

Gregory Graham

Fr. James J. Lehrberger, O. Cist.

Philosophy of Man

8 May 2008

A Comparison of the *Discourse on Method* of René Descartes to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas

In this paper, I will begin my analysis of the *Discourse on Method* of René Descartes by looking at what he gives as his rationale for proposing his philosophical system. He expresses a concern for the diversity of opinions he has found in his education, so he wants to build a system based on certitude. I compare this with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas as expressed in his *Summa Theologica*,¹ and see that his system can provide a reasonable explanation for Descartes' problem of the diversity of opinions. I then compare Descartes' technique of obtaining certitude to the basis by which Aquinas builds his view of humanity. Finally, I compare the two pictures of humanity that result from these two different foundations, contrasting the dignity of the human person as described by Aquinas to the cold, sterile product of the Cartesian system.

The Diversity of Opinions

Descartes begins Part I with a concern over the diversity of opinions in the world, and he believes this is not due to a difference in reasoning capability or virtue, but that “we lead our thoughts along different paths and do not take the same things into consideration” (2). However, due to good fortune, Descartes has found himself on certain paths that have allowed him to discover a method that will allow all who follow it to arrive at the truth (3). He is taking the

1. References to *Discourse on Method* are in the form of page numbers according to the pagination of the Adam and Tannery edition. References to *The Summa Theologica* are in the form of (Qn, An) indicating the question and article numbers.

focus off of the individual and whatever gifts and virtues he might possess, and is focusing on a universal technique.

In contrast, we see the opposite emphasis in Aquinas. He does not see that there is a particular technique which alone will lead someone to the truth. Rather, Aquinas says that truth and reason come from the mind of God. He is the creator of the intellect that is in each of us, and in which we all participate (Q79, A4). Reason is universal and leads to the truth, but beyond that there is not a particular method that will guarantee a person will consistently follow reason.

Rather than the lack of a good method, Aquinas provides us other reasons why people might have a diversity of opinions. First of all, in addition to the intellectual powers, the soul also has appetitive powers at work within it (Q80, A1). Although it is possible for these appetites to be controlled by reason, such control is not absolute. “We observe in an animal a despotic and a politic principle; for the soul dominates the body by a despotic rule, but the intellect dominates the appetite by a politic and royal rule” (Q81, A3). This opens the possibility that the appetites might interfere with sound reasoning.

Another reason why there might be a diversity of opinions has to do with the functioning of the will. By necessity, we always will towards the end of ultimate beatitude (Q82, A1). However, the choices that we make are not directly related to ultimate beatitude, but are only contingently related. We have the freedom to choose between the various contingent goods, so there will be a diversity of choices of the will (Q82, A2). These choices of the will can move the intellect, which would result in a diversity of intellectual opinions (Q82, A4).

A third reason why there may be a diversity of opinions is illustrated in the application of natural law. The natural law is based on natural inclinations (Q94, A2), and is the same in all

men (Q94, A4). However, virtue is required for someone to do and pursue the good given in the natural law, and vice tends to lead one away from the good (Q94, A3). Therefore, the presence of virtue and vice in different people can influence them towards a diversity of opinions.

Nowhere does Aquinas give an indication that a method or technique would mitigate the affect of appetite, the will, and virtue or vice which lead to a diversity of opinions. Neither can I find anything in Descartes that addresses these factors. He assumes people will be able to follow his method, but because his mechanistic approach doesn't have a moral component, he seems to think the moral character of people using his method is not important. The purpose for morality in Descartes' plan is to stay out of trouble so that the plan can be accomplished (23).

In Search of Certainty

Descartes entered his education with the desire to acquire mastery over a body of useful knowledge, but was dismayed to find himself confounded by many “doubts and errors” (4). He could not blame the quality of his school or his scholarship, so he came to believe “that there was no doctrine in the world that was of the sort that [he] had previously been led to hope for” (5). He uses this disappointment with the state of the world's formal knowledge as justification for starting new, and build upon a foundation that is completely his own (15).

In his studies, Descartes had found that logic, geometry, and algebra were the only sciences that reached conclusions with the certitude that Descartes sought (17), yet these disciplines in their current form were insufficient for Descartes' plan, except that they set the bar of certitude which Descartes believed was necessary (18). Therefore, Descartes developed his Four Rules of Method to be a certain foundation upon which a useful body of knowledge could be built. The first rule of the method was to never accept anything as true that was not clear and

distinct (18). As Descartes went through the process of eliminating everything that did not meet this criteria, he was left only with the certainty of his own existence as a thinker (32). He proved with mathematical certitude his existence as a thinking thing distinct from the physical world (35), but he had difficulty linking himself as a thinking thing with the world that we live in (40).

In contrast, Aquinas begins his study of the soul with it intimately linked to the body. By definition, the soul is the first principle, or act of a living body (Q75, A1). The soul is the reason that the body is alive. It is the form which differentiates living things from non-living things. The existence of the physical world is not doubted by Aquinas, but instead, the physical world is the place where he begins. We did not study the thoughts of Aquinas on sense perception, but we did see him appeal to common personal experience when dealing with the union of the intellectual soul with the body (Q76, A1). The fact is, despite the presence of dreams, hallucinations, jaundiced vision, and other sense distortions, there is a common perception of the physical world that we all share that is a reasonable foundation for philosophical inquiry. Indeed, if the purpose of this inquiry is to enable man to flourish in this world, don't we need to assume that the world exists?

The Dignity of Man

Aquinas builds on the idea of the intellectual soul united to the body to produce a rich picture of the human person. This person is essentially physical and intellectual (Q79), and he determines the path of his life, seeking after the good (Q82) through a series of free choices (Q83). This picture of man is full and integrated. Aquinas explains the desires that drive the human experience (Q81, A2), and shows how they relate to our rational side (Q81, A3). He incorporates the “lower” and “higher” aspects of the human person, and fits them together in a

way that gives dignity to all of these aspects of human life (Q94, A2). Not only does Aquinas give dignity to the whole person, but his concept of natural law orders the development of the individual person in virtue (Q94, A3), such that he can live harmoniously in society (Q94, A2).

In contrast, Descartes' picture of humanity seems cold and sterile. Man is primarily a thinking thing whose body is almost irrelevant to what he essentially is (32). The purpose of Descartes' philosophy is to enable man to become “masters and possessors of nature,” (62) but to what end? If Descartes' dream was fully realized and medicine reached the point that all disease was eliminated, and everything that could harm the body could be cured such that we lived indefinitely, what would we live for? If we developed the ability to control nature such that there was never any natural disasters, bad weather, discomforts or inconveniences, what would we do next? Descartes' provides no answers. St. Thomas Aquinas, on the contrary, does have an answer. The highest inclination for man is to know God and live in harmony with his neighbor (Q94, A2). There is no higher goal we could aim for, and it is a journey that leads to an infinite good.