FOREWORD TO CONSIDERATION OF MISTAKE OR ERROR

Although *mistake* and *error* can be considered synonyms, their etymologies are not the same. For *mistake* comes from missing in taking and *error* from the Latin word for wandering. (The Greeks also have a word for error derived from their word for wandering.)

Thus the etymology of *error* suggests that it is the result of a disordered movement of reason. Hence, when Thomas says that logic helps reason proceed *orderly, easily and without error*, there is a connection between *orderly* and *without error*. When reason proceeds orderly, it avoids errors. But when it moves in a disordered way, it is apt to wander into error. Thus, a knowledge of the roads to follow in our thinking helps us to avoid falling into error.

But the etymology of *mistake* suggests that it arises from taking one thing for another. We do not distinguish or see the distinction between two things and, therefore, take one for the other. The word *mixed-up* is closer to mistake than to error in its etymology. The one who is mistaken is mixed-up.

Since reason is defined by looking before and after (reason is the ability for large discourse, looking before and after) and distinction is presupposed to order or a before and after (for nothing is before or after itself), the words *mistake* and *error* in their etymologies touch upon their opposition to the good of reason which involves seeing the distinction of things and their order. But it is more the disorder in the act of reason which is the source of error.

Men are often mistaken. A sign of this is their frequent disagreement. Aristotle spoke of the prevalence of error in man and the other animals in the second book *About the Soul.*

As Aristotle shows in the second book of *Wisdom,* the consideration of truth belongs most of all to the wise man. Hence, also, the wise man is most of all is concerned with the elimination of error. And since it belongs to the wise man to consider things in the light of their causes, the wise man looks for the causes of mistakes or errors with a view to uprooting them.

And since wisdom is "to speak the truth, and to act, in accord with nature, giving ear thereto", the wise man wants to eliminate error which is contrary to nature:

> falsa enim iudicia in operationibus intellectus sunt sicut monstra in rebus naturalibus, quae non sunt secundum naturam, sed praeter naturam; nam bonum intellectus, et eius finis naturalis est cognitio veritatis.[1]

Moreover, it is also opposed to our natural desires. Just as man has a natural desire to know the truth, so too there is a natural desire in man to avoid error or mistake:

> Sicut omnes homines naturaliter scire desiderant veritatem, ita naturale desiderium inest hominibus fugiendi errores, et eos cum facultas adfuerit confutandi.[2]

This is another reason for the wise man in following nature to oppose error.

Moreover, it is opposed to our natural desire to be happy and avoid misery. As knowing truth is a great part of the happiness we all naturally desire most of all, so avoiding error is very important in escaping misery or wretchedness which we all naturally flee:

> deceptio autem et error magna pars miseriae est: hoc est enim quod omnes naturaliter fugiunt.[3]

And as Aristotle can reason from the natural desire to know both to the goodness and the possibility of knowledge, so we can reason from the natural desire to avoid error both to the desirability and the possibility of avoiding error. This does not mean, of course, that it is possible to eliminate all errors. There is something unlimited about eliminating error for mistakes are endless. We do well here to remember the words of Hilary in regard to another kind of infinite:

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[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Liber III, Caput 107

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas*, Proemium, Opuscula Philosophica, ed. Marietti, n. 173

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Liber III, Caput XXXIX

> incipe, procurre, persiste: etsi non perventurum sciam, gratulabor tamen profecturum. Qui enim....infinita prosequitur, etsi non contingat aliquando, semper tamen proficiet prodeundo.[4]

Goethe compared the wise man separating truth from falsity to a swimmer who momentarily parts the waters and, as he passes on in time, they come together again behind him.

Faced with the impossibility of eliminating all or even most errors, mankind can be consoled by two things in this life: the possibility of eliminating the more serious errors from some minds and the usefulness of error (per accidens) in developing the truth - for the refutation of error has often had this effect.

Our aim is to know the causes of mistake or error in our thinking. By "in our thinking", we separate from our aim the causes of mistake in our doing and making. We say in our *thinking* rather than in our *knowing* because knowing is the opposite of being mistaken.

The first division of the causes of error or mistake is made explicit by Thomas although Plato and Aristotle and Shakespeare and others have touched upon it. Hence, this foreword will be followed by a paper on the division of the causes of error or mistake. Then papers on the chief causes of mistake or error can be placed

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[4] *de Trin.*, Liber II, Capita 10 & 11