

SAINT THOMAS AND THE EVOLUTION OF MAN

WILLIAM R. DORAN, S.T.D.

Quigley Preparatory Seminary

Chicago, Ill.

THE continual efforts of scientists to find a satisfactory proof for the theory of evolution have, in the past few years, uncovered several important fossils, which seem to lend considerable weight to the theory. But, aside from the purely scientific puzzle, there is the related question which used to claim much attention from Catholic philosophers and theologians: what do the writings of Saint Thomas reveal regarding the natural evolution of Adam's body? The present-day lack of interest in this question has led to a tiresome repetition of old evidence, and the calm acceptance of oft-repeated data has gradually lent to the inaccurate conclusions of past investigations a deceptive appearance of fact. Indeed, the opinions of Mivart,¹ Dorlodot,² Messenger,³ and others, who teach that Saint Thomas was not averse to evolution in the Catholic sense, seem to have become accepted as the truth, and text-books are beginning to offer our seminarians and Catholic university students arguments from Saint Thomas to prove that the body of the first man was not created in the ordinary sense of the word, but evolved naturally from the slime of the earth, through the various stages of vegetable and animal life, until it reached that state of perfection in which it received from God the created soul, and became Adam.⁴

The doctorate dissertation of the writer⁵ attempted to interpret the passages in the works of Saint Thomas that had some bearing on the question, but further reading and discussions

The Genesis of Species, New York, 1871, p. 282.

Darwinism and Catholic Thought, tracts, by E. G. Messenger, London, 1921, p. 101 *if*.

Evolution and Theology, New York, 1912, p. 201 ff.

«For example the *Cnrsns Philosophiae of* H. Grenier of Laval University (Quebec, 1957), which carries this thesis (I, J«7-J80), has been adopted by many Catholic colleges and institutions throughout the world.

**De Corporis Adami Origine Doctrina Alexandri Hdensis, Sancti Alberti Magni. Sancti Bonaventurae, Sancti Thomae*, Mundelein. 195i.

with different professors of theology have convinced him that, in some instances, his explanations were not sufficiently clear, and, in one case at least, a philosophical principle of the Angelic Doctor, which might possibly be applied to evolution, was unfortunately overlooked. In this article, therefore, a new attempt has been made to go over the ground carefully, with the intention of clarifying certain passages, especially I, q.67, a.4, and q.91, a.2, and of considering the possibility of finding in *Contra Gentiles*, III, 22, a Thomistic proof for the theory of the evolution of Adam's body.⁸

The Thomistic sentence most often quoted by Catholic evolutionists in this connection is: *In prima institutione naturae non quaeritur miraculum, sed quid natura rerum habeat, ut Augustinus dicit.*¹ Does this mean, as some writers hold, that Saint Thomas favored the theory of a production of the "first things" by natural causes and frowned upon immediate production by God as the unwanted miracle?

Tracing it back, we find that Saint Thomas takes his principle from Saint Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram*, II, 1. Saint Augustine is seeking an explanation of the words of Holy Scripture, *Genesis* 1, 6-7: *Liat firmamentum in medio aquarum, et dividat aquas ab aquis. Et fecit Deus firmamentum, divisitque aquas quae erant sub firmamento, ab his quae erant super firmamentum.* There is a dispute about the meaning of the word *firmamentum*. In his opinion it is nothing more than the air. But the other prevalent theory, which maintains that it is the heavens, is, he admits, by no means absurd. It is a probable opinion which, despite the efforts of its adherents, has not yet been proven with certainty. Saint Augustine then proceeds to show why the arguments for this second theory do not prove conclusively, and it is in this exposition that he makes use of the principle quoted by Saint Thomas.

This theory, Augustine says, fails to give a good explanation of the fact that the waters are able to remain suspended above

⁸7% ^ μ precisely Grenier doe»; *op. cit.*, 570 »nd 575.

1\$■«»«"*. I, φ *7, *. 4, »d 5.

the *firmamentum*. As a matter of fact, the only explanation offered by its proponents is the Omnipotence of God effecting a miraculous suspension of the waters above the stars. Such a recourse to the miracle is, according to Saint Augustine, unscientific and unnecessary, for a natural explanation should be given preference over the miraculous whenever possible, and our investigation should confine itself to the question as to how things were instituted by God, rather than extend itself to the mystery of what God wishes to produce by a miracle in or from the things He has instituted. If it were possible, therefore, to say that the waters were so instituted that they could be suspended above the stars by the power of nature, then we could say the *firmamentum* was the starry heavens. But on the other hand, if such an assertion is not possible, and in the opinion of Saint Augustine it is not, then we must deny this interpretation, because it is not proper to have recourse to a miraculous suspension of the waters. *Nunc enim quemadmodum instituerit naturas rerum, secundum Scripturas ejus, nos convenit quaerere; non quid in eis vel ex eis ad miraculum potentiae suae velit operari.* The sane philosophical and exegetical principles of Saint Augustine—and Aquinas follows—may be noted in passing.

Saint Thomas refers to and quotes this passage several times. In the article of the *Summa* mentioned above, he is treating the same old question of the *firmamentum*, and he solves it in the same way as Saint Augustine, quoting the latter indirectly but without changing the meaning of his words. When he wishes to prove that the light of the first day was not caused by a miraculous contraction and expansion of a luminous body, he simply repeats: *In prima institutione naturae non quaeritur miraculum, sed quid natura rerum habeat, ut dicit Augustinus.*

Of greater importance is his reference to this text in *Super Sent.* II, d.18, a.1, obj.f, where he answers an objection against the Catholic doctrine on the origin of Eve's body. The objection is founded on the very principle under discussion, and must be solved by an explanation of that principle. Hence,

St. Thomas, in presenting the solution, presents also a clear exposition of what he understands by the Augustinian text.

The objection reads:

Praeterea, ut dicit Augustinus, II Super Gen. ad Lit., cap. 1, in omnibus operibus creationis non quid Deus facere possit quaeritur, sed quid rerum natura patiatur. Cum, ergo, naturalis modus propagationis mulieris non sit de costa viri sed ex semine, quia his quae sunt ejusdem speciei debetur unus modus originis, videtur quod inconvenienter ex costa viri mulier facta ponatur.

It is worth noting how the objector argues here. Since Adam was already existing, it seems that Eve's body must have been produced naturally from the male seed, because any other theory would introduce the miracle and thus run counter to Saint Augustine's principle.

To this difficulty Saint Thomas answers:

Ad quantum dicendum, quod institutio rerum naturalium potest considerari dupliciter: vel quantum ad modum fiendi, vel quantum ad proprietates consequentes res institutas. Modus quidem fiendi naturalis esse non potuit, cum non praecesserint aliqua principia naturalia quorum actiones et passiones sufficerent ad effectus naturaliter producendos: et ideo oportuit *per virtutem supernaturalem* prima principia in natura constituere, ut *corpus hominis formaretur ex terra* et *corpus mulieris ex costa*, et sic de aliis. Sed proprietates consequentes naturas institutas non debent miraculo attribui, ut quod aquae miraculose super coelos consistant.

In other words, *institutio rerum* can mean either the manner in which things began to be (*modus fiendi*), or the properties and powers which things had after they began to exist (*Proprietates consequentes res institutas*). Now, if we use *institutio rerum* in the second sense, as Saint Thomas and Saint Augustine did when speaking about the *firmamentum* and the light of the first day, then we should *avoid* recourse to a miracle. If on the other hand, we use it in the first sense (*modus fiendi*) as Saint Thomas does in speaking about the origin of Adam's body, then we will be forced to admit that there was a miracle

involved, because, at the time of their first beginning, there were no agents capable of producing such effects naturally.

The inability of nature to produce the first human body is again emphasized by the Angelic Doctor when he says that this act involved the infusion of a soul into matter not properly disposed to receive it, and hence may well be termed a miracle: *Si tamen sine tali praecedenti preparatione (i.e. proper disposition) vel anima infunderetur vel gratia conferretur, utrumque miraculum dici potest, ut patet in formatione primi hominis, et in conversione Pauli/* And perhaps even more clearly: . . . *non enim magis rationi resistit vel divinae potentiae, mulierem ex corpore viri sumi, quam corpus viri ex limo terra formari, cum utrumque a naturae virtute separatum sit:*

Another "proof" for evolution discovered by Catholic evolutionists in the writings of Saint Thomas is the theory of the *rationes seminales*. Perhaps the majority of modern students are correct when they see active evolutionistic powers in these *rationes seminales* as explained by Saint Augustine. But to propose this theory as a Thomistic argument for the evolution of Adam's body is simply to misunderstand Saint Thomas' thought.

According to Saint Thomas, nature was so instituted at the time of creation, that its principles were able to produce from themselves other creatures. To make possible this propagation God conferred on the principles or first living individuals certain active and passive *virtutes*, and these *virtutes* are what Saint Augustine calls *rationes seminales*. There are two kinds of these virtues. Some are the source of propagation within the limits of determined species, as, for example, the powers that are found in the seed of a lion or a horse. Others are the source of a propagation which is not restricted to any particular species. Examples of these are the powers of heat, cold and so forth.¹⁰ The passive powers of these *rationes* offer no

S>per Sr/. II. d. 18, q. 1, a. J, ad. 2.

9Ibid.,

difficulty whatever, for they are nothing more than the potentiality in matter to receive action, or to be acted upon, and of themselves do not constitute a *ratio seminalis*, except in an imperfect sense.¹¹ The active powers, however, especially those of the second class, which seem to produce outside their own species, are much more important and demand an explanation.

The undetermined powers of the second class, or the *virtutes communes*, as Saint Thomas calls them, are capable of producing, with the cooperation of the heavenly bodies, such things as plants and so-called imperfect or simple animals.¹² But that is clearly the full extent of their powers. They cannot produce the *perfect* animals, that is to say, they are not capable of generating any of those animals which are ordinarily generated by the seed of their own species.¹³ Therefore, while it is true to say that the *virtutes communes* do indicate possible evolutionistic powers, nevertheless, there cannot be found in the writings of Saint Thomas any indication that *rationes seminales* are capable of producing a human body.

All this is confirmed by Saint Thomas' stand on the question of the fixity of species.¹⁴ A fundamental Thomistic principle is enunciated in the words: *Omne agens agit sibi simile*.TM Obviously, the important word is *simile*, and this has two meanings: . . . *uno modo secundum eandem speciem, ut homo generatur ab homine, et ignis ab igne; alio modo secundum virtualem continentiam, prout scilicet forma effectus virtualiter continetur in causa: et sic animalia ex putrefactione generata, et plantae et corpora mineralia assimilantur soli et stellis quorum virtute generantur*.TM

If there were any possibility of an evolutionistic trend in this doctrine, it would be found in the second interpretation of *simile*. There seems to be transformation of species here

¹¹*Super Sent.* II, d. 18, q. 1, a. 2; *De Verit.*, q. f, a. 9, ad 8.

¹²*Super Sent.* H, d. 14, q. 1, a. 3, ad <; *Contre Gent.*, VI, 102.

Sent. II, d. 14, q. I, a. J, ad 6; *Contre Gent.*, III, 3.

¹³Cf. R. de Sinét. *Diet. Apol. de le Foi Ceta.*, IV, 179*.

¹⁴*Coeirt Gent.*, II, 43.

¹⁵*Sum>ne* I, q. 103, a. 1, ad. I.

which would satisfy the demands of evolution, and at the same time, there appears to be enough elasticity in the words *secundum virtualem continentiam* to harmonize the principle *Omne agens agit sibi simile* with evolutionary processes. Again however, Saint Thomas' peculiar ideas on the classification of creatures puts very definite limits to the application of this principle.

As we saw above, Saint Thomas distinguishes two general classes of creatures, the simple or less perfect and the more perfect. Of these, the first type can be produced by powers other than those of their own species. For example, certain plants can be produced by the sun, and vermin can originate from matter that is undergoing a disintegrating process called putrefaction. Since neither the plant nor the vermin can be said to pertain strictly to the species of the generator, their production only seems to involve a change in species. Is this even apparently evolution? Hardly; it is important to note that Saint Thomas carefully limits this mode of production to the simpler forms of plant and animal life. It seems he was led to this admission by the biology of his time, and he is speaking of forms of life derived apparently from non-living causes; his texts do not apply to the transmutation of species.

The more perfect animals, those which we see ordinarily generated from seed in their own species, cannot be produced in this manner. While in the case of the simpler creatures the powers of the heavenly bodies can play the role of father, and the earth that of mother,¹⁷ the production of the more perfect types can be effected only by their own seed, or if that does not exist, by an immediate act of God. *Oportet . . . quod cum virtute coelesti adsit in semine virtus animae a patre derivata! . . . secundum fidem non potest poni aliquid esse causa alterius post Deum, nisi per viam motus et generationis, et ideo omnium eorum quae per generationem non inceperunt, oportet Deum immediatam causam ponere, ut sunt angeli, sub-*

¹⁷ . . . quia ad earum pullulationem su&it virtus coelestis loco patris, et virtus terrae loco matris," S<Err Seut. II, <L 14, q. 1, x S, ad 6; *Contre Gnt.*, III, 102.

ISS>^rr *Snt.* H, d. II, q. 2, x }, ad i.

*stantiae coelorum et materia elementorum, et primae hypostases in omnibus speciebus.*¹⁹ By *primae hypostases* he means *primus homo, primus leo, et sic de aliis**

When Father Grenier speaks of an *appetitus* in matter as the foundation for evolution, he argues that because of it matter must be disposed to receive the human form. The *appetitus*, he admits, is nothing more than a passive potency which is to be found in all inferior creatures, and by which they are all ordered to the superior ones, because they have the power to receive superior forms. Matter, therefore, is capable of receiving the human form, and in that sense, the end of all generation is man, because the highest form, beyond which matter has no potency, is the human form. There is no difficulty contained in this philosophical principle, and it is well substantiated by proofs from Saint Thomas,²¹ but as far as we are concerned, the crux of the question lies in determining how the matter which became Adam, was properly disposed to receive the human form for which it had the *appetitus*.

Grenier says that the disposition must have been effected *ab intrinseco* and by natural means. By *ab intrinseco* he means through the succession of inferior forms, so that the preparation was a gradual evolutionary process carried on by natural agents. His sole reason for this assertion is that the only other alternative would be to admit that God disposed the matter by a miraculous act, but, *in prima . . . institutione naturae non quaeritur miraculum, sed quid natura rerum habeat, ut Augustinus dicit** As we have shown above, such an argument is useless because it is founded upon a false interpretation of the text, and the other alternative, the miraculous production, must be admitted.

Not infrequently we see an argument for the evolution of Adam's body drawn from the Thomistic theory of the progressive development of the embryo in the process of generation.

a. J. d. I., . 4; Cdw/ra G<W., II, c. 4>; \$«■»« I. † 47, a. I.

»S»pr Stnt. II. d. 1. q. 1. a. 4.

GciO. HI, 22.

op- at . p- 570



Saint Thomas speaks of a succession of forms received by the embryo, each new form being more perfect than its predecessor, so that it has all the qualities and powers which the old form possessed, and more besides. First, there is present only an *anima nutritiva, postmodum autem sensitiva, et tandem intellectiva . . . quando perfectior anima advenit, fit corruptio prioris; ita tamen quod sequens forma habet quidquid habebat prima, et adhuc amplius**. sic per multas generationes et corruptiones pervenitur ad ultimam formam substantialem, tam in homine quam in aliis animalibus.² It seems hardly necessary to remark that this is the Angelic Doctor's theory of *generation*, and should not therefore be applied to the body of the first man, which was not generated. Even if one did employ the paralogism, one would still fail to reach the goal of the evolutionist. There can be no question here of a progressive evolution from one species to another, for according to Saint Thomas, the different *animae* which succeed each other are not complete forms, and do not suffice to constitute new species.

There are two kinds of forms, he says, the perfect form which completes the species of a thing, such as the form of a plant or a man, and the *incomplete* form, which does not complete a species, and is not in itself the end intended by nature. This latter is said to be *in via generationis*, that is to say, it is a transitory term in the complicated process of change called generation. For in the generation of composites it is necessary to admit many intermediary generations between the seed and the perfect offspring. Each generation must terminate and be replaced by another on a slightly higher plane, and the point of termination is an incomplete form which gives the thing an existence which is incomplete as regards species. Such a being is not an *ens completum*, but is in *via ad speciem aliquam*.^{3*}

Unquestionably correct is Wasmann's statement: "Assuming this theory to be true . . . it would, however, be wrong to

I, q. 118, a. 2, ad 2. Cf. *Contre Gent.* II, c. 89; *Dr fot-*, q. 3, a. 9. *4Dr Pot.*, q. 3, obj. 10, < ad 10; *Dr Gener. et Corrupt.* I, 3. ket. 8.

say that lie (the man being generated) was simply a plant or simply an animal . . . lie was already man in the process of development . . . according to this theory, the whole development of man occurred within the one and same natural species, viz. "man."² It would be difficult indeed to harmonize this with any known theory of evolution.

With these theories of Saint Thomas clearly in mind, we are in a position to understand his interpretation of the words of Scripture relating to the creation of Adam. We read in *Genesis 2, 7*, that God formed Adam from the slime of the earth. On the face of it, such a concise statement can be understood to mean a mediate formation from the slime. That is to say, the matter into which God infused the first human soul could have been, as the Catholic evolutionists aver, prepared matter; matter which, though originally slime, had become, through the natural evolutionistic progress of centuries, so developed and so advanced that at the moment of the infusion of the human soul it was a full grown, perfectly formed, living animal. We, of course, restrict ourselves to the question as to whether Saint Thomas, in his exegesis of the sacred text, approves of, or leaves the door open to the possibility of such an interpretation.

Father Messenger says that Saint Thomas, "takes the statement: 'God breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul,' to mean simply that the human soul is the form of the human body. In other words, this text does not mean that the breath of God gave life to a previous lifeless form, but that the human soul was then infused into something which thereby became really and truly a human body. . . . Clearly Saint Thomas at any rate, would not agree with those modern theologians who think this text teaches definitely that Adam's body was formed directly and immediately from non-living matter."³

We find explicit treatment of the text in several of the works of Saint Thomas. In the *De Anima* he answers an objection embodying it: *Formavit Deus hominem de limo terra, et inspiravit in faciem ejus spiraculum vitae. . . . Spiraculum autem vitae est anima. Ergo aliqua forma praecedit in materia unionem animae?*' The answer is merely an assertion that *formavit Deus hominem* did not precede *inspiravit spiraculum vitae* in the order of time, but that they both took place simultaneously. Obviously, this for us is not a satisfactory answer, because if the word *hominem* were to be understood as meaning *qua homo* (man as man), then there would be no indication at all as to how the matter which became man with the infusion of the human soul, might have been prepared. Neither evolutionist nor creationist asserts that the formation of man *as man* preceded the infusion of the human soul, in the order of time. The difficulty centers rather on the question, did the evolution of an animal precede the infusion of a soul. In a word, was the *materia ex qua* living matter, or was it non-living matter?

Let us glance back for a moment at the Thomistic theory of generation. As we saw, Saint Thomas thinks that generation involves a succession of quasi-forms, each of which disappears upon the advent of its successor, so that the embryo has at first a kind of vegetative soul, then an animal soul and finally the human soul. In the *Quodlibetales* an objection points out that such a process could not have taken place in the production of Adam's body, because a pre-existing form which is destroyed when a superior form is introduced, seems to lack a sufficient *raison d'etre*. *Dicitur enim Gen. 2, 7: "Formavit . . . et inspiravit Frustra autem formasset corpus, si inspirando animam, forma quam informando indiderat, excluderetur."*[^] In his response, Saint Thomas simply admits that in the case of Adam this process did not take place: *Si autem, ut Augustinus dicit, spiraculum vitae sit ipsa anima, non*

Anima, a. 2, obj. 8.

asQ»o/. L. q. 4. i. 6, obi. I.

*oportebit dicere quod alia forma formatum sit corpus hominis de limo terrae quam ipso spiraculo vitae divinitus inspirato'. non enim illa formatio tempore praecessit inspirationem.*²⁹ This is a much clearer exposition of what the Angelic Doctor means by the simultaneity of the body's formation and the infusion of the soul. They were simultaneous in the sense that no soul, not even the quasi-forms of generation preexisted in the matter into which the human soul was infused. The *materia ex qua*, therefore, in the opinion of Saint Thomas, was non-living: it was *limus terrae* in the strict and obvious sense of the word.

It is difficult to see how anyone, who has read the *Summa*, I, 91, can honestly doubt Saint Thomas' stand on this particular question of evolution. We can pass over his rudimentary analysis of *limus terrae*. According to the Aristotelian theory, which he endorses, all material bodies consist of fire, air, earth and water³⁰ and consequently, the *materia ex qua* of Adam's body would be made up these four elements, regardless of whether it was non-living slime or a primate. Even if the Aristotelian theory is discarded the general tone of article 2 remains clear. And the other articles of Question 91 contain statements so clear and explicit as to defy misunderstanding.

In the second article Saint Thomas answers in the affirmative to the question: *Utrum corpus humanum sit immediate a Deo productum*. He then goes on to explain that *immediate* means *non . . . per aliquam virtutem creatam*. Evidently, since in the Middle Ages the theory of evolution was not causing any disquietude, he found it necessary to defend his doctrine only against those who believed in the formation of the body by Angels, or by the heavenly bodies, that is, the stars, the sun, etc. His arguments, however, are interesting, for they exclude also the modern theory of evolution.

Against the possibility of angelic production he argues thus:

j
|
I
j
1
|
1
9
-9
9
a
s
9
9

material part. For, if the material part were produced independently, it would already have its *esse simpliciter*, its own existence, and therefore, the immaterial part would not be, strictly speaking, its *forma substantialis*. A composite could, however, be produced by a generating composite. Note well the word *generating*, for generating is not the same as "giving existence to the material part." In generation there is a succession of quasi-forms, none of which confer *esse simpliciter*, and all of which disappear in order.

As a consequence, the embryo is never simply a plant or simply an animal, and it never really subsists without the final form. That is, according to Saint Thomas, the ultimate reason why the final form is truly a substantial form, and that is why generation of a composite is so different from merely changing or preparing a piece of matter that already exists *per se*. Now, since an angel is not a composite, but a *forma a materia separata*, it could not generate a composite, (*oportet agens esse simile facto*), which is a *forma in materia*; and since there was no preexisting human body *cujus virtute per viam generationis aliud simile in specie formaretur*, he is forced to conclude that the first body was formed immediately by God. Generation by the sun or stars is excluded because, as we saw above, their generative powers are limited to the plant and simpler species of animals.

In the fourth article, Saint Thomas offers a further interpretation of the Scriptural passage: *Formavit igitur Dominus Deus hominem de limo terrae, et inspiravit in faciem ejus spiraculum vitae, et factus est homo in animam viventem. Formavit . . . hominem*, he says, refers to the simultaneous production of the body and soul. Of paramount importance to our question is the fact that he interprets *in animam viventem* as meaning Adam's animal life. That is to say, before God *inspiravit . . . spiraculum vitae*, there was no animal life present. That this is unquestionably the Angelic Doctor's understanding of the words can be very easily proven.

There were three main classes of living creatures produced by the work of creation: plants, which had an imperfect form of life, birds and fish, which were more perfect, and animals, which, according to Saint Thomas, Scripture calls *animam viventem propter perfectionem vitae in eis*³¹ Man is distinguished from the rest of the animals in the Scriptural account by the special manner used in describing his creation.³² The following quotation is deserving of a most careful perusal:

Sicut scriptum est; Factus est a Deo primus homo in animam viventem, vita scilicet animali, qualem anima potest dare, cum scilicet spiravit Dominus in faciem ejus spiraculum vitae, Gen. 2. Forma enim humana, et anima dicitur et spiritus: in quantum enim intendit curae corporis, scilicet vegetando, nutriendo et generando, sic dicitur anima; in quantum intendit cogitationi, scilicet intelligendo, volendo et hujusmodi, sic dicitur spiritus. Unde cum dicit, 'Factus est primus homo Adam in animam viventem' intendit Apostolus de vita qua anima deservit circa corpus. . . .³³

The mediaeval Scholastic could hardly be expected to express more clearly the opinion that the matter which became the body of Adam was not, before the infusion of the human soul, a living animal of any kind: that it was simply non-living matter.

The question of evolution is itself an interesting one, and as yet an undecided issue. This article makes no pretence at contributing to the important investigations now being carried on, nor has it any ambition to influence the opinions of theologians interested in the theory. It is offered merely in the interests of truth, and the truth is this: there is nothing in Saint Thomas which affords any support to the theory of the evolution of man's body.

«I, q. 72. ad 1.

«cf. *iMem*, < q. 94, a. 4, corp.

Â *Epâf. I ed Cormth.* XV, leer. 7.