

THE LOGICAL INTENTION OF *GENUS* IN AN UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSCENDENTAL CONCEPTS

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Predicating the universal properties of things to God we inevitably cast the net of logical intentions on Him. Only later can we disentangle Him from it by means of additional thinking. Therefore, it is probable that Aquinas says “*Deus autem ponitur primum principium, non materiale, sed in genere causae efficientis*” (*S.T.* I, 4, 1 in c.) just because here he looks at the infinite perfection of God through the limited perfection of things and wants to remind us that in such a perspective God is seen quasi in the genus. It is very important that Aquinas does not say, “*Deus est in genere,*” but: “*Deus ponitur in genere*” (emphasis mine). The neglecting of this difference between the *est* and the *ponitur* and interpreting the latter as if it were the former compels the translators from Latin to substitute genus by other terms. But these substitutions are doubtful.

Understanding is not always the ultimate end of reading. Amusement or translation can be to that end. It is obvious that translation demands more profound and precise understanding than amusement. Sometimes, in a case of a complex speculative text, the understanding turns a translator into an interpreter. The peculiarities of the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of different languages prevent the translator from following a golden rule: to translate the same word by one equivalent. The violation of this rule seems especially distressing when the text to be translated is extremely significant, full of terms and technicalities. But try to follow the rule in translating the Latin word *ratio*, frequently used by Thomas Aquinas in his works, and you will promptly see that it is impossible; for sometimes this word means reason, other times it could mean cause, argument, sufficient reason, definition, nature,

essence, formal character, etc. The context clearly shows where *ratio* has to be translated either as *reason* or *argument*, but where it suggests meanings such as formal character, definition, nature or essence, the decision concerning the equivalent to be chosen frequently depends on the intuition and understanding of the translator, which does not always correspond to the intuition and understanding of readers. Fortunately, to a thoughtful reader, it is not very difficult to realize that though these discrepancies are unavoidable, they are not substantial. But there can occur more perplexing discrepancies. For instance, when the translator refuses the precise term's equivalent and either substitutes it by another or omits it. One of these cases is the subject matter of the following consideration.

In his works, Thomas Aquinas underlines that God is not in a genus.¹ Nevertheless, at the beginning of *Summa Theologiae* question four, article one, in corpus, he writes: “Deus autem ponitur primum principium, non materiale, sed in genere causae efficientis.”² It seems that this statement contradicts the previous one, which was proved just three articles earlier in the same *Summa*, that is, that God is not in a genus either as species or as principle.³ Therefore, the mentioned position of God in the genus of efficient cause looks like the author's slip of the pen. It seems that this supposition was accepted by translators of his works, at least by those whose works are available to me.

The English Dominican Fathers translated *genere* as *order*: ‘Now God is the first principle, not material, but in the order of efficient cause.’⁴ German and Austrian Fathers omitted the term *genus* and made some translator's explanatory additions in the brackets: “Gott aber ist nicht erster stofflicher Entstehungsgrund, sondern erster Entstehungsgrund als [äußere] Wirkursache [aller Dinge].”⁵ The same and even more was done by a Polish translator, the Rev. Pius Bełha: “Bóg jako pierwsza przyczyna sprawcza wszelkiego bytu jest tym samym istnoś-

¹ E.g., *De ente et essentia*, ch. V., *Summa contra gentiles*, ch. 25, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 5, *Compendium theologiae*, I, q. 12.

² *S.T. I*, 4, 1.

³ *S.T. I*, 3, 5. *Neutro autem modo Deus est in genere.*

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, literary translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol I, Benziger Brothers, New York, 1947, p. 21.

⁵ Die Deutsche Thomas-Ausgabe, *Vollständige, ungekürzte deutsch-lateinische Ausgabe der Summa Theologica*, übersetzt von Dominikaner und Benedictiner Deutschlands und Österreichs, Herausgeben vom Katholischen Akademiker verband, Band 1, Verlag Anton Pustet, Salzburg & Leipzig, 1934, p. 81.

cią (in actu) w najwyższym stopniu, a nie możliwością jako jest materia.”⁶ In the first Russian translation of *Summa Theologiae* (the first 43 questions were published in 2002) we read that “God is the first principle not in the material sense but in the sense of the efficient cause” (the translation from Russian is mine).⁷ Thus, in all the given examples we see a persistent avoidance of the term *genus*. But the original author’s statement: “Deus autem ponitur primum principium, non materiale, sed in genere causae efficientis” is plain and the term *genus* can be unequivocally translated by the English *genus*, German *Gattung*, Polish *rodzaj*, and Russian *rod*. Here there is no analogy with the case of the Greek word *hypostases* mentioned by Thomas in *Contra Errores Graecorum*, where he says that it is the duty of a good translator to modify the way of speaking in order to remain faithful to the meaning.⁸ Therefore, it seems that here we have a tradition of the tacit improvement of Aquinas’ writing. By the removal of the term *genus*, the translators escape the mentioned contradiction between the statements: God by no means belongs to any genus; He is in the genus of the efficient cause. But let us take a closer look at their achievements.

The English translator substituted *genus* with *order*. He was able to argue in favor of this step by reminding us that in the *secunda via* Thomas himself speaks about “ordinem causarum efficientium” in which it is necessary to posit the first efficient cause, “quam omnes Deum nominat.” But that substitution is a mere nominal, but not essential, change; for both the terms, “genus of the efficient causes” and “order of the efficient causes” are synonymous, i.e., signify the same class of objects. It promises a reader more fluent reading, but does not exclude the questioning of what *the order* means here, concluding that it means the *genus*. Hence the contradiction remains.

Perhaps in striving for better results, the German translator took an additional precaution by not translating the term *genus* at all and adding in square brackets the words *äußere*, ‘external’ and *aller Dinge* ‘of all things’: “Gott ist erster Entstehungsgrund als [äußere] Wirkursache [aller Dinge].” But nothing secures that the reader (and *Summa Theologiae* was intended for beginners in theology) would understand the

⁶ Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Suma Teologiczna w skrócie*, skrótu dokonał i objaśnieniami zaopatrzył Feliks Wojciech Bernadski OP, Wydawnictwo Antyk–Marcin Dybowski, Warszawa 2000, p. 17.

⁷ Foma Akvinskij, *Summa Teologii*, Chast I, voprosy 1–43, perevod S.I. Eremeeva (gl. 1–26), A.A. Judina (gl. 27–43), Nika Centr & Elkor MK, Kiev & Moskva, 2002, p. 45.

⁸ See *Contra errores Graecorum* I, prol., ed. Leon., XL p. A71.

word *äußere* as signifying that the first efficient cause of all things is outside the genus of efficient causes; for in a creative act an efficient cause is always external in relation to its effects. Therefore, it is probable that the term is understood in the way that God as the efficient cause is external to the World (“alle Dinge”) as to His effect. But the question— Does God belong to the genus of efficient cause?— remains open.

The Polish translator omits not only the term *genus* but also the term *principium*, saying that God is the first efficient cause of every being: “Bóg jako pierwsza przyczyna sprawcza wszelkiego bytu”. But this rendering also does not secure against the mistake of God’s inclusion in the genus of efficient causes; for each time we predicate a genus to a subject, we include it in that genus. But if we exclude something from a genus, that means that we negate the possibility to apply the generic name to the subject. For example, if we say that man is outside the genus of animal, this means that the predication of animal to man is false, and properly speaking man is not an animal. Such is the usual way of human understanding and speaking. Accordingly, when we predicate to God a substance or a cause, our understanding tends to place God in the genus of substance or cause. To correct this error, one has to know God as being, and that being cannot be in any genus. In other words, he has to know the difference between transcendental and universal concepts. But such knowledge comes later than acquaintance with God on the way of natural reason, that is, in philosophy. This can be seen in the *De Ente et Essentia*.

In the preface, Thomas says that “a being and an essence are first conceived in the intellect.” Nevertheless, for the first time on the pages of the *opusculum* we meet God not as a being but as cause and substance. At the end of the first chapter, Thomas writes: “for they [that is, separate substances] are the cause of composite substances — at least this is true of the first simple substance, who is God.” This is quite comprehensible; for *ens ut primum cognitum* is a fundamental but not elaborated concept, which could be predicated to substances, accidents and in a sense to privations. It serves as the basis of recognition of the presence of something but not as the means for recognition of what that something is. Therefore, it is natural that, for the first time man recognizes God not as a being but as something else, that is, as substance and cause. Of course, recognizing Him as the cause, man recognizes Him as being also, but his attention is focused on God as cause but not as being. To recognize God as being, man has to follow a path of reasoning, which is concisely described in the fourth chapter

of *De ente et essentia*. The recognition starts from ordinary perceivable causes such as the nature of man in relation to his risibility, the sun in relation to the luminosity of air. Directed by two axioms that nothing can be the cause of its own being and that everything which is through another must be reduced to that which is through itself, it comes to the conclusion that there must be “the first being, which is existence only; and this is the first cause, which is God.” In the conclusion, we see the being and the cause connected: the first being is the first cause.

So far, nothing stops us supposing that being is a genus or that God is the principle in the genus of causes. The same can be said about the *quarta via* where Thomas says that “the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum of heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must be something which is to all beings the cause of their being [...] and this we call God.” I claim this, since in the *Summa Theologiae* as well as in the *De Ente et Essentia* the explanation that God is not in a genus comes later. And since in the *opusculum* and in the five ways Thomas follows the path of natural reason, therefore we can conclude that at early stages of approaching God natural reason has no means of knowing that God is not in a genus, therefore it naturally sees Him as in the genus of substance and cause.

Since knowledge of God is reached through knowledge of other things, at the early stages of learning it is indispensable to posit Him in some genus; for predicating the universal properties of things to God we inevitably cast the net of logical intentions on Him. Only later can we disentangle Him from it by means of additional thinking. Therefore, it is probable that Aquinas says “Deus [...] ponitur primum principium [...] in genere causae efficientis” just because in that article he looks at the infinite perfection of God through the limited perfection of things and wants to remind us that in such a perspective God is seen quasi in the genus. In this context it seems very important that Aquinas does not say: “Deus *est* in genere,” but: “Deus *ponitur* in genere” (the emphasis is mine); i.e., that God is placed or posited in the genus, not that He is in the genus. The neglecting of this difference between the *est* and the *ponitur* and interpreting the latter as ‘is’, ‘ist’, and ‘jest’ makes it impossible to leave the term *genus* in the sentence; for *is* does not allude to the possibility of semblance which could not correspond with reality.

The sentence considered belongs to the article in which Thomas Aquinas looks at the perfection of God through the prism of mater-

ial things. In this perspective, the presence of the second intentions is inevitable. This necessity is expressed by the words *in genere*. But the preceding word *ponitur* warns us that this could be the case in our understanding alone, but not *in re*. God is placed in the genus by the natural reason at a particular stage of cognition, and therefore the possibility that He is not really there cannot be excluded. Since in the preceding article of *Summa* it is already proved that He indeed is not there, the statement discussed can be interpreted as a pedagogical device, by which Aquinas reminds students of the difficulty which is present in thinking of God: each time we think of God we have to perform two inevitable operations: at the beginning to rely on the second intentions, but finally to liberate our notion of God from their net so that the generic names cease to belong to genus but still signify something that makes their application understandable.

Against the background of this consideration the mentioned attempts to improve Aquinas' text seem doubtful. It is hard to believe that such an accurate thinker and careful teacher as Thomas Aquinas made a slip of the pen in the treatise on God at the beginning of *Summa* which he intended for beginners in theology. And, moreover, that in doing so he repeated a slip similar to one he made earlier in *Summa Contra Gentiles*: "in genere autem causae efficientis fit reductio ad unam causam quae Deus dicitur." In translating this statement, the Spanish translator Jesus M. Pla Castellano substitutes *genus* with *orden*,⁹ in other words he follows the aforementioned tradition of "correction." But also there are examples of the contrary attitude: Anton C. Pegis, the translator of *Summa Contra Gentiles* into English, and the translator into French, Cyrille Michon, use *the genus* and *le genre* correspondingly as the precise equivalents of the Latin *genus*.¹⁰ Thus, the different ways of translating constitute the material for analysis and discussion and consequently inspire more profound studies of Thomas Aquinas' works.

⁹ Compare Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, University of Notre Dame Press, London 1975, p. 136 with Santo Tomas de Aquino, *Summa Contra Los Gentiles*, La Editorial Catolica, S.A. Apartado 466, Madrid, 1952, p. 168.

¹⁰ See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ibid.*, and Thomas d'Aquin, *Somme contre les Gentils, I Dieu*, Flammarion, Paris, 1999, p. 216.