malus homo bestia, et plus nocet, ut Philosophus dicit, in 1 Polit. et VII Ethic.” Lest one come away with the impression that Thomas is eager to see the death penalty enacted, one should note, first, that he speaks of sins serious enough to make someone fit to be treated as a wild beast, evidently citing of the first magnitude, and second, that he says it can be good (“potent esse bonum” to punish such criminals with death, even as it is necessary at times to kill a rabid animal that threatens to injure people. See SCG 3.144 and ST 2-2.64.1–2; cf. ST 2-2.10.8, 11.3, and 25.6 ad 2.
A glutton whose belly is his god seems to be afflicted with a kind of madness that pushes him well past the bounds of nature. As Thomas explains in the commentary on the *Ethics*, “nature desires nothing except that needs be supplied; hence that someone should take [food or drink] beyond need is an excess beyond nature. And thus such people are called belly-mad (gaster-margs), from gastir meaning belly and margos meaning raving or insanity, as if they had a raving or insane stomach, because they stuff nature beyond need.”

The gluttony that appears to be localized in mouth, throat, and stomach turns its disorder back upon the man, transforming his soul into the interior image of what he does externally. A raving stomach produces in due course a raving man; this is why a lesser vice like gluttony is said to lead invariably to vices that are worse, more interior and more corruptive. This reciprocal likeness and causality between flesh and spirit, much dwelled upon by moralists such as Gregory the Great, is grounded in a keen appreciation of the intimate union of body and soul, whereby each acts upon and mirrors the other:

According to the order of nature, on account of the tying-together of the powers of the soul in one essence and of the soul and body in one being of the composite, the higher and the lower powers, and even the body and the soul, let flow from one to the other whatever superabounds in any one of them; and hence it is that from the apprehension of the soul the body is changed with regard to heat and cold, and sometimes even to the extent of health and sickness and even to death; for it does happen that a person meets with death from joy or sorrow or love. And hence it is that there occurs in the glorified body an overflowing of the very glory of the soul . . . and contrariwise, a change of the body overflows into the soul. For a soul joined to the body imitates its make-up in point of madness or docility and other such things, as is said in the *Book of Six Principles*.

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112 Sent. III Ethic. 20 (47:185.136-42): “natura enim non concupiscit nisi quod suppleatur indigentia, unde quod aliquis assumat ultra indigentiam est excessus supra naturam. Et ideo tales sicutur gastrumargi, a gastir, quod est venter, et margos, quod est furor vel insania, quasi furo vel insania ventris, quia scilicet implant naturam praeber indigentiam.”

113 In this connection one might recall a popular patristic and monastic genre, the treatise on the seven deadly sins (influential in Thomas’s structuring of the *De malo*), which typically emphasizes the connection between lesser fleshly sins and greater spiritual ones, showing how the former when indulged initiate a downward spiral into the latter.

114 Df 26.10 (22:784.162-81): “secundum naturam ordinem, propter colgiantiam virium animae in una essentia et animae et corporis in uno esse compositi, vires superiores et inferiores, et etiam corpus et anima invicem in se effluent quod in alio eorum superabundat; et inde est quod ex apprehensione animae transmutatur corpus secundum calorem et frigus, et quandoque etiam usque ad sanitatem et aegritudinem et usque ad mortem; contingit enim alium ex gaudio vel tristitia vel amore mortem incurrere. Et inde est quod ex ipsa gloria animae fit redundantia in corpus glorificentum . . . et similiter est e convo, quod transmutatio

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On Jesus’ words “we piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep” (Luke 7:32), Thomas quotes Gregory of Nyssa: “Singing and lamentation are nothing else but an excess, the one of joy, the other of sorrow. Now, a certain harmonious melody resounds from a musical instrument in such a way that when a person is moved to tap his foot and make a fitting movement in his body he shows his internal response to the music.”

In spite of his critique of astrological determinism, Thomas willingly grants that men who have lost something of their self-possession and self-rulership by living immersed in their passions are that much more likely to be swayed and moved by celestial influences, making them more akin to animals driven by instinctive appetites than men living by reason and will.

Nevertheless, as tempering words like *quasi* and *sicut* indicate, it would be false to think that insanity, regardless of its magnitude, actually strips away reason and leaves a person mindless, no more than a beast. As long as a man remains alive, he must be living by and through the rational soul, even if its higher powers are fettered. Thomas is careful to point out that “those who are frantic or mad lack the use of reason *per accidens*, i.e., owing to some impediment in a bodily organ, and not, like irrational animals, owing to the lack of a rational soul.” However much the shining of the light of reason may be

corporis in animam redundat. Anima enim coniuncta corporis eius complexiones imitatur secundum amentiam vel dici et alia haud insana, ut dictor in libro sex principiorum.”

115 *Glossa continua super Evangelia, seu Catena aurea in quattuor Evangelia* (CA) Lac. 1, §5 (Marietti, 2:103): “Canticum autem et lamentatio nil aliud est quam excessus, hoc quidem gaudii, ille vero morositatis. Resonat autem quaedam consors melodia ex organo musicno, secundum quam dum homo pede et motu consors corporis commovetur, intrinsencom dispositionem manifestat, et ideo dicit [carnivorus vobis tibiis, et non salistis; lamentavimus, et non ploratis.”

116 SCC 3.85 (14:256, Scenendum): “Interdum etiam ex corporebus caelestibus actu manu incusatur inquantum ex indispositione corporis aliquo amente efficiuntur, usus rationis privati. In quibus proprie electo non est, sed noventur aliquo naturallo instinctu, sicut et bruta. Manifystum autem est, et experimento cognitum, quod tales occasiones, sive sint exteriore, sive sint interiora, non sint causa necessaria electionis: cum homo per rationem possit ei resistere vel obediere. Sed plures sunt qui impetus naturales sequuntur, pauciores autem, sicut etc alii sequi solemnes, qui occasiones male ageinti et naturales impetus non sequuntur.” Thomas opines that the heavenly bodies exercise a physical influence on all sublunar bodies, and he extends this causality even to the body of Christ prior to the resurrection: ST 3.12.4 ad 3. In several places Thomas mentions “lunatics” and discusses the extent to which their behavior is caused by the lunar cycle. *Super Matt.* 4, n.392 (Marietti, 60): “Lunatici propriae dicuntur qui patiuntur infirmitates cuiusdam amentiae in defectu lunae”; cf. *Super Matt.* 17 n.1458 (Marietti, 222): “lunaticus proprius est qui secundum statum lunae alienatur.”

117 ST 3.68.12 ad 2 (12:105): “furiosi vel amentes carent usus rationis per acciddem, sicut propter aliquo impeditamentum organis corporalis, non autem proprius defectum animae rationis, sicut bruta animalima.” This is in reply to an objection: “Præterea, homo bruta animalima superexcedit in hoc quod habet rationem. Sed furiosi et amentes non habent usum rationis, et quandoque etiam in eis non expectatur, sicut expectatur in puero”—an argument that clearly
dimmed by impediments in the lower powers, the human soul can never be deprived of this light, since it pertains to the very nature of the rational soul.  

Insanity is not always a condition into which a previously sane man falls or lapses on account of excessive passion, a massive bodily change like getting struck in the head, or a corrupt way of life. Some are simply born in the condition of not having the use of reason, and their lack of reasoning ability, in no way their own fault, cannot be accounted brutishness. At three places in his works, the context identical (whether the sacraments should be given to the mentally disturbed or handicapped), Thomas draws a distinction de amentibus: “certain ones are called ‘mindless’ in a broad sense, because they have a weak mind, just as something can be called invisible which is but poorly seen; and nevertheless they are in some way teachable. . . Certain others, on the contrary, are altogether lacking the judgment of reason, and these were either such from birth . . . or they [later] fell into madness.” Another text adds a nuance: among those who are mentally unsound either from birth or from a later sickness, some have never had lucid intervals, while others do have lucid intervals.  

Nor should we think that madness is caused only by physical factors (the bodily indispositions or vehement passions so often mentioned), for some have lapsed into madness “by the exercise of spiritual operations.” As they were no strangers to vice, the medievals were no strangers to mental illness. William of Auvergne gives numerous examples of unfortunates who come to believe that they are Christ, the Holy Spirit, or Antichrist. Less loftily, Jean Gerson claims that he knew a

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127 St. 2-2.15.1 (8:18): “Et hoc lumen [scil. lumen naturalis rationis], cur pertinat ad speciem animae rationalis, nunquam privatur ab anima. Impeditur tamen quandoque a proprio actu per impedimenta virtutem inferiorum, quibus indiget intellectus humanus ad intelligentiam, sicut patet in amentibus et furiis.”  

128 IV Sent. 9.5.3 (396, §195-96): “Quidam enim dicuntur largae amentiae, qua debillem mentem habent, sicut dictur invisible quod male videtur; et tamen sunt aliquo modo dociles. . . Quidam vero sunt omnino carentes judicio rationis; et isti vel fuerunt tales a nativitate . . . vel inciderunt in amentiam.”  

129 IV Sent. 4.1.1.3 (184, §211-12). Cf. ST 3.68.12 (12:105): “circa amentes et furiosos est distinguendum. Quidam enim sunt a nativitate tales, nulla habentis lucida intervalla, in quibus etiam nullus usus rationis apparat. . . Alii vero sunt amentes qui ex sana mente quam habuerunt prius, in amentiam inciderunt. . . Quidam vero sunt qui, etsi a nativitate fuerint furiosi et amentes, habent tamen aliquam lucida intervalla, in quibus recta ratione uti possunt.”  

130 II Sent. 22.2.2 (561): “et ita post sequens peccatum ex toto excusaret, ut patet in his qui exercito spiritualium operationum in amentiam vertuntur.”

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learned man of science who thought he was a rooster, and even sang like one. He fled into the woods, not to be heard from again. Another individual believed he had grown a horn on his forehead; others thought they had feet of iron (and stomped around), while still others thought they had feet of glass (and were afraid to walk). The ancients supplied a famous example, Cratylus, who, feeling that stability of reference is impossible if all things are in flux, “finally arrived at such dementia,” says Thomas, “that he thought that he should not express anything in words, but in order to express what he wanted he would only move his finger.” It is fitting at this point to recall Reginald’s anxieties when Thomas hung up his writing tools after the mystical experience of 6 December 1273. Bartholomew of Capua relates that the soccita urged his Master to continue, fearing he might have lost his mind from too much study (“timens ne propter multum studium aliquam incurritus amentiam”). The many kinds of infirmitas rationis or insania secundum animam have this much in common: “irrationality and madness, fury and concupiscence, imply a divergence of the will from right judgment of intellect or reason.” In the end, it is exactly this lack of reason, this weakening or loss of it when it should be operative, that makes the condition of amentia such a horrible thing, little different from death: It seems that some transformation can happen to a virtuous man that would altogether take away his happiness by completely hindering the operation of

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132 In Metaphys. 4.12 n.684 (Marietti, 188): “Et haec opinione habitu Cratylus, qui ad ultimum ad hanc dementia devinit, quod opinatus est quod non oportebat aliquid verbo dicere, sed ad exprimendum quod volebat, movet in solum digitum.”  


134 II Sent. 7.2.1 ad 1 (187): “Irrationalitas autem et amentia, furor et concupiscencia important obliquitatem voluntatis a recto judicio intellectus vel rationis.” The desperate words of Ophelia over Hamlet’s apparent mental collapse are a perfect poetic summary of Aquinas’ views on the subject: e.g. Hamlet III.1.159-61, as given in The Complete Works, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York, 1977). Notice the emphasis on Hamlet’s being “quite, quite down,” reminiscent of Thomas’s speaking at ST 1-2.28.3 of bad cognitive status as a depresso.
drinking too much wine, which indicates a moral failing, or from suffering a fever, which does not. One might be born with a mental disability or one might lapse into it as a result of violent passion. The “absence of mind” brought on by anger or gluttony, jealousy or lust, admits of as many degrees of intensity as the passion that causes it; the ensuing behavior can range from something trivial, say forgetting one’s table manners, to something terrible, falling into beastliness. Hence, to state accurately what it means to “go out of one’s mind,” one must always take note of the kinds, causes, and degrees of *excessus mentis.* Reasoning is more impeded in the insane than in the sleeping. 139 By recognizing that concupiscence is more natural to man than fury, and certainly more natural than drunkenness, one would be inclined to judge it more leniently. A further indication of the difference between desire and drunkenness would be the latter’s guaranteed consequence, the loss of the use of reason, which is by no means a necessary consequence of the former.140 Similarly, a habit of getting drunk is worse than gluttony, because the matter with which sobriety is concerned—drink that can inebriate and, as Thomas puts it, mix up the head on account of its volatility, *famositas—is of its nature more potent than other food and drink, and so deserving of special care. A measured use of drink brings strength, while excess brings harm, because it hinders the use of reason.141

**EXCESSUS AND OTHERNESS**

As can be gathered from the root word *ex-cedere* and its uses, *excessus* always implies a comparison, proportion, or relation: one thing must be in excess of another, or the same thing must be somehow in excess of itself. We can understand this point better by considering for a moment an Aristotelian concept likewise embedded in multiplicity and reliant on proportion, *dynamis.*142 Having distinguished the various meanings of *dynamis* in *Metaphysics*

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135 *Sent. I Ethic.* 16 (47:59.148-56): “Videtur tamen alicuia transmutatione virtutis possit accidere, quae omnino auserit eius felicitatem impediendo totali operationem virtutis puta si per nigrutinem, manum vel fumum seu quamcumque amentiam incurrit. Sed, cum felicitas non quaeatur nisi in vita humana, quae est secundum rationem, deficientie usus rationis deficiet talis vita, unde status amentiae repripiat est quantum ad vitam humanam sicut status mortis.”

136 Mary F. Rousseau, “Elements of a Thomistic Philosophy of Death,” *The Thomist* 43 (1979): 581-602. Prescinding from supernatural assistance, separated souls are “diminished knowers, diminished lovers, diminished images of God” who “could well make their own the words with which the shade of Achilles greeted Odysseus: ‘How did you find your way down to the dark where these dim-witted dead are camped forever, the after-images of used-up men?’” (ibid., 599). For a more optimistic interpretation, see Patrick Quinn, “The Relationship Between Human Transcendence and Death in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas,” *Milltown Studies* 25 (1990): 63-75.

137 This connection to death takes on a new significance in light of the ways in which death, the dying to self demanded by love of God and neighbor, is involved in the Christian life. The *extasis* of the moral and spiritual life is not itself a death, for it is not corruptive, but it presupposes the death of what Aristotle would call ignoble self-love and St. Paul, the old man.

138 According to Thomas, there are times when it is virtuous for man to live—that is, to act or to permit activity—“outside of” or “beyond” reason; one might speak of moments of legitimate or praiseworthy unknowing, either by transcending reason in a hyperintensity of wakefulness or by falling beneath it or letting it be blocked in it in a kind of unconsciousness, swoon, or mist. Of the former, the noblest example of activity beyond reason would be the union of *agnosia* spoken of by Dionysius in the Mystical Theology or by the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing:* the very act of supernatural faith, the wayfarer’s uninterrupted dark night, shares the character of this union with the God who dwells in inaccessible light. Of the second kind of unknowing, evident examples are sleep and sexual intercourse (ST 1.2.18.9 ad 3, ST 2.2.179.2 ad 3). Thomas enunciates the broad principle that all operations that fulfill genuine needs of life belongs to the vita activa which provides for such needs by orderly actions; hence these actions are virtuous (ST 2.2.179.2 ad 3).

139 ST 3.68.12 obj. 3.

140 ST 2.12.150.4 ad 3 (10:189): “concopiscitentia non totaliter ligit rationem, sicut ebrietas, nisi forte sit tanta quod faciat hominem insanire.”

141 Cf. ST 2.2.1.49.1.

142 *Dynamis* is not unrelated to *extasis.* As Kevin Corrigan shows, for Aristotle *extasis* is always connected with change, whether it be perfective or corruptive, while ancient authors in general understand *extasis* to be connected with motion, the act of the potential as potential (“Ecstasy and Ectasy in Some Early Pagan and Christian Mystical Writings,” in *Greek and Me*
5.12, Aristotle concludes that “the proper definition of the primary kind of capacity [potency, ability] will be a source of change in another thing or in the same thing qua other” (1020a3–6). For example, an animal can move locally because one part of its body actually in motion is capable of moving another, as yet inactive, part capable of being acted upon (and for this reason, the animal body must be heterogeneous, constituted of various sorts of parts: flexible tissues, inflexible bones, etc.). More fundamentally, the animal as a whole is able to go from being at rest to being in motion because it is not simple but manifold: when stirred up by the cognition of an appetible object, the animal’s appetite, made to be in actu by the appetible in actu, is then the principle by which the resting members are brought from potency to act. Appetite is a source of change in the same thing qua other, since the diversity of the powers of appetite, of local motion, and of limbs enables one and the same animal to move itself from rest, and once in motion, to continue moving itself. In short, composition, multiplicity, or manifoldness is a basic prerequisite for the sort of dunameis found in things that are not, of their essence, simply in actu, that is, things whose being is pure actuality.

It is no different with the excessus whereby one and the same thing is said to exceed itself or to be outside of itself. Something can admit of excess or stand apart from itself to the extent that it is not simple but manifold, not al-

...
limits of its own natural life. Each is an excessus a propria natura, but the one is corruptive because it debases, making a man less or lower than he is by nature, whereas the other is perfective because it elevates, making him more or higher than he is by nature. Yet neither debasement nor elevation would be possible unless man were manifold, so that he could abandon the good of his better part for the good of the lower, or even, as it were, abandon the good of himself as a certain whole for the good of a whole better than himself, as when a citizen sacrifices his life for the common good of his people, or when a Christian relinquishes marriage, property, and self-determination so as to imitate and participate more perfectly in the life of Christ, who, being true God, is the common good of the human race and of the entire universe.\footnote{See Super I Cor. 12.3 n.753 (Marietti, 1.377): “Estis membra dependantia de Christo membro, quod quidem dicitur membrum secundum humanitatem, secundum quam praecepit dicunt ecclesiæ caput. Nam secundum divinitatem non habet rationem membris aut partibus, cum sit commune bonum totius universi.”} 

Although I have spoken here primarily of the excessus a seipso of the madman (to which correspond also a number of suggestive texts in Aquinas concerning the excessus mentis of the lover of God\footnote{For example, on extra in the life of St. Paul, see DV 13.5 corp. and 18.5 arg. 2 et ad 2; Super II Cor. 5.3 and 12.1; and ST 2.175.6. On ecstatic conditions of other holy men, see Super Heb. 12.3 (Isaac); Super Ps. 17, §11 (the Apostles); Super Ps. 32, §2 (being drunk with divine love); and Super Ps. 30, §§19 and 19 (David). On the mystical sleep of Adam during which Eve was formed, see DV 18.1 arg. 14 et ad 14 and 18.5 arg. 2 et ad 2; CA Matt. 19, §11, and Super Matt. 19.1. On extra as an effect of love, see n. 39 above.}, this notion cannot be restricted to human psychic or spiritual phenomena. The fact of metaphysical boundaries implied in the notion of excessus leads irresistibly to a further and more universal conclusion. Since composition of potency and act is found in every creature—whether, as among material things, composition of prime matter and the substantial form through which esse comes, or, as in the angels, composition simply of essentia and esse—the creature as such, in its finitude and non-eternity, expressions of its manifoldness, lives a continual excessus of self-displacement and dependency. Reflection on being in place or acting in a place, too, can illuminate creaturely extra. The extra that belongs to God is founded upon his ubiquity, whereas the creature’s extra is rooted in its singularity, its being contained under limits.\footnote{Hence, so far from being “ecstatic,” God’s metaphorical extra is, in terms of its effect, as much more perfect than the creature’s literal extra as his metaphorical working, desiring, or getting angry is, in terms of its effect, more perfect than the creature’s literal work, desire, or anger. None can work as ecstatically, desire as effectively, punish as thoroughly as God can do, precisely because he is not ecstatic, needy, or angry. This claim strictly parallels Thomas’s account of the difference between divine and creaturely knowledge and love (ST 1.14.8 ad 3 and 20.2). See also n. 165 below.} Extra taken strictly is as intrinsically connected with finitude as the divine extra of crea-

\footnote{See ST 1.8, esp. art. 2.} 

\footnote{The angels are ecstatic in their being and operations, but they exist outside of the worldly time that depends upon the motion of bodies.}

\footnote{ST 1.10.1 (4.94).}


\footnote{M.-D. Chenu, Faith and Theology, trans. Denis Hickey (New York, 1968), 120.}

\footnote{Throughout his The Metaphysics of Love (New York, 1962), Frederick D. Wilhelmsen develops Thomas’s idea that man is a being that has something of itself always outside itself; see esp. 23–24. Armand A. Maurer’s St. Thomas and Historicity (Milwaukee, 1979) also contains pertinent observations on this topic.}

tion is connected with infinity; and as one consequence of finitude is locative presence, so one consequence of infinity is omnipresence, which, far from depending on place, creates places for beings by the indivisible immanence of the causa essendi.\footnote{Di 1 Sent. 1.4.8 (124–25).} 

The question of the relationship between temporality and extra is more complicated.\footnote{However, this much can be said: temporality is an aspect of extra for temporal beings, whereas the eternity that is convertible with the divine being belongs uniquely to the divine extra, which is ontologically simple, as the definition of eternity well conveys: interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possesio.\footnote{I Sent. 1.10.1 (4.94).}} However, this much can be said: temporality is an aspect of extra for temporal beings, whereas the eternity that is convertible with the divine being belongs uniquely to the divine extra, which is ontologically simple, as the definition of eternity well conveys: interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possesio.\footnote{I Sent. 1.10.1 (4.94).} Explaining in his Sentences commentary why “He who is” is the name most proper to God, Thomas’s first argument appeals to the perfection of the divine esse:\footnote{I Sent. 1.10.1 (4.94).} 

For that is perfect of which there is nothing outside itself. But our being has something of it outside itself, for it is without something of itself which is now past, and something [else] which is in the future. In the divine being, however, nothing is either past or future; and therefore he has his whole perfect being, and on account of this, to him, speaking in regard to other things [i.e., other perfections], properly belongs being.\footnote{I Sent. 1.10.1 (4.94).} 

Consider M.-D. Chenu’s remark: “Time for the Hebrews, in the perspective of an organic progression and continuous maturing, is akin to a permanent creation, a continuous bringing to birth; it is described in the terminology of ‘generation.’”\footnote{From Thomas, Joseph Owens, and Existence,” The New Scholasticist 56 (1982): 399–441.} Creatures are always being born in time, are always changing for better or for worse. Their being now is always a being from the past towards the future. The creature is being shaped ahead of time, as it were, by the extra of the present moment which reaches into the future, and its having-been-shaped is the testimony it bears to the reality of the past which is now outside of the creature.\footnote{I Sent. 1.10.1 (4.94).} In Chenu’s words again, the creature’s “present

Note: The text contains a few errors in formatting and notation, such as missing symbols and characters. The content is generally coherent and discusses themes related to the nature, existence, and attributes of God, focusing particularly on the concept of 'extra' and its implications for both divine and creaturely existence.
has by no means the required intensity" to be the image of eternity, "and is not capable of even relative immobility... We fall back into time, into lived time, which soon becomes time lost and gone." Time "is a wound through which our life pours out." Wilhelmson sees the root of man's existential instability in the real composition of being and essence—a certain lack of self-identity implicit in being created, which makes the creature, in a sense, a stranger to itself:

Man is always estranged from his essential being. This estrangement forms human existence into a tension between being and non-being in all its "forms,... [W]e can say that existence is the situation in which we encounter our being as well as our non-being, ourselves as standing inside and outside of being. God, in whom there is no estrangement, transcends the essence-existence polarity. As the text from the Sentences teaches, it belongs to the being of the creature as such that it be, or have being, outside of itself, as regards its inherent finitude and its dependency on God who constitutes it in its perfections, of which esse is the first. Central to this dependency is the fundamental part to whole relationship of the creature vis-à-vis its intrinsic final end, the order of the universe, and its extrinsic final end, God. Being by its very nature part of a whole—more precisely, part of many concentric wholes—the creature is ordered to the whole not merely as to something superior to and in some sense constitutive of it but as to that which, in its very universality, is most causative of and integral to its own proper perfection. Motion, therefore, since it aims at attaining something not yet had, is proper to the creature and foreign to God. Thomas's comment on Aristotle's refutation of the possibility of an infinite body in motion is also relevant at the theological level: "the infinite supports, i.e., sustains, itself, because it is in itself and not in another, for nothing contains it; and so it cannot be moved outside itself." In general, the perfect or the infinite may be defined as "that outside of which there is nothing." The incompleteness and potentiality of the creature, on the other hand, is expressed in its concrete need, welling up from the exigency of its finite form, to go beyond itself towards objects of desire. "It cannot be said," we read in the De potentia, "that that which moves itself should desire nothing outside of itself, because [then it would never be moved—for motion is for the sake of acquiring something extrinsic in some way." All things other than God are in motion and thus are being moved (if we take motion broadly enough to include immanent activities of the perfect, such as operations of intellect and will), whereas God is not being moved but only moves others. He is not, except metaphorically speaking, "moved by love," whereas every-


162 *In Phys. 3.9, §7 (2:129b):* "Dixit enim quasi fulcit, ideo sustinet, infinitum sequitur, quia est in se et in aliis, cum nihil ipsum continent; et sic non possit extra se moveri." Given what the infinite is, it cannot be contained; since it is altogether uncontained, it is everywhere, containing everything; thus it cannot move to where it was not before, nor, in fact, is any motion at all possible, since motion requires a place *outside* of the mover to which it is moving, and the infinite, as infinite, occupies all places. In short, the infinite is self-sufficient ("supports or sustains itself") because it is "in itself and not in another." The same argument can, with due modification, be made concerning God's infinity of esse.

163 *Compendium theologiae* 1.56 (42:99–104): "perfectum est extra quod nihil est." The source of this statement is *Physics* 3, "infinitum est extra quod nihil est," which prompts Thomas in his commentary to explain the relationship between infinitum, perfectum, and totum (*In Phys. 3.11*). In the commentary on the De caelo, the notion of "extra quod nihil est" appears several times, e.g., *In De caelo* 1.3, §1 (3:9b): "antiqui dixerunt infinitum esse extra quod nihil est;" ibid., §4 (3:140b): "perfectum dicetur esse illud extra quod nihil est acquirit eorum quae possunt ipsi conuere, sicut homin dicent esse perfectum cui non dest aliquid eorum quae ad hominem pertinent." The connection between *perfectum* and *infinitum* is considered in *De DDP 13.1 n.964 (Marietti, 360), where Thomas discusses why some ancients opposed the two: "perfectum opponitur infinito quia, ut dicitur in II Phys., infinitum est cuius quantitatem accipien
tibus, semper est aliquod ultra acquirere; perfectum autem et totum est extra quod nihil est. Sic igitur creatura perfecta infiniti opponitur, sed Deus sui perfectione omnem in infinitum terminat quia quodcumque infinitum, divinae perfectionis comparatur, est finitum et terminatur." For discussion of these points, see Oliva Blanche, "The Logic of Perfection in Aquinas," in Thomas Aquinas and His Legacy, ed. David M. Callahan (Washington, D.C., 1994), 107–30.

164 *Df 6.6* (Marietti, 174b): "non enim potest dic, quod movens sequatur, nihil desideret extra se, quia nuncum movetur: motus enim est ad acquirendum aliquod extrinem sequitur aliquo modo." At *ST* 1.9.1 we likewise read that everything that moves acquires something by its motion.
thing a creature does relies on being literally moved by his love. This is the basic reason for God’s pure liberality of giving, in contrast to the creature’s inescapable neediness. Consider the statement with which Corrigan concludes his overview of ekstasis in Greek thought from Plato to Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa: “Ecstasy is intimately connected with natural movement or growth—physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual.”

What about supernatural movement or growth? For this, too, Aquinas confidently uses the word excessus, whether to convey the mental state of a prophet in the grip of divine inspiration, or the selfless dedication to God and neighbor of a believer spurred on by divine love. A translator eager to bring out the kinship of this meaning of excessus with other meanings already discussed might well choose the path of least resistance, “excess.” But in view of what has been learned from madness, it seems that a more literal translation is demanded: “going out of,” exactly as in the phrase “she’s going out of her mind.” For Thomas, a visionary goes out of her mind because God takes her out of her mind, carrying her beyond what is conatural to the human soul. A lover of God goes out of herself because her affections are borne away from a narrow concern with her own good to a selfless love of others for their own sake. One begins to see a deeper rationale behind Thomas’s decision, in some writings, to treat together excessus mensis or going out of one’s mind, raptus or being carried away, and extasis or standing outside of oneself.

At the same time, these associated terms have to be distinguished if we wish to understand why Thomas never declares the Christian life an “enrapurement” (raptus) but will describe it as an extasis, or why he maintains that a friendship between human beings who are virtuous on a natural plane brings about genuine extasis yet not the excessus mensis of the lover of Christ.

165 For Aquinas, God is the only one who gives without gaining anything from the giving (ST 1.9.1 and 44.4 ad 1; SCC 1.93 and 3.18; DV 23.4, and DP 7.10). “Only in God does love become entirely gratuitous, totally without a turning back upon self, and this is because God is absolutely simple, without the duality inherent in a dependent nature” (Teresa Mary DeFerrari, The Problem of Charity for Self: A Study of Thomistic and Modern Theological Discussion [Washington, D.C., 1963], 67). In giving good things to the creatures he loves, and for their sake—above all, in willing to men and angels a share in his life—God does what an ecstatic lover does, indeed he does it in a way that as far surpasses all that createuly lovers can do as uncreated being surpasses created being.


167 All three terms—extasis, excessus mensis, raptus—are discussed at DV 13.2 ad 9 and ST 2-2.175.2. In other texts, extasis and excessus mensis are treated together: see ST 2-2.174.1; Super Ps. 30, 91; and Super II Cor. 5.3. There are, of course, many independent occurrences of each of the three terms.

168 An important Thomistic nuance is lost if one renders raptus as “ecstasy” in the questions on prophecy from the Secunda secundae, as Roland Potter does in Prophecy and Other Charisms [translation of and commentary on ST 2-2.171-78] (New York, 1969), 95 ff.

For Aquinas, extasis or excessus a seipso is really, even if not fully, present whenever a person exceeds himself (“outdoes himself,” one might say) on behalf of another, for love of the other—that is, when he wills and does the good for her, because it is hers. This is the meaning Thomas gives to extasis in the moral life of the human person, as contrasted with the extasis of charity belonging to the Christian or the rarer extasis belonging to the recipient of a prophetic or apostolic mission.

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We have followed a path from the most ordinary sense of excessus, according to which one number or dimension exceeds another, to a more extended sense according to which an object exceeds the capacity of a power (as the divine nature exceeds the capacity of the created intellect) or one power exceeds another in quantity of power (as intellection exceeds sensation in power for knowing and the kind of objects known), to the negative and positive aspects of excessus in natural and human virtues, and finally to the excessus a natura and excessus a ratione characteristic of sickness, sin, and madness in their many different forms. Analysis of the ways in which madness and the spiritual disease of sin overthrow the rulership of reason has shown why it is appropriate to speak of excessus a seipso in a man who lacks the use of mind or loses it by going out of his mind, for in either case, the use of that better part which makes him what he is has fallen to the wayside. It would require a separate discussion to see how, for Aquinas, this better part is exceeded in turn when the Spirit of God carries a man out of himself, and how love brings about the extasis, the self-transcendence, in which human perfection most of all consists.

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169 For references to discussions in Aquinas of the various topics mentioned in this paragraph, see nn. 39, 40, 88, 150, and 167 above.

170 As Thomas establishes in ST 1.93, the end or completion of the production of man is the imago Dei: this is what man most fundamentally is, and his perfection is measured by the degree to which the potentiality contained in this image is actualized in him, not merely by his having a mind (a. 1–6) but by his active use of it (a. 7), and not by merely any use but rather by the highest: attaining union with God in loving contemplation (a. 8). The final perfection of the imago Dei coincides with the perfect union of man and God in the extasis of the beatific vision, a mystical union of creature and creator realized ontologically and exemplarily in the Incarnate Word.

171 See the references cited in n. 39. I wish to express my gratitude for the criticisms of anonymous reviewers and for Jonathan Black’s invaluable assistance in making ready a final version.