DIVISION OF THE CAUSES OF ERROR

Thomas Aquinas has divided the causes of error in his commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul to Timothy. In the following text, he speaks of the *occasions of errors* and divides them into two kinds:

> dicit et resipiscant a diaboli laqueis, id est, ab occasionibus errorum ex parte intellectus, sicut falsae phantasiae, et ex parte affectus, sicut sunt invidia, superbia, et huiusmodi.[1]

Thomas uses the word *occasion* especially for accidental cause, the kind of cause that something bad is apt to have. The division is into those occasions or causes which are *ex parte intellectus* or on the side of the understanding and those causes which are *ex parte affectus* or on the side of desire. Since the understanding or reason depends upon the senses in its operation, the first kind of cause includes the senses as Thomas' example of false imagination brings out. The second kind of cause includes those in the will and the emotions.

The above text is from Thomas' commentary on the *Second Epistle to Timothy*. In his commentary on the *First Epistle to Timothy*, Thomas also touches upon the above division, speaking of the root of error:

> Radix autem erroris est duplex, scilicet superbiae affectus, et defectus intellectus.[2]

Here the use of the word *root* seems to touch upon what is most fundamentaland universal or strongest in both kinds of causes. On the side of desire, Thomas singles out *superbia* or pride. Thomas, in his commentary on the *Gospel of St. John,* says that every error is caused by pride:

omnis error ex superbia causatur[3]

---

[1]*II Ad Timothy*, II, Lection IV, n. 87

[2]*I Ad Timothy*, VI, Lection I, n. 238

[3]Super Joannem, IV, Lectio IV, n. 601

And in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas calls pride or presumption[4] the *mother of error:*

praesumptio...est mater erroris[5]

And on the side of the understanding, he gives the failure to understand or the failure of the understanding as fundamental and universal. As Thomas says elsewhere, every error comes from a failure of understanding:

> In eo autem quod quis intelligit, non errat: ex defectu enim intelligendi provenit omnis error...[6]

Every error or mistake comes from a failure to understand something or from a misunderstanding. God cannot be mistaken because he understands everything.

Aristotle also touches upon causes on the side of the understanding and on the side of desire. In the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle considers the causes of the mistake of thinking that political rhetoric is political philosophy. He says that men claim this through not acquiring paideia or through boastfulness (which is a form of pride) and other human causes.[7] He gives ignorance and boastfulness as causes of error in the Eudemian Ethics.[8] Plato also in the *Phaedo* has Socrates see ignorance of the art of arguments and various defects in desire as causes of error or mistake. Shakespeare also sees causes on the side of our knowing powers and on the side of desire as will be seen in the papers on Shakespeare's understanding of error.

The reason why there are causes of error on both the side of reason and on the side of desire is not hard to find. Since a mistake or error is a defective act or product of reason, it is not strange to look for causes of error on the side

---

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo,* Q. 8, Art. 3, Ad 1: "praesumptio...maxime videtur ad superbiam pertinere"

[5] *Summa Contra Gentiles,* Liber I, Capitulum 5

[6] *Summa Contra Gentiles,* Liber III, Capitulum CVIII:

[7] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book I, Chapter 2, 1356a

[8] *Eudemian Ethics*, Book One, 1216b 40 - 1217a 10

of reason itself and the sense powers necessary for its act. But since the use and application of our reason also depends upon our will, for we can choose to apply or not apply our reason or apply it to this or to that, there can also be causes of error on the side of desire. And the emotions also influence our thinking as everyone knows.

Duane H. Berquist