

# Περιπατητικός

(*Peripatetikos*)

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*The Journal of the Society for Aristotelian-Thomistic Studies*  
*Revue de la Société d'études aristotélico-thomistes*

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Περιπατητικός is the official journal of the Society for Aristotelian-Thomistic Studies. It appears yearly, approximatively, with the purpose of explaining, promoting and applying to contemporary problems the great Greek philosophical tradition which centers on the work of Aristotle and Aquinas. Only contributions answering to this purpose will be considered. – Περιπατητικός est la revue officielle de la Société d'études aristotélico-thomistes. Publiée annuellement, approximativement, elle a pour but d'expliquer, promouvoir et appliquer à des problèmes contemporains la grande tradition philosophique grecque qui culmine dans l'oeuvre d'Aristote et de Thomas d'Aquin. N'y sont considérées que des contributions en relation à ce but.

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## Περιπατητικός

<p>se veut un véhicule d'expression assez diversifié pour offrir le mode de rencontre écrite où chaque membre se sent à l'aise. Une rubrique spéciale répond au type de réflexion que chacun veut livrer : de la suggestion de lecture au point de doctrine approfondi, en passant par le commentaire, le débat, l'outil pédagogique, la traduction, ou même — pourquoi pas? — un texte divertissant, sous mode de conférence ou d'entretien familial.</p>	<p>is intended to be a multi-faceted vehicle for philosophical exchange suited to the needs of all our members. The different sections are meant to reflect this diversity, running from serious philosophical and scholarly articles, to pedagogical texts, translations, talks given by members, exchanges on particular questions, critical studies, book reviews and — why not? — an occasional more popular text.</p>
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### Κεφάλαια

<p>Les <i>articles</i> sont, étymologiquement, les parties principales qui <i>articulent</i> une chose. C'est, traditionnellement, l'élément le plus substantiel, le plus sérieux d'une revue. Κεφάλαια l'annonce, en désignant le <i>capital</i>, qui a rapport à la tête.</p>	<p>Etymologically speaking, <i>articles</i> are those independent principal parts which, joined together, give structure to the whole and are thus, traditionally, the most substantial parts of a journal. Κεφάλαια, in its meaning of <i>principle</i> or <i>chief</i> expresses this well.</p>
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### Αμφισβητήματα

<p>Le dynamisme de la vie interne de la Société s'observe dans la présentation de découvertes relatives à l'interprétation d'Aristote, susceptibles d'attirer la contestation de membres. — Et dans la contestation de parutions antérieures, suivant un débat continu. Une tribune d'investigation dialectique.</p>	<p>The inner vitality of the Society can best be found in the presentation of discoveries in respect to the interpretation of Aristotle and his school which are apt to bring about lively debates among the members—debates that may extend through many issues of the journal. This is our dialectical Agora.</p>
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### Ἐξηγήσεις

<p>On réagit par des notes critiques à des parutions plus ou moins récentes en matière de tradition aristotélicienne.</p>	<p>A critical evaluation of recent — and not so recent — writings in the light of the Aristotelian tradition.</p>
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### Παιδεία

<p>Voilà le lieu de réflexions fondamentales sur les principes et le mode de l'apprentissage philosophique. Et d'autres outils, telles des traductions.</p>	<p>The place to go for translations of texts, as well as for reflections on the principles of philosophical teaching and their application.</p>
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### Ἐντεύξεις

<p>Des conférences présentées à différents publics reçoivent ici une diffusion plus large. Cette rubrique a couleur de vulgarisation, d'application à des situations familières et s'ouvre à des textes plus légers, voire divertissants.</p>	<p>Here we find a diversity of more popular and public works: talks given to various audiences; lighter works of philosophical reflection. A break from the more serious parts of the journal.</p>
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### Ἀπογράφεις

<p>Une rubrique un peu <i>technique</i>, mais utile, qui signale les dernières parutions susceptibles d'aider l'approfondissement de la doctrine aristotélicienne et thomiste. Ses compte-rendus énumèrent et décrivent simplement, sans commenter ni critiquer.</p>	<p>A more <i>technical</i> section devoted to indicating the newest texts in the tradition that may be of use to our readers. These reviews describe, but do not attempt to comment or critique.</p>
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# Κεφάλαια



# CIRCONSTANCES OU SINGULARITÉS ?<sup>1</sup>

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LA NATURE ET LA CONSCIENCE DES CIRCONSTANCES d'une action revêtent une importance capitale au moment de porter un jugement sur elle. Telle circonstance change une action bonne en fautive; telle autre lui appose le sceau de l'héroïsme; telle autre transforme un crime en acte involontaire. À quel titre un simple accident s'arroge-t-il pareille importance? La plupart des circonstances ne sont-elles pas insignifiantes pourtant, n'altérant en rien la nature ni la moralité de l'action qu'elles enveloppent? D'ailleurs, leur infinité potentielle ne promet-elle pas qu'on n'aura jamais conscience de toutes?

Que sont-elles donc au juste? Comment définir une circonstance? Comment devient-elle morale? Son infinité potentielle se contracte-t-elle en quelques prédicaments, comme celle des êtres?

## I. Son mystère

La circonstance, comme beaucoup de sujets d'intérêt philosophique, inspire au philosophe sa réaction proverbiale : "Je sais très bien ce que c'est! Mais si vous me le demandez, je ne le sais plus!" Plus je m'efforce de le dire clairement, plus je m'empêtre et deviens confus.

Aristote attire l'attention sur les circonstances dans l'*Éthique*, au moment d'élucider quelle ignorance rend une action involontaire. Après l'énumération d'un certain nombre d'objets que personne ne peut ignorer sans perversion – en gros, la loi naturelle et la nature de ce qu'on fait –, il déclare que seule l'ignorance de l'une de ses *circonstances* qu'on ne pouvait connaître excuse une action comme involontaire. Aristote, toutefois, ne s'exprime pas exactement ainsi; il ne parle pas de *circonstances*, de *περίστασες*, de ce qui "ἴσθησι περί", 'stat circum' l'action. Il parle de ses *singularités*, ses *ἕκαστα*, ses aspects qui en font telle action individuelle, sans aucune autre identique à elle.

Ἡ ... ἄγνοια αἰτία τοῦ ἀκουσίου ... ἢ καθ' ἕκαστα ἐν οἷς καὶ περὶ ἃ ἡ πρᾶξις...  
Ὁ γὰρ τούτων τι ἀγνοῶν ἀκουσίως πράττει. – L'ignorance qui rend l'action involontaire, c'est celle qui concerne les **singularités** dans lesquelles et à propos desquelles elle s'accomplit ... Celui qui ignore l'une d'elles agit involontairement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sujet d'abord présenté comme communication au Colloque virtuel de la *Société d'études aristotélico-thomistes* tenu les 20-21 août 2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Éth. Nic.*, III, 2, 1110b31-1111a2.

A. *Son nombre*

Aristote enchaîne en mentionnant l'intérêt de prendre connaissance de ces singularités. « Ἴσως οὖν οὐ χεῖρον, sans doute ne serait-il pas si mauvais », dit-il, « διορίσαι αὐτά τίνα καὶ πόσα ἐστί, de déterminer quelles elles sont et combien il y en a ».<sup>3</sup>

La tâche ne s'annonce pas aisée. La potentialité est infinie, des singularités qui accompagnent n'importe quelle action individuelle. Néanmoins, comme il l'a fait au moment de distinguer les genres d'êtres, un peu aussi à la manière dont l'infinité des directions géographiques possibles se ramasse en quatre points cardinaux, Aristote ramène cette infinité potentielle à quelques chefs d'attribution : il comprime les singularités des actions en une liste de sept κατηγορία :

*Τίς τε δὴ καὶ τί καὶ περὶ τί ἢ ἐν τίνι πράττει, ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ τίνι, οἷον ὄργανον, καὶ ἔνεκα τίνος, οἷον σωτηρίας, καὶ πῶς, οἷον ἡρέμα ἢ σφόδρα. – Qui agit, bien sûr, et qu'il fait, et sur quoi ou en quoi il le fait, parfois aussi avec quoi, par exemple avec tel instrument, et en vue de quoi, par exemple pour son salut, et comment, avec douceur, par exemple, ou avec force. (Ibid., 1111a3-6)*

Ces κατηγορία s'appréhendent plus aisément dans un tableau comme le suivant :

τίς qui	τί quoi	περὶ τί sur quoi	ἐν τίνι en quoi
τίνι (ὄργανον) avec quoi	τίνος ἔνεκα pourquoi		πῶς comment

Par exemple : Qui? *Socrate*, fait quoi? *donne*, quoi? un *encouragement*, à qui? à *Alcibiade*, avec quoi? *en quelques mots*, pourquoi? pour *qu'il n'abandonne pas la discussion*, comment? *Sincèrement*.

Le tableau semble clair, mais le reconsidérer suscite quelques malaises. D'abord, une ambiguïté agace : qu'entend Aristote par 'ἐν τίνι πράττει, *en quoi il le fait*'? Faut-il comprendre littéralement *en quoi* ou *à quoi et, éventuellement, à qui*? Ou s'agit-il d'une reformulation pour éclairer le sens de 'περὶ τί'? Tricot va dans cette direction; il traduit : « la personne ou la chose objet de l'acte », et insiste en note : « περὶ τί ἢ ἐν τίνι, l'objet, personne ou chose, sur lequel roule l'action ». Ainsi définis, 'περὶ τί' et 'ἐν τίνι' visent tous deux l'objet direct de l'action. Aristote semble d'ailleurs abonder en ce sens, en liant les deux par ἢ, *ou*, les mettant ainsi sur le même pied. Pourtant, l'objet indirect d'une action en représente un aspect trop capital pour être omis. Certes, peut-on remarquer, pour récupérer à son avantage la formulation d'Aristote, les objets direct et indirect se situent aussi plus ou moins au même niveau. Aristote marque d'ailleurs l'aspect plus accessoire des trois singularités suivantes, en les faisant précéder d'un 'ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ, *mais quelquefois aussi*' : l'agent s'aide souvent, mais pas toujours, d'un instrument, il ordonne souvent aussi son action, mais pas toujours, à une autre fin que son résultat immédiat et il l'accomplit souvent, mais pas toujours, d'une manière qui se démarque.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1111a3.



### *Circonstances ou singularités?*

La liste montre d'autre part des lacunes importantes. Aristote ne fait aucune allusion au *lieu* et au *temps*, des singularités inaliénables de toute action, parfois capables d'une portée telle qu'en les ignorant on croit poser un acte innocent alors que ce qu'on fait est déplacé : s'exprimant à haute voix, par exemple, sans réaliser qu'on se trouve dans un lieu sacré au moment d'une cérémonie importante. – Aristote ne mentionne pas non plus les *résultats collatéraux* de l'action, ceux que l'agent ne vise pas, mais qui s'ensuivent de ce qu'il fait; eux aussi peuvent dégrader une action, et leur ignorance la rendre involontaire; affaiblir le système immunitaire pour soulager les symptômes de l'arthrite rhumatoïde peut ainsi réveiller inopinément une tuberculose latente.

Saint Thomas, toujours prêt à lire Aristote avec bienveillance, lui fait mentionner ensemble le lieu et le temps dans l'expression 'ἐν τίνι πράττει, *en quoi il le fait*'. Commentant l'énumération d'Aristote, sa phrase devient toutefois laborieuse, au moment de soutenir qu'Aristote pointe temps et lieu, et témoigne ainsi de la contrainte exercée sur le texte grec pour l'entendre de la sorte.

En énumérant ces singularités, le Philosophe dit : *qui*, ce qui vise la personne de l'agent principal. Et : *quoi*, à savoir *quoi il fait*, ce qui vise son genre d'action. Et : *sur quoi*, ce qui vise sa matière, c'est-à-dire son objet.<sup>4</sup>

Vient alors la phrase que j'ai qualifiée de laborieuse :

*Apponit autem et circa hoc, id quod pertinet ad mensuram actus, ut agentis, idest locum vel tempus, cum dicit, vel in quo operatur.* – Il ajoute encore à *l'entour*, ce qui vise sa mesure, en tant que celle de l'agent, c'est-à-dire, son lieu ou son temps, lorsqu'il dit : *ou en quoi il le fait*.<sup>5</sup>

Ce '*circa hoc, à l'entour*' n'apparaît pas dans le texte, mais veut périphraser 'ἐν τίνι', comme en témoigne la phrase suivante : « C'est que tout ce qui lui est extérieur entretient manifestement une relation avec l'action humaine. »<sup>6</sup> À quoi s'ajoute la référence à Cicéron : « Cicéron, lui, inclut 'sur quoi' sous 'quoi' et divise '*en quoi*' en deux circonstances : *quand* et *où*. »<sup>7</sup> Cicéron, en effet, dont la propre liste de chefs de circonstances s'inspire manifestement d'Aristote, mentionne nommément le temps et le lieu. Enfin, '*ut agentis, en tant que celle de l'agent*' rappelle que c'est en mesurant l'agent que le temps et le lieu mesurent l'action.

Il reste néanmoins qu'entendre 'ἐν τίνι πράττει, *en quoi il le fait*' comme visant temps et lieu, fait négliger par Aristote l'objet indirect, pourtant plus important, parce que plus essentiel.

En définitive, il n'y a là que problème de lecture, non problème doctrinal comme tel. Il est clair que l'intention est d'inclure son objet indirect, son lieu, son temps et tous ses résultats comme des singularités de l'action, dont l'ignorance de la part de l'agent pourrait rendre son agir involontaire. Aristote ne le nie pas. En outre, ses exemples laissent voir qu'il y pense. Il n'illustre pas les circonstances de lieu et de temps, peut-être en raison de leur évidence, mais il illustre clairement l'objet indirect et le dommage collatéral,

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<sup>4</sup> *In III Nic. Eth.*, lect. 3, #415.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

impliqués simultanément en deux cas : on peut, signale-t-il, « tirer à seul titre de démonstration »<sup>8</sup>, sans savoir que son arme est chargée et qu'on blessera quelqu'un; on peut aussi « ne pas savoir que c'est son fils qu'on frappe »<sup>9</sup>, la nuit, en croyant défendre sa maison contre un cambrioleur. Rappelons-nous qu'en matière éthique, Aristote ne cherche pas l'exhaustivité rigoureuse et se contente de s'exprimer plus largement. Dans le cas, il inclut le dommage collatéral sous l'objet de l'action, il compte tout résultat atteint comme *ce qu'on fait*, τί πράττει.

On peut donc réviser la table des circonstances à la hausse, pour plus de clarté :

AGENT	OBJET			FIN
τίς qui	τί quoi	περὶ τί sur quoi	τίνι à qui	τίνος ἕνεκα pourquoi
τίνι ὀργάνῳ avec quoi	ποῦ où	ποτὲ quand	πῶς comment	τέλος quel résultat

Saint Thomas en explique assez exactement l'ordre, en se fondant sur une définition de la circonstance :

Voici comment comprendre le fondement de cette énumération. On appelle *circonstance* ce qui, bien qu'en dehors de la substance de l'action, la touche de quelque façon. Or cela peut se faire de trois façons : en touchant soit l'acte même, soit sa cause, soit son effet. Touche l'acte même, sa mesure : son *temps* et son *lieu*; ou sa qualité : son *mode d'action*. Touche son effet, *quoi* on fait. Touchent sa cause, d'abord sa fin : *pourquoi* on le fait ; puis sa matière, son objet : *sur quoi* on le fait ; enfin son agent principal : *qui* agit; et son agent instrumental : *avec quoi* il agit.<sup>10</sup>

On voit que saint Thomas, comme Aristote, ne sent pas la nécessité de distinguer le résultat collatéral de l'objet direct. Cette distinction ajoute tout de même assez à la clarté pour mériter d'apparaître au tableau.

### B. Sa nature

Sommes-nous au bout de nos peines? Loin de là! Nous nous trouvons seulement mieux placés pour contempler le mystère. Nous apercevons nettement les dix κατηγορίαί de la circonstance. Maintenant, comment définir celle-ci? Qu'est-ce que ce sont au juste que ces singularités de l'action? Saint Thomas vient tout juste de le dire : « On appelle circonstance ce qui, bien qu'en dehors de la substance de l'action, la touche de quelque façon. »<sup>11</sup> Il en parle toujours comme d'un accident, comme d'un aspect de l'action

<sup>8</sup> Δεῖξαι βουλόμενος ἀφεῖναι, ὡς ὁ τὸν καταπέλτην, *décocher en voulant démontrer, comme qui enseigne le maniement de la catapulte*. (1111a10-11)

<sup>9</sup> Οἰηθεῖν δ' ἄν τις καὶ τὸν υἱὸν πολέμιον εἶναι, *on peut prendre son propre fils pour un ennemi*. (1111a11-12)

<sup>10</sup> IaIIae, q. 7, a. 3, c.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Circonstances ou singularités?*

étranger à sa substance, à son essence. Il justifie dans la même ligne le nom de ‘*circumstantiae*’ que les latins ont substitué aux ‘singularités’ d’Aristote.

Les noms sont les signes des concepts. Aussi, le processus de nomination doit se conformer au processus de la connaissance intellectuelle. Or notre connaissance intellectuelle procède du plus connaissable au moins connaissable. C’est pourquoi nous transférons les noms de ce qui nous est plus connaissable à la signification de ce qui nous l’est moins. Par conséquent, le nom *distance* s’étend, de ce qui concerne le lieu, à tous les contraires. Pareillement, nous nous servons des noms qui visent le changement de lieu pour signifier les autres changements, comme ce sont les corps qui nous sont le plus connaissables, du fait de se trouver circonscrits par un lieu. De là vient que le nom *circonstance*, à partir de ce qui se trouve en un lieu, s’étend aux actes humains. – Or, à propos d’un corps présent en un lieu, on dit que l’entoure ce qui lui est extérieur, mais le touche, ou en est proche. C’est pourquoi on appelle des circonstances toutes les conditions d’un acte qui, bien qu’extérieures à sa substance, le touchent cependant de quelque façon. Or ce qui est extérieur à la substance d’un acte, mais lui appartient, on l’appelle son accident. On doit donc déclarer leurs accidents les circonstances des actes humains.<sup>12</sup>

Or cette définition jure avec l’énumération aristotélicienne des genres de circonstances. Comment considérer ce qui se fait, τί πράττει, comme étranger à la substance de l’action? Prendre, donner, voler, tuer, médire, c’est l’action elle-même, c’en est la substance. Il en va de même avec περί τί et ἐν τίνι : prendre *le bien d’autrui* et restituer *son dû à autrui* définissent respectivement l’agir injuste et juste, voler et rendre. On ne se sent pas non plus à l’aise de regarder les causes responsables de l’action comme de ses accidents : sa matière et sa forme, qu’on vient de mentionner, et aussi son agent et sa fin, τίς et τίνοϋς ἕνεκα, aussi extérieurs qu’on veuille les dire à l’action même, sont tout de même responsables de son essence.

On admet plus spontanément comme des accidents les autres chefs de circonstances. Mais un examen plus rigoureux incite à quelque réticence. L’usage de tel ou tel *instrument* ne change-t-il pas la nature de l’action posée : écrire avec une plume, en tapant à la machine ou en usant d’un ordinateur partagent-ils exactement la même essence? Quant au *lieu* et au *temps*, ils sont capables de faire essentiellement d’une action un sacrilège, si on vole dans un lieu sacré, comme le mentionne saint Thomas, ou si on banquette durant l’eucharistie, comme le reproche saint Paul. Le *mode* d’action ne spécifie-t-il pas lui aussi des actions essentiellement distinctes? Frapper doucement, c’est témoigner son affection; fortement, c’est agresser ou châtier, selon les personnes impliquées. Enfin, le *résultat* qu’on ne vise pas, qui ne motive pas son action, n’en change-t-il pas de même la nature? Intervenir chirurgicalement pour délivrer d’une tumeur cancéreuse garde-t-il la même essence s’il entraîne l’expulsion d’un enfant à naître?

D’ailleurs, s’il s’agissait simplement d’accidents, leur ignorance rendrait-elle l’action involontaire, comme le déclare Aristote? Ne faut-il pas que la singularité qu’on ignore ait quelque impact essentiel sur son action pour en faire une qu’on regrette une fois qu’on sait mieux ce qu’on a fait? Acheter de seconde main un outil dont on ne sait pas qu’il a appartenu au cousin du monsieur de la rue voisine fait-il de cet achat un acte involontaire? S’en excuse-t-on? Rencontre-t-on la compassion des témoins, comme Aristote dit que

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<sup>12</sup> IaIIae, q. 7, a. 1, c.

l'acte involontaire la suscite? « Ἐν τούτοις γὰρ καὶ ἔλεος καὶ συγγνώμη, c'est dans ces conditions qu'on accorde sa compassion et son indulgence. »<sup>13</sup>

Aristote, en outre, s'oppose expressément à cette minimisation de la nature des circonstances, quand il fait tout spécialement tenir l'involontaire à l'ignorance des singularités les plus essentielles de l'action. « Ὁ τούτων τι ἀγνοήσας ἄκων δοκεῖ πεπραχέναι, en ignorant l'une de ces singularités, on est regardé comme ayant agi involontairement »<sup>14</sup>, conclut-il, précisant : « καὶ μάλιστα ἐν τοῖς κυριωτάτοις, surtout quand il s'agit des principales. »<sup>15</sup> Et ces principales, « δοκεῖ »<sup>16</sup>, c'est-à-dire l'opinion commune l'admet sans difficulté, « εἶναι ... ἐν οἷς ἡ πρᾶξις καὶ οὗ ἕνεκα, se trouvent celles qui concernent l'objet et la fin de l'action. »<sup>17</sup>

## II. Son homonymie

Dissiper ces ambiguïtés et contradictions commande distinction du sens et de la portée des termes de l'énumération de ces κατηγορίαί. Chacune des étiquettes désigne plusieurs réalités distinctes et les consacre comme homonymes.

On devra aussi prendre conscience que, contrairement à l'impression spontanée, les 'singularités' d'Aristote, ses 'ἕκαστα', et les 'circumstantiae' des Latins ne s'équivalent pas parfaitement; la seconde appellation ne traduit pas exactement la première.

### A. Tantôt spécifications tantôt accidents

Première concession inéluctable, les principales κατηγορίαί énumérées désignent en première instance des aspects essentiels de l'action. L'objet de l'action – le 'τί', le 'περὶ τί' et aussi le 'ἐν τίνι', si on y reconnaît l'objet indirect – représente le cas le plus manifeste : il constitue l'essence même de l'action, son genre et la matière qui le spécifie. C'est très clairement ainsi que le voit aussi saint Thomas :

Tout comme la chose naturelle tire son espèce de sa forme, de même l'action la tire de son objet, comme aussi le changement la tire de son terme.<sup>18</sup>

Ensuite, les κατηγορίαί qui incarnent les causes de l'action – τίς, son agent principal, τίνι, son agent instrumental, et τίνοσ ἕνεκα, son but – se trouvent responsables de cette essence; elles ne doivent donc pas s'en considérer comme des accidents; ni comme des circonstances, tant qu'on définit celles-ci comme des accidents. Saint Thomas l'accorde aussi expressément : « Les actes humains ... tirent leur espèce de leur fin. »<sup>19</sup>

Le temps, le lieu, le mode et le résultat non visé, quant à eux, constituent normalement des aspects accidentels de l'action. Ils ne touchent pas son essence : travailler avec son ordinateur garde la même nature, qu'on le fasse sur son bureau ou sur la table de la cuisine, en avant-midi ou en après-midi. Il en va de même de la modalité : user de son ordinateur avec enthousiasme ou avec ennui ne spécifient pas des actions de natures distinctes. Il en

<sup>13</sup> 1111a1-2.

<sup>14</sup> 1111a16-17.

<sup>15</sup> 1111a17-18.

<sup>16</sup> 1111a18.

<sup>17</sup> 1111a18-19.

<sup>18</sup> IaIIae, q. 18, a. 2, c. : « Sicut autem res naturalis habet speciem ex sua forma, ita actio habet speciem ex obiecto; sicut et motus ex termino. »

<sup>19</sup> IaIIae, q. 1, a. 3, c. : « Actus humani ... a fine speciem sortiuntur. »

## *Circonstances ou singularités?*

va pareillement pour les effets collatéraux : qu'en travaillant, on se trouve à manquer un épisode d'une série télévisée, ne transforme pas diamétralement l'activité concernée. Pourtant, ces aspects normalement secondaires de l'action incarnent à l'occasion leurs différences spécifiques, comme en certains exemples présentés plus haut : le *lieu* qui distingue le sacrilège du simple vol; la *manière* qui distingue le geste d'affection de l'agression. Ils n'en sont plus alors des accidents, ni des circonstances. Saint Thomas l'avoue : « La condition<sup>20</sup> de la cause dont l'essence de l'acte dépend ne se qualifie pas comme circonstance. »<sup>21</sup>

Il est donc capital de s'en apercevoir : plusieurs des singularités énumérées désignent tantôt des aspects essentiels des actions qu'elles concernent : leur genre ou leur différence spécifique, tantôt des accidents plus ou moins significatifs en complément de leur être. En fait, on le verra tout de suite, toutes sont sujettes à cette homonymie, bien que ce soit plus immédiatement évident pour le temps, le lieu, le mode et le résultat collatéral.

### *B. Tantôt chef de circonstances tantôt circonstance subordonnée*

Si les singularités mentionnées incarnent souvent des aspects essentiels des actions, pourquoi les énumérer absolument comme les *chefs* de circonstances? Il faut comprendre que les circonstances qu'on range sous les rubriques τίς, τί, περί τί, ἐν τίνι, τίνος ἕνεκα et chacune des autres ne sont pas proprement l'agent, le genre, l'objet, la fin de l'action, mais la myriade d'accidents qui les singularisent. Ce n'est pas *l'agent* la circonstance de l'action; ce sont sa fonction, son titre, ses liens parentaux, sa taille, son âge, tout ce qui se rattache d'accidents à l'agent. Il s'agit de circonstances ordinairement insignifiantes, sans aucune influence sur la nature de l'action, mais qui la singularisent comme telle action, identique à aucune autre. Tout de même, certaines la perfectionnent ou la détériorent : commander *dûment mandaté*, c'est le faire légitimement; commander *sans mandat*, c'est usurper; châtier comme père ou comme juge, c'est faire acte de justice; le faire sans ces titres, c'est commettre une injustice. On observe la même situation chez les substances naturelles : toute leur perfection ne tient pas exclusivement à leur essence; celle-ci a besoin du complément qu'apportent propriétés et accidents communs.

Les êtres naturels ne tirent pas toute la plénitude de la perfection qui leur est due de la forme substantielle qui leur confère leur espèce. Au contraire, beaucoup de perfection s'ajoute par les accidents qui leur surviennent : par leur figure, par exemple, chez l'homme, par leur couleur, et ainsi de suite. En conséquence, si quoi que ce soit manque à l'état qui leur convient, il s'en ensuit du mal. Il en va de même aussi dans l'action. En effet, la plénitude de sa bonté ne consiste pas toute en son espèce ; quelque chose s'y ajoute, au contraire, de ce qui lui advient en tant qu'accident. C'est le cas des circonstances dues. En conséquence, si quelque chose manque qui soit requis aux circonstances dues, l'action sera mauvaise.<sup>22</sup>

Par ailleurs, certaines singularités de l'agent accèdent au rôle de différences spécifiques et cessent pour lors de représenter des circonstances; elles constituent alors des singularités dont l'ignorance revêt l'action du caractère involontaire. Ainsi, tuer un

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<sup>20</sup> 'Conditiones' traduit plus adéquatement 'ἑκαστα' que 'circumstantiae'.

<sup>21</sup> IaIIae, q. 7, a. 3, ad 3 : « Illa conditio causae ex qua substantia actus dependet non dicitur circumstantia. »

<sup>22</sup> IaIIae, q. 18, a. 3, c.

innocent est un meurtre, mais si l'agent est le *filis* de la victime, cette singularité aggrave le meurtre en parricide. Qui a une relation avec qui il n'est pas marié fornicque, mais s'il est *marié*, il commet un adultère. Et un inceste s'il est *père* ou *frère* de la partenaire.

L'objet, de son côté, le 'περὶ τί', se revêt de même en chaque action d'une infinité d'accidents qui le singularisent : l'argent qu'on prend ou qu'on donne peut figurer comme *dollars*, *euros* ou *shekels*, s'utiliser en *petites* ou *grosses coupures*, être *beaucoup* ou *peu*. Ces circonstances rangées sous l'attribution de l'objet ne font rien de spécial. Mais si cet argent est à *autrui*, voilà que prendre devient voler et que donner devient frauder.

Pareillement, de multiples accidents et concomitants colorent chaque fin visée : le doctorat qu'on recherche peut se faire *en philosophie* ou *en médecine*, être le *premier* ou le *second* qu'on obtient, *simultané* à un baccalauréat en une autre discipline, à son mariage ou à l'obtention d'un permis de conduire. Encore là, rien qui en change la nature. Mais s'il n'est qu'honorifique...

Bref, quelle que soit la tête de circonstances considérée, les circonstances sont les accidents qui entourent la réalité de ce nom, plutôt qu'elle-même. Et ce ne sont des circonstances que tant qu'elles demeurent des accidents, eux-mêmes tantôt indifférents tantôt complémentaires à l'essence de l'action. Dès qu'elles se haussent au statut de différences spécifiques, elles cessent d'être des circonstances, mais demeurent des singularités et deviennent d'ailleurs de ce fait d'autant plus aptes à conférer le titre d'involontaire, ou au moins de non volontaire, si on les ignore.

La condition de la cause dont l'essence de l'acte dépend ne se dit pas une circonstance. *La circonstance est plutôt une condition qui s'y adjoint*. Ainsi, en l'objet, ne constitue pas une circonstance du vol le fait qu'on prenne *le bien d'autrui* ; cela appartient en effet à l'essence du vol. La circonstance sera plutôt que ce bien soit *grand* ou *petit*. Il en va pareillement des circonstances tirées des autres causes. En effet, *la fin qui donne son espèce à l'acte*<sup>23</sup> *n'est pas une circonstance ; la circonstance sera plutôt une fin adjointe*<sup>24</sup>. Par exemple, que le courageux agisse avec courage *en vue du bien propre au courage*, ce n'est pas une circonstance ; mais c'en sera une s'il agit avec courage *en vue de la libération de sa cité*, ou du peuple chrétien, ou autre chose du genre. – *Quoi* on fait prête à la même distinction : qu'on se lave *en se mouillant*, ce n'en est pas une circonstance ; mais qu'en se lavant, *on prenne froid* ou *chaud*, et qu'on *guérisse* ou *encoure quelque dommage*, voilà des circonstances.<sup>25</sup>

Bref chacun des chefs de singularité qu'Aristote place dans son énumération désigne d'abord quelque élément de l'action ou quelque cause ou accident de l'action, mais par extension couvre aussi tout ce qui peut se rattacher de quelque façon à eux. Un peu comme chacune des attributions de l'être énumérées au traité des *Attributions* (*Κατηγορίαι*) désigne tantôt chacun des genres d'êtres, ou plus précisément des homonymes de la substance, l'être par excellence, tantôt chacune des espèces rangées sous ces genres, tantôt l'ensemble de leur ordonnance.

<sup>23</sup> La 'finis operis'.

<sup>24</sup> La 'finis operantis'.

<sup>25</sup> IaIIae, q. 7, a. 3, ad 3.

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### *C. Tantôt circonstance naturelle tantôt circonstance morale*

Une autre homonymie à relever concerne les niveaux naturel et moral de l'action. Déjà sur le plan naturel, une action possède son essence et ses accidents, ses circonstances. Génériquement, donner diffère par nature de prendre, acheter de vendre, manger de boire. Leurs objets directs respectifs spécifient cette différenciation : donner, prendre, acheter, vendre, ce n'est pas le même acte s'il s'agit d'une maison, d'une voiture ou d'un vêtement; de même manger, s'il s'agit de poisson ou de viande, de fruits, de légumes; et boire, s'il s'agit d'eau ou de boisson alcoolisée. De même les objets indirects : s'unir à une femme change de nature s'il s'agit de son épouse ou d'une autre femme, d'une femme célibataire ou mariée, d'une parente ou d'une étrangère.

Les fins ajoutent aussi une différence importante : acheter une maison *pour l'habiter* diffère de l'acheter *pour la louer*; manger pour fêter, de manger pour guérir; boire pour socialiser, de boire pour s'enivrer. De même, chaque temps, chaque lieu, chaque modalité, chaque résultat singularise une action vis-à-vis d'une autre. En outre, tout ce qui peut s'attacher à ces aspects en fait de... singularités, accentue la distance naturelle entre les actes singuliers. Jusque-là, il s'agit de singularités ou circonstances de natures. Mais elles fournissent matière à moralité.

#### a) Bien de nature et bien moral

À son simple plan naturel, une action est déjà bonne ou mauvaise. Son bien, comme celui de toute autre réalité s'identifie à son être. « Le bien et le mal de l'action, comme ceux des autres choses, s'attend de la plénitude ou du défaut d'être. »<sup>26</sup> Aussi, on décrit ce qu'elle présente en premier de bon précisément en décrivant ce qu'elle est, ce en quoi elle consiste : ce qu'elle a en commun avec sa famille d'êtres, son genre, et ce par quoi elle se distingue des autres êtres de son genre. Bref, le premier et fondamental bien qu'elle comporte, c'est l'espèce d'être qu'elle est. « Ce qui touche en premier la plénitude d'être est ce qui confère à une chose son espèce. »<sup>27</sup> Ainsi que je le signalais plus haut, s'il s'agissait d'une substance, on penserait à sa forme; son genre, conçu à l'inspiration de sa matière, se préciserait par des différences inspirées de sa forme. Ce que l'action présente de correspondant, qui lui confère son type exact d'être et par là le bien fondamental qu'elle offre, c'est son objet, c'est cela même qu'elle fait et à quoi elle aboutit.

Ainsi, on peut prendre bien et prendre mal. On prend mal, par exemple, si l'on ne tient pas solidement et qu'on échappe; ou si l'on serre trop et qu'on écrase. On mange mal, si l'on ingère des aliments dont la nature ou la quantité empoisonnent ou rendent malade, au lieu de nourrir; ou si on ne met pas en bouche proprement, de sorte que tout dégouline sur son menton, ses doigts et ses vêtements.

À ce bien, à cette perfection naturelle de l'action, s'en ajoute un autre que l'on qualifie de moral. Comment, par quoi, une action, avec tout son vêtement d'essence et d'accidents, s'élève-t-elle ainsi au niveau de la moralité? C'est qu'on agit pour compléter son être. À la différence des autres êtres, l'homme commence son existence incomplet, indéterminé. La dimension principale de son être, celle qui le différencie de tous les autres et spécialement des autres animaux, son intelligence, est absolument ignorante, alors qu'elle est appelée à tout savoir et spécialement à connaître l'auteur de toutes choses. Sa volonté est plus ou moins indifférente, alors que sa perfection serait de choisir et de vouloir ce en

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<sup>26</sup> IaIIae, q. 18, a. 2, c.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

quoi réside ou qui concourt à la perfection de l'être de son sujet. Ses mains sont débiles alors que la nature les lui a données pour tenir et manipuler habilement tout ce qui peut donner efficacité à ses actions.

L'homme étant tel au départ de sa vie, chaque action qu'il envisage est susceptible, en son essence et chacune de ses singularités, soit de compléter son être, soit de le détériorer. Cette perfection de son être humain est ce qu'il cherche ultimement, sans pouvoir viser autre chose, en chaque action qu'il pose.

Il y a, à ce qu'on fait, une fin qu'on veut pour elle-même, et on veut le reste à cause d'elle. En effet, on ne choisit pas toute fin en vue d'une autre, car on irait ainsi à l'infini, ce qui rendrait tout désir futile et vain. C'est cette fin-là, clairement, notre bien, et notre bien le meilleur. Dès lors, ne pèse-t-elle pas lourdement sur la direction de notre vie?<sup>28</sup>

Mais ce but incontournable, cet être heureux, qu'est-ce au juste? S'en faire une idée juste est indispensable, si on est pour l'atteindre moyennant son activité.

Sa connaissance ne nous fera-t-elle pas ressembler à l'archer en vue de sa cible, plus capables d'atteindre ce à quoi nous devons viser?<sup>29</sup>

Certainement, ce but dernier inaliénable de chacune de nos actions est la vie la plus proprement humaine.

Le bonheur, c'est ce qu'il y a de mieux, on l'admet déjà sans doute. Reste tout de même à énoncer plus clairement ce qu'il est. On y arrivera dès qu'on saisira quel est l'acte propre de l'homme (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου). Comme le flutiste, le statuaire, tout détenteur d'un art, et quiconque absolument exerce un acte, une activité propre, l'homme aussi, manifestement, trouve en cet acte son bien et sa réussite.<sup>30</sup>

Il ne s'agit pas simplement de se nourrir et de se reproduire, ni de vivre en santé, ce à quoi réussissent les meilleures plantes. Ni simplement de sentir et de ressentir, à quoi tout animal arrive. N'est susceptible de parfaire l'homme à sa pleine satisfaction que l'opération réussie de sa raison : prendre conscience de ce qui l'entoure, se connaître lui-même, connaître son bien et y ordonner en toute situation l'usage de chacune de ses puissances.

Vivre, voilà qui est commun aussi aux plantes; or c'est l'activité propre à l'homme qu'on cherche. On doit donc éliminer la vie de nutrition et celle de croissance. Ce sera la vie sensitive, alors? Mais évidemment, elle est commune au cheval, au bœuf, à tout animal! Reste la vie active de qui détient raison : vie de soumission à cette raison, mais surtout vie à la détenir et à en user... Bref, le bien propre à l'homme, c'est l'activité de sa raison, exercée avec excellence<sup>31,32</sup>

Ce bonheur auquel tout homme aspire réside en fin de compte en l'activité spéculative de sa raison, en cette conscience qu'il développe de son essence, de celle des autres êtres et spécialement de celle de l'être suprême dont dépend sa propre existence. Mais il

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<sup>28</sup> *Éth. Nic.*, I, 1, 1094a18-23.

<sup>29</sup> *Éth. Nic.*, I, 1, 1094a23-24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 1097b22-28.

<sup>31</sup> « Τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια γίνεται κατὰ ἀρετήν. » – Litt. : "l'activité de son âme", mais en entendant celle de la puissance la plus élevée et propre de son âme.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1097b33-1098a5.16-17.



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consiste initialement en l'activité pratique de sa raison, qui prépare la situation propice à son activité spéculative, notamment en soumettant à son jugement les activités des autres puissances humaines sur lesquelles elle a autorité. Car tant que sa raison est droite, chacun a l'opportunité de prendre conscience de cette contribution à son bonheur ou son malheur, à sa perfection ou à sa ruine, qu'offre chaque action qui se présente à lui. Chacun aussi, tant que sa volonté est droite, a la liberté de se conformer à cet éclairage de sa raison pour choisir ou rejeter l'action projetée. En cette conformité de sa volonté à sa raison droite consiste toute la moralité des actions qu'il choisit; à l'opposé, toute l'immoralité, toute la malice de ses actions tient à s'écarter sciemment de cette conformité à sa raison droite. Qui plus est, chaque action, en se répétant, développe un habitus, vertu ou vice, qui rend son agent de plus en plus efficace à contribuer ainsi à son bonheur ou à son malheur.

Pourquoi qualifier de *morale* l'action conforme à la raison, l'action qui prépare et constitue notre bonheur, celle dont la répétition rend vertueux, spécialement efficace à choisir et effectuer exactement ce qui concourt à notre perfection? Le motif en est que ce qui garantit au mieux ce discernement rationnel, ainsi que la soumission à lui de notre volonté et de toute notre vie affective, ce sont nos mœurs, nos habitus, ces qualités que la répétition d'un discernement adéquat et une soumission répétée à celui-ci développent en notre raison, notre volonté, notre appétit sensible, initialement ignorants et indéterminés. Aristote le manifeste par l'absurde, quand il déclare vain l'auditeur de la science morale que ses habitus forcent déjà à une action contraire à son bien; quand il insiste jusqu'à déclarer impropre l'auditeur que son éducation n'a pas encore muni d'habitus capables de garder rationnel son agir.

Le jeune ne fait pas un auditeur approprié de la politique. Il est encore sans expérience des actions qui tissent la vie humaine, pourtant principes et objets des réflexions de cette science. En outre, asservi à ses passions, il entendra en vain et sans profit pareilles réflexions, puisque la fin n'en est pas qu'on sache, mais qu'on agisse en conséquence. Cela ne change rien, d'ailleurs, que l'insuffisance tienne à l'âge ou aux mœurs, car le handicap ne tient pas au temps, mais à ce que la passion dicte tout ce qu'on vit et cherche. Dans cette condition, la connaissance ne sert de rien, et c'est pareil tant qu'on ne se maîtrise pas.<sup>33</sup>

Bref, tout le critère de la moralité tient à la contribution apportée au bonheur, perfection humaine; en contrepartie, toute immoralité vient de faire obstacle à ce bonheur. Toute action est morale dans la mesure exacte où elle rend heureux et immorale dans la mesure où elle entraîne au malheur.

#### b) Moralité radicale

L'objet d'une action lui confère donc son être naturel; puis, sa conformité au jugement de la raison sur ce qu'il convient de faire ici et maintenant, assumée par la volonté, lui confère son être moral, la forme qui le spécifie comme bien proprement humain. S'il s'agit de prendre, l'acte sera bon par nature, si l'on prend correctement, en serrant comme il convient pour user adroitement de ce qu'on prend; l'acte sera bon moralement, pour autant que, prenant, on se conforme à ce que la raison droite juge contribuer au meilleur être de l'agent : qu'on prenne ce qu'il convient de prendre, un bien par exemple qui soit sien.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 1095a2-9.

L'acte moral est un acte volontaire qui procède de la raison. Forcément, donc, il tire son espèce d'un aspect en son objet qui comporte ordonnance à la raison : s'il s'accorde à la raison, il sera bon d'espèce.<sup>34</sup>

L'action dont l'espèce se conforme au jugement de la raison droite est bonne en soi, bonne par nature. Étrangement, on s'est accoutumé à marquer cette bonté initiale de certaines actions comme une bonté *ex genere*<sup>35</sup>, bien qu'elle se doive plus précisément à l'espèce, comme on parle du *genre humain*, sans contester que l'homme soit une espèce, non un genre<sup>36</sup>.

Se dédoublant, quand l'action est transitive, l'objet, impliquant alors quelque chose d'extérieur à elle, fournit une double source d'être et de bonté : on prend, ce qui peut être bon et se faire bien, comme marcher, courir, dormir, mais on prend quelque chose, ce qui ajoute à l'être et à la bonté de l'acte concerné. Naturellement déjà, mais aussi moralement, en autant qu'en prenant comme il convient rationnellement, on prenne ce qu'il convient rationnellement de prendre, quand et où cela convient, dans l'intention qui convient.

À ce bien radical d'une action s'oppose un mal tout aussi radical, *ex genere* lui aussi. Sur le plan naturel déjà : si on prend maladroitement et qu'on échappe, on prend mal; mais au plan moral aussi : si on prend ce que, au jugement de la raison, on ne devrait pas prendre, dont la prise menacera notre être humain, on compromettra l'atteinte de sa fin ultime. La substance qui ne parvient pas à endosser sa forme spécifique est radicalement déficiente, naturellement mauvaise en son essence même; similairement, l'action essentiellement privée de ce dont elle attendait sa spécificité morale : sa conformité au jugement rationnel, est immorale à sa racine, mauvaise *ex genere*.

Dans les choses naturelles, le premier mal résulte de ce que la chose engendrée n'obtient pas sa forme spécifique : si par exemple ce n'est pas un homme, mais autre chose, qu'on engendre à sa place. Pareillement, le premier mal dans les actions morales leur vient de leur objet, comme prendre le bien d'autrui. On l'appelle mal *ex genere*, 'genre' étant pris pour 'espèce'.<sup>37</sup>

Le bien moral *ex genere*, la conformité à la raison, constitue comme la substance de l'acte moral. Aucun acte bon moralement ne peut s'accomplir dont l'essence, dont le double objet – *ce que* l'on fait et *sur quoi* on le fait – n'est pas de soi conforme à la raison; toute dérogation sous ce rapport prive irrémédiablement un acte de bonté morale. Sous ce genre moral se range ensuite une riche diversité d'espèces d'actes moraux. Cette diversification tient encore à la nature plus précise de la matière de l'acte concerné, en autant que cette matière appelle une façon originale de se conformer à la raison. Cette conformité se définit comme une espèce de milieu entre excès et défaut, auquel chaque matière impose une forme distincte. L'échange de biens et services privés réclame un milieu arithmétique; la distribution de biens communs exige un milieu proportionnel; les passions veulent un juste milieu, accordé aux conditions de personnes, de temps et de lieux. Le désir et la tristesse doivent se freiner pour atteindre ce juste milieu, tandis qu'au contraire l'espoir et l'audace ont besoin d'être excités. Chacune de ces formes génère des actes moraux spécifiquement différents et leur répétition développe en l'intelligence, la volonté et les appétits concupiscibles et irascibles des vertus distinctes.

<sup>34</sup> *Q.D. de malo*, q. 2, a. 6, c.

<sup>35</sup> « Certains l'appellent le bien *ex genere*. » (*IaIIae*, q. 18, a. 2, c.)

<sup>36</sup> « ... de la manière de parler dont on appelle *genre humain* toute l'espèce humaine. » (*Ibid.*)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

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Les vertus diffèrent d'espèce selon que le rapport de juste milieu se trouve en diverses matières : la justice, par exemple, consiste à constituer le rapport de juste milieu dans les échanges et les distributions, et autres actions du genre; la tempérance, elle, concerne les désirs; le courage concerne les craintes et les audaces; et ainsi de suite.<sup>38</sup>

Et si la délibération descend aux moyens concrets de réaliser cette panoplie de milieux variés, assurer la proportion de ces moyens à ces différentes fins sollicitera un effort particulier d'intelligence destiné, à l'usage, à produire encore une espèce très distincte de vertu : la prudence, appelée elle-même à se diversifier selon les difficultés particulières que présenteront les biens politique, familial et individuel. Tout cela, insiste saint Thomas, ne tranche pas tellement sur le paysage que présentent les êtres naturels.

On ne doit rien voir d'inadéquat à ce que les espèces des vertus se diversifient d'après des matières diverses, du fait que la diversité de matière a coutume de causer de la diversité non entre espèces, mais entre individus. Même chez les êtres naturels, en effet, la diversité de matière cause de la diversité d'espèce, quand une diversité de matière requiert une diversité de forme. En matière morale aussi, par conséquent, il résulte forcément des vertus d'espèce différente des matières diverses en lesquelles le rapport de juste milieu s'obtient autrement. Dans les désirs, par exemple, il s'obtient en refrénant; aussi, la vertu qu'on y développe se trouve-t-elle plus proche du défaut que de l'excès, comme son nom de *tempérance* l'indique. Dans les audaces et les craintes, ce n'est pas en modérant, mais plutôt en excitant, que ce rapport de juste milieu s'obtient; aussi la vertu qu'on y développe est-elle plus proche de l'excès que du défaut, comme son nom de *force* le montre. La même chose s'observe en regard des autres vertus.<sup>39</sup>

Le bien se définit ainsi en proportion de l'être, et le bien moral, on le comprend, en regard de la conformité à la raison droite. De même, en face, le mal se définit par leur privation. On est aussi mauvais, naturellement, qu'on est privé de l'être dû à sa nature; et aussi mauvais, moralement, qu'on est privé de sa conformité à la raison. La variation spécifique du mal obéit à ce même critère de la différence de matière, mais le double d'une variation formelle due à ce que deux directions s'offrent à la difformité rationnelle d'un acte, puisque sa conformité tenait à un milieu : on se privera de ce conforme milieu soit par défaut soit par excès.

Ce qui, quant à l'objet concerné, ne s'accorde pas à la raison, peut diversifier l'espèce du péché à deux niveaux : matériellement ou formellement...

Par opposition aux vertus, les fautes diffèrent d'espèce d'après diverses matières : l'homicide, par exemple, l'adultère et le vol... Cependant, bien que concernant une seule matière il n'y ait qu'une seule vertu il peut se trouver des fautes d'espèce différente. On doit donc ensuite regarder formellement, dans les fautes, la diversité de leur espèce, selon qu'on pêche par excès ou par défaut : la timidité diffère ainsi de la présomption, et la mesquinerie de la prodigalité.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Q.D. de malo*, q. 2, a. 6, c.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Le nom plus précis attaché à la prise d'un objet annonce éventuellement cette disqualification morale : voler, violer, c'est prendre et utiliser un objet dont la prise et l'usage compromettent par nature le bonheur; assassiner, c'est pareillement tuer ce dont causer la mort nuit par nature à ce qu'on soit un être humain accompli.

Il faut toutefois éviter de surestimer la symétrie apparente que suggère l'expression *ex genere*. La bonté et la malice *ex genere* ne s'avèrent pas également définitives. Au plan moral comme au plan naturel, l'être mauvais *ex genere* n'offre aucun espoir de finir en bien, tandis que l'être bon *ex genere*, tant qu'il conserve un aspect de puissance, se trouve confronté à une multitude de privations éventuelles capables de le détériorer. L'homme, aussi fermement qu'il soit en possession de son espèce, peut tomber malade, devenir aveugle, perdre l'usage de la raison. L'action, de même, aussi conforme que son objet soit à la raison, *ex genere*, risque de se voir disqualifier de cette conformité par une multitude d'accidents surajoutés. L'action ne se révèle pas morale ou immorale à la même vitesse, ne se voit pas accoler l'une ou l'autre étiquette aussi vite définitivement. Celle dont le résultat naturel, immanquable, directement visé, compromet le bonheur, est tout de suite irrémédiablement immorale; rien de ce qui s'y ajoute, l'entoure, la modifie, ne la rachète. Au contraire, celle dont le résultat normal est de nature à contribuer au bonheur n'est morale que sous condition; elle le demeure seulement si aucune détermination surajoutée ne la tourne ensuite en obstacle au bonheur. Une action peut s'entacher d'immoralité jusqu'en sa racine, être immorale *ex genere*, dira-t-on; elle mérite par contre de se dire morale seulement une fois tout habillée d'accidents qui confirment et précisent son habileté à rendre heureux. « *Malum ab uno* », disait Denys<sup>41</sup>, « *sed bonum ab omnibus*. »

Un défaut suffit pour déclarer mauvais quelque chose; mais une perfection ne suffit pas pour le rendre bon absolument. C'est que le bien résulte seulement d'une cause une et parfaite, tandis que le mal résulte déjà de défauts particuliers. Aussi, ce qui est bon par son genre (*ex genere*) ne l'est pas forcément absolument, mais peut devenir mauvais, tandis que ce qui est mauvais par son genre est mauvais absolument et ne peut devenir bon.<sup>42</sup>

### c) Moralité circonstancielle

En complément, ce qu'on a vu de singularités multiples qui s'attachent aux différents aspects de l'action – son agent, son objet, sa fin, sa mesure, ses résultats divers – non seulement parfait ou détériore en sa nature l'action posée, mais, en autant qu'assumé à la lumière de la raison droite, augmente ou diminue son niveau de moralité, s'il s'agit d'accidents, de simples circonstances, et le confirment ou l'infirmement, si ces singularités se haussent au statut de différences spécifiques, comme on a vu que chaque chef de singularités le fait quelquefois<sup>43</sup>. Ainsi, pousser une chaise, pousser un homme ne sont pas le même acte et risquent bien de ne pas revêtir le même statut moral; ni casser une branche et casser un bras.

<sup>41</sup> *Des noms divins*, c. IV, §30.

<sup>42</sup> *Sup. II Sent.*, d. 36, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

<sup>43</sup> « Le bien se convertit avec l'être. En conséquence, l'être s'attribue à un sujet d'après son accident comme d'après sa substance. De même, le bien aussi s'attribue à une réalité selon son être accidentel comme selon son être essentiel, et ce tant dans la moralité des actions que dans la nature des choses. » (IaIIae, q. 18, a. 3, ad 3)

### *Circonstances ou singularités?*

Une circonstance, en tant que telle, est l'accident d'un acte moral. Une circonstance peut toutefois se prendre comme différence spécifique d'un acte moral; *elle perd alors sa nature de circonstance et constitue l'espèce d'un acte moral*. Cela se produit, dans les fautes, quand une circonstance ajoute une difformité d'un autre genre : en s'unissant à une femme qui n'est pas la sienne, son acte souffre d'une difformité opposée à la chasteté; mais si la femme, en plus de ne pas être la sienne, est celle d'un autre, s'ajoute une difformité opposée à la justice, que contrarie le fait d'usurper le bien d'autrui. *Cette circonstance constitue une nouvelle espèce de faute, qu'on appelle adultère.*<sup>44</sup>

De même que l'accident d'une substance n'en fait pas une substance d'une autre espèce, de même la simple circonstance d'une action moralement bonne, bien que susceptible d'en augmenter ou diminuer la bonté radicale, n'en fait pas une moralement mauvaise, ni vice-versa. Seule une différence spécifique qui entraîne une malice morale distincte a ce pouvoir. « Une circonstance ne fait pas d'un acte bon un mauvais, à moins de constituer une espèce de faute. »<sup>45</sup>

Saint Thomas se montre ailleurs plus explicite sur le degré de détermination où ce qui, plus communément, n'est que simple circonstance, devient, à regarder plus précisément l'acte dont il s'agit, une différence spécifique et perd son statut de circonstance.

Tel caractère demeure extrinsèque à un sujet supérieur tout en devenant intrinsèque à un sujet inférieur : *raisonnable*, par exemple, reste en dehors de la notion d'animal, mais fait partie de la notion d'homme. De même, tel caractère est la circonstance d'un acte considéré plus communément, mais ne peut plus se considérer la circonstance de cet acte, une fois qu'on le considère plus spécialement. L'acte de prendre de l'argent, par exemple, n'inclut pas en sa notion qu'il s'agisse de celui d'autrui; ce fait se rapporte donc à lui comme une circonstance, à considérer cet acte aussi communément. Il fait néanmoins partie de la notion plus précise de vol, de sorte que ce n'en est plus une circonstance.<sup>46</sup>

Il ne faut toutefois pas s'attendre que n'importe laquelle de l'infinité potentielle des circonstances entourant une action deviennent éventuellement la différence spécifique d'une action regardée plus précisément. La plupart des circonstances restent indifférentes et il n'y a aucun désavantage à les ignorer au moment de choisir ou écarter l'action concernée. Pour avoir cet effet, pour se hisser au statut de différence spécifique une singularité doit concorder ou répugner expressément au jugement de la raison droite sur ce qui contribue ou nuit au bonheur de qui agit.

Tout caractère extérieur à la notion d'un sujet supérieur ne fait pas forcément partie de celle d'un sujet inférieur. Ainsi, *blanc* ne fait pas partie de la notion d'animal, mais ne fait pas non plus partie de celle d'homme : il se rapporte aux deux comme leur accident. Pareillement, toute circonstance d'un acte plus commun ne constitue pas une espèce d'actes plus particuliers; celle-là seulement le fait, qui lui appartient par soi. Or à l'acte moral, une singularité appartient par soi pour autant qu'elle se conforme à la raison ou lui répugne. Si

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<sup>44</sup> IaIIae, q. 88, a. 5, c.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 3. – Comparer : « Une circonstance ne peut rendre un acte mauvais, à moins de répugner à la raison. » (IaIIae, q. 18, a. 5, ad 4)

<sup>46</sup> *Q.D. de malo*, q. 2, a. 6, c.

donc une circonstance ajoutée ne comporte aucune concordance ou répugnance spéciale à la raison, elle ne spécifie aucun acte; qu'un outil soit blanc, par exemple, n'ajoute rien de pertinent à la raison; par conséquent, blanc ne constitue pas une espèce d'acte moral. Par contre, que l'outil appartienne à autrui modifie le rapport à la raison; aussi, ce fait entraîne une espèce distincte d'acte moral.<sup>47</sup>

Cette spécification pourra adopter deux allures. « Une circonstance peut constituer une nouvelle espèce de faute de deux manières. »<sup>48</sup> La plus simple ira dans la ligne de la précision : l'action regardée plus précisément se rangera comme son espèce sous celle considérée plus communément : la fornication, par exemple, sexualité hors mariage, espèce de la luxure, sexualité irrationnelle plus générale, dont la bestialité et la masturbation représenteront d'autres espèces.

D'une manière, l'espèce constituée par la circonstance est une espèce de cette faute que l'on regardait d'abord dans un acte plus commun. La nouvelle espèce de faute se trouve alors constituée formellement ou matériellement. Matériellement, certes, si, par exemple, au fait d'user du bien d'autrui, on précise : sa femme; de ce fait, l'acte devient un adultère. Formellement, par ailleurs, si, par exemple, on prend le bien d'autrui d'un lieu sacré; l'acte, initialement une espèce de vol, devient alors un sacrilège.<sup>49</sup>

L'autre allure combinera au genre d'action considérée une action d'un genre distinct, ce qui mettra l'agent en situation d'accomplir ensemble deux bonnes actions ou de perpétrer deux mauvaises actions en la même.

D'une autre manière, cependant, se trouve parfois constituée par la circonstance une espèce distincte, qui ne se range pas sous le même genre de faute : si, par exemple, je vole le bien d'autrui pour être à même de commettre un homicide ou de la simonie, mon acte vise à une espèce tout à fait distincte de faute.<sup>50</sup>

On saisira mieux la différence en remarquant que la même diversification dans la précision se retrouve déjà chez les substances et les autres genres d'êtres sur le simple plan naturel.

On trouve pareille situation en d'autres matières. Si en effet on précise un corps coloré comme blanc, on obtient une espèce de cette qualité qu'on considèrerait initialement ; mais si on conçoit le coloré comme doux, on produit une autre espèce de qualité, tout à fait distincte. Le motif de cette diversité est que, lorsque ce qu'on ajoute comme précision est division par soi de ce à quoi on l'ajoute, il en fait son espèce ; tandis que s'il se rapporte à lui par accident, il obtient son espèce sans que celle-ci soit celle de ce à quoi on l'ajoute, parce que ce qui advient par accident ne fait pas un par soi avec ce à quoi il advient. On voit ainsi comment une simple circonstance peut constituer une espèce de faute.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Circonstances ou singularités?*

Bref, une troisième occasion d'homonymie sous les chefs de singularités énumérés par Aristote tient à ce qu'ils désignent tantôt des aspects naturels de l'essence et des accidents des actions, tantôt de leurs aspects moraux. L'ambiguïté possible est d'autant plus confondante que très facilement des singularités qui, sur le plan naturel, constituent de simples circonstances, des accidents, constituent au contraire des différences spécifiques sur le plan moral, et inversement. L'agent est ainsi la cause naturelle de l'action, mais demeure circonstanciel quant à la bonté ou malice *ex genere* de son action : peu importe qui adultère, son acte est vicié; peu importe qui fait l'aumône, son acte est d'une nature foncièrement bonne, tant que quelque singularité répugnante à la raison ne l'entache.

### **Conclusion**

On mesure maintenant toute l'ambiguïté à laquelle prête le discours sur les circonstances morales. Aristote, on l'aura compris, a fait un choix lexical plus heureux en parlant plus généralement de singularités. Car ce dont on parle, sous les attributions de *qui, quoi, sur quoi, à qui, pourquoi, avec quoi, où, quand, comment* et *quel résultat*, est tantôt, 1°, un aspect essentiel de l'action : son genre ou sa différence spécifique; tantôt, 2°, son accident attaché à l'un de ces aspects, rehaussant ou détériorant sa nature et sa bonté, ou, 3°, insignifiant; tantôt, 4°, une fois jugé comme contribuant ou nuisant à la fin humaine, source de la moralité de l'action; tantôt, 5°, ignoré, cause d'involontaire.

Parler de circonstances, plutôt que de singularités, limite le spectre, puisque le mot s'est vu restreint à signifier les occurrences accidentelles. À moins qu'on ose encore une homonymie, et étende le nom de *circonstances* à toutes les occurrences de singularités des actions. Saint Thomas ne l'a pas fait formellement, mais il me semble que tous ceux qui s'expriment sur ce sujet le font confusément, sans le réaliser pleinement. Quand par exemple, à propos de l'acte involontaire, ils traduisent le mot 'ἑκαστα' d'Aristote par 'circonstance'. Même saint Thomas le fait régulièrement...<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Par exemple, en commentant la définition de l'involontaire, saint Thomas utilise 'circumstantiae' comme équivalent exact de 'ἑκαστα' : « Le Philosophe manifeste quelles sont ces circonstances dont l'ignorance rend l'acte involontaire... » (*In Nic. Eth.*, III, lect. 3, #414) ; « Le Philosophe manifeste quelles sont les circonstances principalissimes. Manifestement, dit-il, ce sont celles en lesquelles consiste l'opération, c'est-à-dire l'objet ou la matière de l'acte. Et ce en vue de quoi on l'accomplit, c'est-à-dire sa fin. Car c'est d'après leurs objets que les actes se spécifient et que, de même que la matière est l'objet de l'acte extérieur, de même la fin est l'objet de l'acte intérieur de la volonté. » (*Ibid.*, #423) – Il fait de même dans la *Somme théologique* durant tout son discours sur les sources de spécification de l'acte moral. Ainsi : « Une circonstance spécifie comme bon ou mauvais un acte moral en tant qu'elle concerne un ordre spécial de la raison... Toutefois, ce n'est pas toute circonstance qui, en ajoutant de la bonté ou de la malice à l'acte moral, varie son espèce. » (IaIIae, q. 18, a. 11, c.)





## SAINT THOMAS ET LA POSSIBLE ÉTERNITÉ DU MONDE

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SAINT THOMAS L'ÉNONCE clairement dans sa *Somme théologique* : « Que le monde n'a pas toujours été, on le sait par la foi, mais cela ne peut pas être prouvé démonstrativement. »<sup>1</sup> Il met le cas en parallèle avec le mystère de la Sainte Trinité et l'oppose à l'existence de Dieu, objet de Révélation, mais tout de même accessible à la raison naturelle.

Cette position du saint docteur, à son époque et jusqu'à aujourd'hui, est loin d'avoir fait l'unanimité. Même des thomistes et médiévistes réputés l'ont attaquée. Sans entrer dans les détails de cette célèbre controverse sur la possibilité d'un monde éternel<sup>2</sup>, je me propose ici de présenter les grandes lignes de la position de saint Thomas. J'exposerai, en un premier temps, comment il argumente directement en faveur de l'impossibilité de démontrer ce qu'il en est de la durée du monde. Par la suite, je présenterai quelques-unes des objections auxquelles le docteur angélique a dû faire face, en me limitant à celles qui ont principalement séduit ses opposants.

### **L'argumentation directe**

#### *Les limites de la démonstration par l'essence*

La raison qu'il donne de cette impossibilité de démontrer, c'est que notre intelligence, au principe de ses démonstrations, s'appuie sur l'essence, sur le *quod quid est* du sujet auquel elle entend attacher un attribut. Universelle, cette essence fait abstraction de l'ici et maintenant, elle ne peut avoir rapport à d'éventuelles limites spatiales ou temporelles :

La nouveauté du monde ne peut recevoir démonstration à partir du monde lui-même. En effet, le principe de la démonstration est l'essence. Chaque chose, par ailleurs, selon la définition de son espèce, abstrait du ici et maintenant. C'est pourquoi on dit que les choses universelles sont partout et toujours. De là vient qu'on ne peut démontrer que l'homme, le ciel ou la pierre n'ont pas toujours été.<sup>3</sup>

Même s'il n'y a qu'un monde, son explication passe par le concept universel de monde, applicable, en principe, à tous les mondes possibles. Essayer de démontrer que le monde est nouveau, c'est tenter de conclure à un premier temps du monde, plutôt qu'à son éternité. Mais comment trancher entre ces deux rapports possibles au temps, à partir d'un concept dont l'universalité, obligatoire au principe de toute démonstration, fait échapper

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<sup>1</sup> Ia, q. 46, a. 2, c.

<sup>2</sup> Sur l'histoire de cette controverse, voir Cyrille MICHON (dir.), *Thomas d'Aquin et la controverse sur l'éternité du monde*, Paris, Flammarion, 2004. Pour une présentation à la fois de la situation historique et de la position philosophique de saint Thomas en tous ses détails, voir Grégoire CELIER, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la possibilité d'un monde créé sans commencement*, Le Chesnay, Via Romana, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ia, *ibid.*

au temps ? Je peux certes comprendre que le monde englobe des choses soumises au mouvement et au temps, saisir le concept de temps, mais la nouveauté du temps ne peut recevoir démonstration à partir du temps lui-même : ma connaissance universelle du temps comme mesure du mouvement selon l'avant et l'après ne me dit pas si ce mouvement dont il dépend a toujours existé ou non. L'analyse du concept de mouvement ne me dira pas non plus si la matière, source de puissance, a toujours été là ou non pour l'acte de ce qui est en puissance en tant qu'il est en puissance. Que la matière première soit incorruptible du fait que toute génération la présuppose et qu'on la trouve encore au terme de toute corruption m'indique certes qu'une venue à l'être est, pour elle, impossible par mode de génération, mais n'exclut en rien la possibilité qu'elle surgisse par un autre mode de commencement dans l'existence, comme ce sera expliqué plus loin.

*Les limites de ce qu'on peut tirer de la cause efficiente du monde*

Mais si la nouveauté du monde du monde ne se laisse pas démontrer à partir du monde lui-même, ne pourrait-elle pas se démontrer à partir de sa cause efficiente ? Si on admet que le monde ne s'explique pas par lui-même, mais dépend d'une cause première, et s'il est raisonnable de penser que cette cause première agit non par nécessité de nature, mais par volonté, ne pourrait-on pas trouver, du côté des raisons qui ont motivé cette volonté, le principe permettant de démontrer que nécessairement le monde devait avoir un commencement ? Non, dit saint Thomas, on ne pourra rien trouver de ce côté, pour la bonne et simple raison que les vouloirs divins concernant les créatures nous échappent :

De la même manière, on ne peut non plus démontrer la nouveauté du monde à partir de la cause efficiente, qui agit par volonté. C'est que la volonté de Dieu ne peut être scrutée par la raison, si ce n'est à propos des choses qu'il est absolument nécessaire que Dieu veuille. Ce qui concerne les créatures n'est pas de cet ordre. Par ailleurs, la volonté divine peut être manifestée à l'homme par révélation, sur laquelle s'appuie la foi.<sup>4</sup>

C'est donc uniquement au nom de sa foi en la révélation que saint Thomas affirme que « tout ce qui existe en dehors de Dieu a commencé à exister »<sup>5</sup>. À la suite de saint Grégoire, il considère la première phrase du livre de la *Genèse* (« Au commencement Dieu créa le ciel et la terre ») comme une prophétie sur le passé. Sans la foi en cette prophétie faisant remonter dans le temps, l'esprit humain désireux de savoir si le monde a eu un commencement en est réduit à des conjectures :

Il n'y a de démonstration ni sur l'une ni sur l'autre partie de la question. Seulement des arguments probables ou sophistiques à l'appui de l'une et l'autre.<sup>6</sup>

*L'autorité d'Aristote*

Pour étayer cette position, le docteur angélique s'appuie sur l'autorité d'Aristote, qui dit dans les *Topiques*<sup>7</sup> qu'il existe des problèmes dont nous ne pouvons découvrir la solution (*rationem non habemus*), comme la question de savoir si le monde est éternel. Cette affirmation d'Aristote guide d'ailleurs son plus illustre commentateur dans son interprétation des positions cosmologiques du Stagirite. Il dit qu'Aristote n'a jamais eu

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Super II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5, c.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Topiques*, I, 7.

### *Saint Thomas et la possible éternité du monde*

l'intention de démontrer l'éternité du monde et que sa façon de procéder, à partir d'opinions, l'atteste. Cependant, si l'on s'en fie à l'abbé Grégoire Celier, qui reprend le point de vue de Simon Decloux<sup>8</sup>, l'étude approfondie des *Physiques*, à partir de la fin des années 1260, aurait conduit saint Thomas à changer d'avis : « Cette plongée dans le texte aristotélicien le convainc que le Philosophe a bien entrepris de proposer une démonstration rigoureuse de l'éternité du monde. »<sup>9</sup> Quoi qu'il en soit, à l'époque où il rédige son commentaire des *Sentences*, le saint docteur affirme que partout où Aristote traite de cette question, toujours il ajoute des éléments de persuasion, soit à partir de l'opinion de plusieurs philosophes, soit en demandant le consentement sur les raisons proposées, procédés qui ne sont pas de mise chez qui démontre<sup>10</sup>.

#### *La nécessité de distinguer entre la venue à l'être et l'être déjà constitué*

De toute façon, saint Thomas ne se contente pas de cet argument d'autorité. Pour rendre raison de l'impossibilité de démontrer l'éternité ou la non-éternité du monde, il fait valoir que la nature d'une chose varie selon que cette chose est dans la perfection de son être ou qu'elle est dans son premier devenir, encore toute proche de la cause dont elle sort. On n'a qu'à penser à la différence entre l'homme déjà né et l'homme encore dans le sein de sa mère. Imaginons un jeune esprit curieux des choses de la vie, qui entreprenne, à partir de ce qu'il connaît des conditions de la vie de l'homme déjà né et parfaitement formé, de se prononcer sur les conditions de l'être imparfaitement formé et en devenir dans le sein maternel. À coup sûr, il se tromperait. C'est ce qui se produit dans l'histoire racontée par Maïmonide (Rabbi Moyses, comme l'appelle saint Thomas) dans son livre *De perplexis Veteris Testamenti*. Un enfant qui a perdu sa mère quelques mois après sa naissance et a été élevé sur une île isolée, parvient à l'âge de raison. Il demande à un voisin si les hommes sont fabriqués et comment ils le sont. L'explication qu'on lui en donne paraît à l'enfant de toute évidence impossible. Un homme qui ne peut respirer, manger et excréter, fait-il valoir, ne peut vivre ne serait-ce qu'une seule journée. On ne peut donc pas, conclut-il, vivre neuf mois dans l'utérus maternel.

Remplaçons l'homme déjà né par le monde. Dans ce monde déjà formé, un peu d'étude et d'observation montre comment les choses viennent à l'être : leur formation résulte d'un changement qui implique un moteur antérieur à elles; un sujet, une matière doit aussi les précéder, qui devait auparavant se trouver dans une disposition contraire, car on ne peut devenir ce qu'on est déjà. Sur cette base, que va conclure un apprenti-philosophe sur la nécessité ou l'impossibilité, pour le monde, d'avoir un commencement ? Les conditions du devenir naturel dans un monde déjà fait lui feront fatalement concevoir erronément ce qui concerne l'apparition initiale du monde, car la façon dont l'univers a procédé de Dieu diffère considérablement des changements qui voient l'apparition de nouvelles choses dans un monde déjà constitué.

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<sup>8</sup> Simon DECLOUX, *Temps, Dieu, liberté dans les commentaires aristotéliciens de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Bruges-Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1967, p. 55 : « S'il a jadis douté de l'intention même d'Aristote, l'Aquinat ne semble plus mettre ici en question sa volonté formelle d'affirmer l'éternité du mouvement, en contradiction formelle avec la foi chrétienne. »

<sup>9</sup> Grégoire CELIER, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

<sup>10</sup> Voir *II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5, c.

*Illustration par des objections antinomiques*

Les objections imaginées ou rapportées par saint Thomas — tant celles qui concluent à la nécessité d'un monde éternel que celles qui concluent à son impossibilité — procèdent d'ailleurs pour une bonne part de cette confusion entre les conditions du devenir dans un monde déjà fait et celles qui accompagnent le monde en sa première venue à l'être.

- La matière première est incorruptible

Quant à sa nécessité, l'objection va comme suit :

Tout ce qui est inengendré et incorruptible a toujours existé et existera toujours; or la matière première est inengendrée et incorruptible, car tout ce qui est engendré, est engendré à partir d'un sujet et tout ce qui se corrompt, se corrompt en un sujet. Par ailleurs, pour la matière première, il n'y a pas de sujet. Donc la matière première a toujours existé et existera toujours. Mais la matière n'est jamais dépourvue d'une forme. Donc la matière a, de toute éternité, existé en étant perfectionnée par ses formes, par lesquelles les espèces des êtres sont constituées. Donc l'univers, dont ces espèces sont les parties, a existé de toute éternité.<sup>11</sup>

La réponse à cette objection manifeste bien la nécessité de ne pas juger de ce que Dieu a fait venir à l'être d'après les conditions nécessaires aux générations naturelles :

La matière est inengendrée et incorruptible, mais on ne peut conclure de cela qu'elle ait toujours existé. C'est qu'elle a commencé d'être, non par génération à partir de quelque chose, mais absolument à partir de rien (*ex nihilo*). Et de la même façon, elle pourrait cesser d'être si Dieu le voulait, car c'est sa volonté qui communique l'être à la matière et à tout l'univers.<sup>12</sup>

Saint Thomas ne prétend pas là démontrer avec la raison naturelle que la création de la matière a eu lieu à un moment donné plutôt que de toute éternité. Il fait simplement comprendre qu'un argument en faveur de l'éternité du monde qui peut, à première vue, sembler très fort, n'a, au fond, aucune valeur démonstrative. Sur un plan strictement philosophique, les deux possibilités restent ouvertes à la matière reconnue inengendrée et incorruptible : elle peut très bien avoir toujours existé; elle peut aussi avoir commencé à être absolument, sans qu'aucun sujet ne l'ait précédée. Qu'elle ait toujours existé ne s'impose pas comme la seule éventualité.

- L'effet suit sa cause dans la durée

La même confusion entre venue l'existence dans un monde déjà constitué et avant sa constitution inspire des arguments en sens contraire. La première objection l'atteste bien :

De deux choses l'une, ou bien Dieu est cause de la substance du monde, ou bien non, mais de son mouvement seulement. S'il n'est cause que de son mouvement, c'est dire que la substance de ce monde n'est pas créée et donc que cette substance est un premier principe. Mais alors, il y aura plusieurs premiers principes et plusieurs choses créées, ce qui a été réfuté plus haut. Si par ailleurs Dieu est cause de la substance du ciel, donnant au ciel l'existence, eh

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<sup>11</sup> Voir *II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5, obj. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 1.

bien, puisque tout ce qui reçoit son existence d'un autre, le suit dans la durée, il semble bien que le monde n'ait pas toujours existé.<sup>13</sup>

Ici encore, la réponse fait bien comprendre que les circonstances d'une génération naturelle n'entourent pas automatiquement la venue initiale du monde à l'être, qui procède directement de Dieu :

Comme le dit le Commentateur [Averroès] dans son livre *De la substance des orbes*, au chapitre II, l'intention d'Aristote n'a jamais été de dire que Dieu était seulement cause du mouvement du ciel; il le considérait aussi comme la cause de sa substance, lui donnant l'existence. Le ciel n'a qu'une puissance limitée (*sit finitae virtutis*), du fait qu'il est un corps; il a donc besoin d'un agent de puissance infinie, duquel il reçoit à la fois la perpétuité de son mouvement et la perpétuité de son être, tout comme il en reçoit le mouvement et l'être. Il ne suit cependant pas de cela que Dieu précéderait le ciel en durée. C'est que Dieu ne lui donne pas l'être par voie de mouvement, mais par une influence éternelle, selon laquelle sa science est la cause des choses. Cette influence vient de ce qu'il connaît l'être, par sa science, de toute éternité. C'est un peu comme avec un soleil qu'on imaginerait exister de toute éternité : il s'ensuivrait que son rayonnement existerait de toute éternité.<sup>14</sup>

Encore ici, on faisait face à un argument à première vue très fort, concluant en faveur, cette fois, de l'impossibilité de l'éternité du monde et du ciel faisant partie de ce monde. La réponse de saint Thomas, même si elle s'incarne dans une cosmologie périmée, permet de comprendre que l'admission d'une influence créatrice de Dieu n'implique pas nécessairement une antériorité dans la durée de l'être de Dieu par rapport à celui du monde. Par foi en la Révélation, on admettra, avec saint Thomas, que le monde a eu un commencement, mais on admettra aussi, toujours en compagnie du saint docteur, que Dieu aurait pu choisir d'être à l'origine d'un monde sans commencement, dépendant éternellement de son créateur comme les rayons d'un soleil éternel dépendraient de leur source sans la suivre dans le temps. Ce qui revient à dire que l'argument évoqué en faveur du commencement du monde n'a pas valeur démonstrative, puisque son principe, à savoir que ce qui reçoit son existence est précédé dans le temps par sa cause, n'est pas universellement et nécessairement vrai.

- La « première antinomie » thomiste

Certes, je n'ai rapporté qu'un seul des arguments pour chaque côté. J'ai ainsi constitué, si l'on peut dire, une espèce d'antinomie thomiste. Cette antinomie, à la différence de celle de Kant, ne vise néanmoins pas à montrer la futilité des recherches philosophiques sur la nature, mais fait ressortir la valeur purement dialectique des arguments opposés ici. Il serait trop long, dans le cadre de cet exposé, de passer en revue les quatorze arguments présentés dans les *Sentences* comme autant d'objections contre un commencement du monde et les neuf arguments tenant lieu d'objection contre l'éternité du monde. L'exercice procurerait toutefois une plus grande évidence. Je n'ai pas non plus rapporté les réflexions de saint Thomas dans le *De Aeternitate Mundi*, où il déclare que toute la question consiste à se demander si *être créé par Dieu selon toute sa substance et ne pas*

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<sup>13</sup> *Sup. II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5, obj. 1 *in contrarium*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 1 *in contrarium*.

*avoir un commencement temporel* sont contradictoires ou non<sup>15</sup>. À défaut d'avoir pris connaissance de tout cela, le disciple fait confiance au maître. Il s'attend donc à ce que les arguments à la base de ces autres objections ne conduisent jamais à une conclusion nécessaire. L'occasion se présentera tout de même d'examiner certains de ces arguments, car des disciples de saint Thomas se sont crus obligés, par fidélité à ce qu'ils croyaient être la vérité, de corriger leur maître au rapport de ceux-ci.

*Pourquoi réfuter ce qui appuie sa position ?*

Par ailleurs, certains pourraient s'étonner de ce que le saint docteur se donne la peine, dans son article des *Sentences*, de réfuter neuf arguments qui concluent en faveur d'un commencement du monde, alors qu'il adhère tout à fait à leur conclusion. Mais comme le souligne Zimmermann...

..., sa confrontation aux arguments en faveur d'un commencement du monde n'a pas pour but de prouver son éternité ou son absence de commencement, mais seulement de manifester les faiblesses de ces prétendues preuves. Il s'agit pour Thomas simplement de montrer l'insuffisance d'une argumentation, il n'est aucunement question de preuve de la non-vérité de la conclusion.<sup>16</sup>

L'esprit humain en quête de vérité et de certitude ne peut se contenter d'adhérer matériellement à un énoncé comme à une opinion, si droite soit-elle. Il doit fonder son adhésion sur des motifs appropriés lui fournissant des gages de certitude. D'où l'importance d'apercevoir la valeur seulement dialectique de certains arguments, pour ne pas en tirer une certitude indue de la non-éternité du monde :

Ces arguments ne concluent pas avec nécessité, bien qu'ils aient une certaine probabilité. Il suffit de les aborder seulement pour que la foi catholique ne paraisse pas établie sur de vaines raisons, plutôt que sur la très solide doctrine de Dieu. C'est dans ce contexte qu'il convient de proposer comment se sont objectés à ces arguments ceux qui ont soutenu l'éternité du monde.<sup>17</sup>

Il est utile de considérer cela [à savoir que le commencement du monde est objet de foi, non de démonstration]. Car quelqu'un pourrait prétendre démontrer ce qui relève de la foi. Il apporterait alors des raisons non nécessaires, prêtant ainsi le flanc aux moqueries des infidèles, qui penseraient que c'est à cause de ces raisons que nous croyons ce qui relève de la foi.<sup>18</sup>

### **Les objections contre l'éternité du monde qui sont au cœur du débat**

Mais est-il bien vrai qu'aucun des arguments pour ou contre l'éternité du monde n'a de valeur démonstrative ? Tel que déjà évoqué, certains écrits de thomistes renommés sèment un doute. Non pas qu'ils accorderaient une valeur démonstrative aux arguments en faveur de l'éternité du monde, dont la conclusion contredit le donné révélé. C'est plutôt du côté du commencement du monde qu'ils pensent disposer, à la suite de saint Bonaventure, de preuves démonstratives. La contestation surgit plus précisément autour de la

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<sup>15</sup> Voir l'excellente présentation qu'en fait Van Steenberghen dans « La controverse de l'éternité du monde au XIIIe siècle », pp. 280-281.

<sup>16</sup> « *Mundus est aeternus* », p. 322.

<sup>17</sup> *Contra Gentes*, II, 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ia*, q. 46, a. 2.

sixième objection présentée dans l'article 2 de la question 46 de la *Prima Pars*<sup>19</sup>. Une objection basée sur un argument dialectique, d'après saint Thomas, acquiert aux yeux de certains spécialistes de sa pensée une valeur démonstrative. En conséquence, la réfutation de cet argument par le docteur angélique leur paraît insoutenable.

Il convient ici de s'arrêter aux objections et aux réponses de saint Thomas au cœur de cette polémique.

#### *L'impossibilité de parvenir au présent*

La principale de ces objections se fonde sur une conséquence absurde soi-disant rattachée à l'hypothèse d'un monde éternel :

Si le monde a toujours existé, des jours infinis ont précédé ce jour. Mais on ne peut rien parcourir d'infini. Donc on ne serait jamais parvenu à ce jour, ce qui, manifestement, est faux.<sup>20</sup>

- La réponse basée sur la distinction entre deux sortes d'infini

Cette objection, saint Thomas l'avait déjà affrontée dans le deuxième livre des *Sentences*. Il y avait répondu en invoquant une distinction entre l'infini en acte et l'infini par succession qui permet d'échapper à la conséquence absurde évoquée :

Un infini en acte est impossible, mais un infini par succession ne l'est pas. Dans le cas d'un infini ainsi considéré, tout ce qu'on en reçoit (*quodlibet acceptum*) est fini. Une traversée n'est concevable que d'un principe déterminé à un terme déterminé. Ainsi, quel que soit le temps déterminé qu'on considère, il y a toujours un temps fini de ce temps pris comme principe vers cet autre temps pris comme terme. Et ainsi on peut parvenir au temps présent.<sup>21</sup>

Autrement dit, supposer un monde sans commencement équivaut à supposer non une quantité infinie en acte, mais un infini successif, qui est, lui, comme l'explique Zimmermann, tout à fait concevable :

La supposition d'un monde éternel n'implique pas celle d'une quantité infinie actuelle. Saint Thomas dit, d'ailleurs, à une restriction près, que je mentionnerai plus loin, qu'une telle quantité est impossible. Supposer un monde éternel, c'est supposer plutôt un infini successif ; un tel infini est concevable sans contradiction.<sup>22</sup>

- La réponse basée sur la distinction entre deux aspects du passé

Une autre réponse est aussi possible, ajoute le docteur angélique pour compléter sa réplique. Il s'agit de distinguer entre deux aspects du temps passé, de le considérer soit en sa partie antérieure, soit en sa partie postérieure. Dans l'hypothèse d'un monde sans commencement, la partie antérieure est infinie, mais la partie postérieure est finie, puisque le passé prend fin dans l'instant présent. C'est l'inverse de ce qui se produit dans

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<sup>19</sup> On la retrouve également dans la troisième objection *in contrarium* présentée dans les *Sentences*, ainsi que dans la *Somme contre les Gentils* (II, 38, obj. 3).

<sup>20</sup> *Ia*, q. 46, a. 2, obj. 6. Les éditeurs dominicains d'Ottawa indiquent, références à l'appui, Algazel, Maïmonide et saint Bonaventure comme sources de cet argument. Pour une présentation de l'argument de saint Bonaventure, voir Zimmermann, « *Mundus est aeternus* », p. 320, et Van Steenberghen, « La controverse sur l'éternité du monde au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle », pp. 271-275.

<sup>21</sup> *Sup. II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3 *in contrarium*.

<sup>22</sup> « *Mundus est aeternus* », p. 322. La restriction évoquée concerne la quantité d'âmes humaines, dont saint Thomas semble admettre, à la fin du *De Aeternitate mundi*, qu'elle aurait pu être infinie.

l'hypothèse d'un monde sans fin, poursuivant une existence éternelle; dans ce cas, puisqu'on part du présent, c'est la partie antérieure qui est finie, tandis que sa partie postérieure est infinie. Or à un temps passé ou futur, peut-on imposer un terme qui serve de point de départ ou de fin de son parcours? Uniquement en sa partie finie, évidemment! Dans l'hypothèse d'un monde sans commencement, le temps passé refusera tout point de départ, mais acceptera une fin, puisqu'il se termine à l'instant présent. Aussi, la seule façon concevable de compter les jours de l'univers dans l'absolu, c'est-à-dire sans découper des durées arbitraires en se donnant des points de départ arbitraires, c'est d'y aller à reculons, en comptant à partir d'aujourd'hui. En effectuant un tel calcul, en découvrira l'impossibilité de parvenir jamais à un premier jour. L'inverse se produit avec le futur supposé éternel : on comptera les jours à partir du présent, sans jamais parvenir à un dernier jour.

Ou encore, on peut dire ceci : le temps passé est infini du côté de sa partie antérieure, fini du côté de sa partie postérieure. Pour le temps futur, c'est le contraire. C'est du côté par lequel il est fini qu'il est possible de fixer à chacun un terme qui soit principe ou fin. Du fait que le temps passé soit infini du côté antérieur, il s'ensuit, doivent admettre nos adversaires, qu'il n'ait pas de point de départ (*principium*), mais qu'il ait une fin. La conséquence est que si l'homme commence à compter à partir de ce jour où nous sommes, il ne pourra pas, en comptant les jours, parvenir à un premier jour. Et le contraire se produit dans le cas du futur.<sup>23</sup>

C'est dire, comme le souligne Zimmermann, que la représentation qu'on peut se faire d'un monde sans commencement ne saurait comporter de premier membre qui soit constitutif de l'intégralité des révolutions passées des astres. On peut très bien admettre l'absence de premier jour sans se contredire :

Soutenir la thèse d'un monde éternel, c'est ne comprendre, dans l'ensemble des révolutions passées, aucun premier membre. Déclarer qu'une série n'a pas de premier membre ne conduit pas à une contradiction.<sup>24</sup>

- La condition de toute traversée

Dans la *Somme*, la réponse est moins élaborée, mais se rattache assez étroitement à la première de ces deux répliques. Saint Thomas ne distingue pas explicitement entre l'infini en acte et l'infini par succession; il insiste plutôt sur la condition en dehors de laquelle la notion même de traversée ou de passage (*transitus*) n'aurait plus aucun sens. Cette condition, c'est la présence de termes, de points déterminés :

Une traversée se comprend toujours d'un terme à un autre. Quel que soit le jour passé qu'on désigne, de ce jour à aujourd'hui il y a un nombre fini de jours qui pourront être parcourus. Tandis que l'objection procède comme si les extrêmes étaient posés et qu'il y avait une infinité d'intermédiaires.<sup>25</sup>

Cette dernière phrase ajoute une considération intéressante. Au fond, saint Thomas reproche à ses adversaires de poser dans leur objection, au moins implicitement, un extrême de départ au principe de l'écoulement infini des jours dont ils veulent manifester l'impossibilité. Car sans ce premier terme, le concept même de traversée ne se comprend

<sup>23</sup> *II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3 *in contrarium*.

<sup>24</sup> « *Mundus est aeternus* », p. 322.

<sup>25</sup> *Ia*, q. 46, a. 2, ad 6.



pas. Ce faisant, l'attaque porte à faux, car les défenseurs de l'éternité du monde ne reconnaissent aucunement l'existence de cet extrême de départ, de sorte que la conséquence absurde qui en découle ne réfute en rien leur position. Pour eux et pour saint Thomas, la conciliation d'un passé infini et d'un parcours jusqu'au présent est assurée par la désignation, dans l'infinité indéterminée des jours passés, d'un jour, n'importe lequel, qui rend possible, parce que fini, un parcours jusqu'à aujourd'hui.

Pour le dire autrement : il faut certes accorder qu'une série infinie ne peut être parcourue, qu'elle n'est pas traversable; mais il faut aussi tenir compte du fait qu'un parcours, une traversée, ne se conçoit pas sans une limite, au départ ou à l'arrivée. En conséquence, monde éternel et traversée totale se nient réciproquement par définition. Zimmermann explique très bien la nécessité, pour le partisan d'un monde éternel, de refuser de totaliser les parcours :

Parcourir ou traverser une suite ou une série infinie n'est pas possible; de sorte que là où il n'y a pas de limites, il n'y a pas non plus de « *transitus* ». Par conséquent, quiconque enseigne l'éternité du monde refuse de déclarer comme s'appliquant à un tout le concept de traversée à partir de la suite des révolutions.<sup>26</sup>

#### *L'impossibilité d'ajouter à l'infini*

Pour comprendre plus à fond la position de saint Thomas et se munir des principes permettant d'affronter les attaques dont elle fut l'objet, il convient d'examiner encore au moins, avec sa réplique, l'une des objections rapportées par le saint docteur. Il s'agit de l'argument qui se fonde sur l'impossibilité d'ajouter à l'infini, alors que le passé, pourtant prétendu infini, s'agrandit à mesure que les jours s'écoulent :

Ce qui ne peut recevoir addition ne peut avoir quelque chose de plus grand ou de plus. Mais aux jours qui ont précédé, on peut additionner des jours. Le temps passé peut donc être plus grand qu'il n'est. Or il n'y a pas et ne peut y avoir de plus grand pour l'infini. Le temps passé n'est donc pas infini.<sup>27</sup>

L'objection paraît très forte. En y réfléchissant avant d'avoir lu la réponse, on doute de la possibilité de répliquer à pareil argument. On ne peut certainement pas récuser le lien entre *recevoir addition* et *devenir plus grand*. On ne va pas non plus nier le fait que chaque nouveau jour qui passe ajoute au passé. Et quiconque réfléchit le moins comprend l'absurdité d'agrandir l'infini.

- Le caractère sophistique de cet argument

Pourtant, d'après saint Thomas, le caractère sophistique de cet argument saute aux yeux. Aux yeux d'un esprit averti, sans doute, mais il se laisse tout de même plus difficilement voir du commun des mortels, qui a besoin d'explication.

#### *- Un parallèle avec l'infini dans les nombres*

Un parallèle avec l'infini dans les nombres éclaire la question. Imaginons le raisonnement suivant : il y a des nombres plus grands que dix, sans dépasser cent ; forcément alors, davantage de nombres dépassent dix que cent. Or une infinité de nombres dépassent cent. On reste donc avec une quantité supérieure à l'infini : les nombres entre 10 et 100

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<sup>26</sup> « *Mundus est aeternus* », p. 323.

<sup>27</sup> *Sup. II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5, obj. 4 *in contrarium*.

s'ajoutent à l'infinité de ceux qui sont plus grands que cent. L'argument est sophistique, car les multitudes de nombres évoquées sont des infinis en puissance, alors que les comparaisons entre groupes de nombres ne se font que pour autant que ces groupes soient de quantité déterminée, et donc finie. Le sophisme consiste à recevoir absolument ce qui n'est vrai que relativement : l'excès de nombres plus grands que dix sur les nombres plus grands que cent ne se vérifie qu'en relation à un groupe déterminé, les deux cents premiers, par exemple, ou les trois cent mille premiers, ou ceux qu'on voudra, toujours à la condition d'une pluralité définie. Il y en aura toujours 90 de plus. Si par contre la comparaison vise les séries potentiellement infinies qui suivent dix et cent, l'une ne peut plus s'avérer supérieure à l'autre. Une considération absolue de ces séries potentiellement infinies, abstraction faite de toute détermination susceptible de les réduire à des groupes finis en acte, élimine toute notion d'addition, de dépassement ou de parcours.

Pour manifester que l'argument est sophistique, saint Thomas dit qu'il « enlève l'infini dans l'addition des nombres »<sup>28</sup>. L'argument stipulait en effet, après avoir évoqué les nombres qui dépassent dix sans dépasser cent : « S'il y a une infinité de nombres qui dépassent cent, il y a donc quelque chose de plus grand que l'infini. » L'antécédent, déjà impossible, ne peut se concéder : une infinité en acte de nombres est chose impossible. Rien d'étonnant à ce que concéder une infinité de nombre qui dépassent cent conduise à une conséquence aussi impossible que l'existence actuelle d'une quantité supérieure à l'infini. Aristote le remarque souvent : il n'y a aucune impossibilité à ce que l'impossible s'ensuive de l'impossible.

L'argument et sa réplique se transposent aisément : pour conclure à l'impossibilité d'un passé infini, on prétend se faire concéder qu'il équivaut à une infinité en acte de jours avant aujourd'hui, comptant ainsi obtenir la même conséquence impossible d'une quantité qui devienne supérieure à l'infini, à mesure que de nouveaux jours s'ajoutent au passé. Là aussi il est exclu de concéder une infinité en acte, de sorte que la comparaison s'évanouit entre l'ensemble de tous les jours passés jusqu'à l'an dernier et leur ensemble jusqu'à l'an prochain.

*- Application au passé infini*

Tout autant que l'argument qui conduit à retirer l'infini dans l'addition des nombres, l'argument qui décrète impossible un passé infini est spécieux. Qu'on ne puisse rien ajouter à des jours passés infinis est vrai si ces jours sont considérés dans l'infinité indéterminée qu'ils comportent en raison de l'absence de limite antérieure. Mais rien n'empêche d'additionner les jours qui se sont écoulés depuis tel jour passé choisi dans cette infinité indéterminée des jours ; car une fois cette détermination effectuée, elle donne prise sur du fini, de sorte que l'écart entre ce moment du passé et le présent est calculable. Faute de comprendre cette distinction, on risque de rattacher à la thèse d'un monde éternel des conséquences indues qui conduisent à la discréditer pour une fausse raison, comme l'a bien vu Zimmermann :

Certainement, la détermination de chaque révolution [amenant un nouveau jour ou une nouvelle année] donne la possibilité d'assigner un nombre à chacun. Il ne s'ensuit cependant pas nécessairement de cela qu'à chaque révolution doive être assigné un nombre déterminé fixé par la série elle-même ; il ne s'ensuit pas, autrement dit, qu'il doive y avoir quelque chose comme un

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

numérotage absolu, ce qui, naturellement, présupposerait un tout fermé. Un numérotage relatif suffit, un numérotage dont le point de départ peut être choisi *arbitrairement*. Si, au contraire, on comprend la détermination d'une révolution comme absolue, alors on présuppose qu'il y a une première révolution. Avec un tel présupposé, la thèse stipulant que le monde est éternel *a parte ante* apparaît — il est trivial de le dire — insoutenable.<sup>29</sup>

En somme, que l'infinité se trouve dans les nombres ou dans les jours passés, les mêmes principes s'appliquent. Il s'agit toujours de bien distinguer entre ce qui s'additionne et ce qui ne s'additionne pas. Une détermination relative, qui donne prise à du fini, ne doit jamais être confondue avec une détermination absolue, à caractère totalisant : tant qu'il est question de succession *totale* qui met en présence – si l'on peut dire – d'un infini potentiel, il faut renoncer aux comparaisons de grandeur.

Il n'y a pas d'addition pour l'infini considéré dans sa succession totale, par laquelle il est un infini seulement dans la puissance de celui qui le reçoit (*qua infinitum est in potentia tantum accipientis*); mais il y a addition pour du fini reçu en acte (*alicui finito accepto in actu*). Pour ce fini reçu en acte, rien n'empêche d'avoir du plus et du plus grand.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Ce qu'il y a de commun aux deux objections*

Ce qui vaut pour l'addition vaut aussi pour le dépassement et la traversée. L'infini n'admet pas pareils événements. Hors du fini et de l'actuel, point d'addition, de dépassement ou de passage d'un point à un autre. On peut donc, à la suite de saint Thomas, concéder aux adversaires que leur argument rappelle l'impossibilité d'un infini en acte, mais rate la cible, s'il prétend réfuter la possibilité d'une éternité du monde.

Il est donc évident qu'il n'y a de dépassement, d'addition et de traversée possibles qu'en rapport avec quelque chose en acte, que ce soit l'acte d'une chose existante (*in re existentis*) ou par une considération actuelle de l'intellect ou de l'imagination (*actu per intellectum vel imaginationem acceptae*). Par conséquent, on prouve suffisamment, par ces arguments, qu'il n'y a pas d'infini en acte, mais poser un infini en acte n'est pas nécessaire à l'hypothèse de l'éternité du monde.<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Les considérations qui précèdent ne constituent qu'un bref aperçu de ce qui a nourri et continue de nourrir la controverse sur l'éternité du monde. Pour avoir une idée plus exhaustive des attaques dirigées à l'encontre de la position de saint Thomas, il faudrait examiner l'article de Fernand Van Steenberghe intitulé « Le mythe d'un monde éternel ». Je réserve pour un article ultérieur, que j'espère publier dans la *Revue thomiste*, la présentation et la réfutation des objections du chanoine louvaniste. Le présent exposé visait simplement à mettre en évidence quelques-uns des principes qui font comprendre, avec saint Thomas, que la possibilité, sinon la réalité, d'un monde éternel n'est pas un mythe.

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<sup>29</sup> « *Mundus est aeternus* », p. 327.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



# Ἐντευξις



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### **Introduction**

EDITH STEIN, PHILOSOPHER, makes us think of phenomenology, because she refers to Husserl, not Aristotle, as her mentor. It may seem paradoxical to see her complete or nuance Aristotelian political conceptions. But prior to being associated to the inadequate efforts of Husserl to get free of the Kantian folly, Edith Stein is above all an intelligent woman with penetrating powers of observation. She is aware of what people around her are living. Her own life has brought her to examine, as she liked to say, the “specificity” (*Eigenart*) of women, as compared to men. This subject goes beyond the usual considerations of phenomenologists and appeals her natural intelligence. Furthermore, because of her conversion to Christianity, she read Thomas of Aquinas, which somewhat protected her from the intellectual habits of phenomenological contagion.

Likewise, in his *Politics*, Aristotle examines the differences between man and woman, albeit from a slightly negative angle. His main interest is for the highest political virtues. As a result, he focuses on the good judgement of those who rule, while markedly insisting that it is the exclusive domain of men. When he examines women from this point of view, Aristotle emphasises their lack of natural aptitude for this virtue, which easily instills in the reader contempt for the feminine nature. Aristotle retains this incriminating sentence which confirms the weakness of women’s deliberations: « Τὸ δὲ θῆλυ ἔχει μὲν τὸ βουλευτικόν, ἀλλ’ ἄκυρον. — Women indeed possess deliberation, however without authority. »<sup>2</sup>

Edith Stein approaches the subject in a more positive way. She considers women in themselves, not in the limited context of political direction. Her interests go further than focusing on what nature has deprived women of, which keeps them from acting like men. She readily describes how nature has provided women with what they need to answer to a particular call. This perspective shows women as a marvel of nature, beautifully equipped for their mission, and not as diminished or incomplete human beings, or failed men.

This does not mean that Edith Stein contradicts Aristotle, but rather that she completes or ‘rehabilitates’ his thought. She calls on the reader to be aware that this negative thinking attributed to Aristotle does not do him justice, but betrays the contextual intention of the first book of *Politics*. To reduce to that the global concept that Aristotle has of women does not equate with his usual admiration for nature that “does nothing in vain” and that “does everything for the better”. And nature made women. What’s more, it is with a profession of faith that Aristotle begins his

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<sup>1</sup> First published in French in *Peripatetikos* N° 9 (2014). Translated in English by MARC GENDREAU.

<sup>2</sup> *Pol.*, I, 13, 1260a13.

political considerations: “Οὐθὲν γὰρ μάτην ἢ φύσις ποιεῖ. — Nature does nothing in vain”.<sup>3</sup> And with each particular development, we sense a conviction that nature calls man to the city and that this is the most appropriate context to attain man’s greatest good. This refrain is constant in Aristotle: nature does everything for the best and purveys everything for the best for its own end. “Ἡ φύσις μήτε ποιεῖ μάτην μηθὲν μήτε ἀπολείπει τι τῶν ἀναγκαίων. — Nature does nothing in vain nor does it forget to fulfil any need.”<sup>4</sup>

As soon as he refers to what distinguishes men and women, Aristotle denies that it is due to any imperfection in nature. On the contrary, he asserts that women are as they are because of the generosity of nature: it always provides the correct instrument for each operation.

Φύσει μὲν οὖν διώριστα τὸ θῆλυ... Οὐθὲν γὰρ ἢ φύσις ποιεῖ... πενιχρῶς, ἀλλ’ ἐν πρὸς ἕν’ οὕτω γὰρ ἂν ἀποτελοῖτο κάλλιστα τῶν ὀργάνων ἕκαστον, μὴ πολλοῖς ἔργοις, ἀλλ’ ἐνὶ δουλεῦον. — It is by nature that women are different... This is because nature does nothing stingily, but bestows the correct instrument to each function. In this way, each instrument achieves its full potential: by being allocated to one specific function instead of many.<sup>5</sup>

This is precisely the tone which we find in Edith Stein. She emphasizes that this observation is again made in our times:

We no longer consider women’s different nature as being inferior, but as having a specific value.<sup>6</sup>

### Edith Stein

Frequent readers of Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas do not immediately feel at ease with the writings of Edith Stein. They must overcome some obstacles to benefit from her profound intuitions. These writings are lectures given to diverse audiences and are variations of the same subject. Consequently, there are many repetitions, but with an added detail here and a different wording there. Furthermore, oral teachings have other irritating imperfections: less rigorous articulation, excessive affirmations, vague ways of saying things, a vocabulary that is not always scientific. From her philosophical background, Edith Stein also inherits a terminology that is a tad too personal. Conversely, to describe properties that she calls very specific, she uses terms that are too general. She is also very liberal in finding new faculties for the execution of operations that retain her attention. She has a propensity, somewhat excessive, to believe she is the first to observe and to name what she observes. Finally, somewhat like the Fathers of the Church, she has no scruples about combining considerations inspired from revelation to those that come from natural observation and reflection, as she also does with theology and philosophy, without bothering to distinguish from which authority she draws. She sometimes even augments these irritants, in particular when she uses a deluge of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 1253a9.

<sup>4</sup> *On Soul*, III, 9, 432b23.

<sup>5</sup> *Pol.*, I, 2, 1252b1-4.

<sup>6</sup> Edith Stein, *Essays On Woman*, in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, ICS Publications, Book 2, 100.



italics and brackets. With these, I will take the liberty of being as frugal as possible. However the quality and soundness of Edith Stein's observations merit that we bear with this discomfort.

To this effect, we can cite the verbal exaggeration in the expression of feminine 'specificity'. Edith Stein sometimes talks as if men and women were two distinct animal species, or some sort of 'binary species'. Because she had a poor scholastic background, we must forgive this exaggeration on account of her imprecise use of technical terms of logic. We should rather retain her insistence on the radical nature of the characteristics that distinguish women from men, and on the profoundness of this distinction.

Strictly speaking, men and women certainly constitute a single species. They represent two versions of the same human essence. In each, we find all the essential characteristics of a human being: life, with all its vegetal foundations, sensing and sensible affections, intellectual life with its practical and speculative dimensions, along with the emotional life proper to this level: free will.

But this Jewish philosopher insists that the difference in sexuality between man and woman cannot be narrowed down to a simple genital accident, or to a parting of the mechanical aspects of the reproductive function, or to a difference only present at the level of this vegetative function. According to her, this difference deeply colours all the operations of the being, up to those specifically human. She asks:

Isn't there a substantial difference underlying the different rhythms of Being... Does the difference between man and woman involve the whole structure of the person or only the body and those psychic functions necessarily related to physical organs? Can the mind be considered unaffected by this difference?<sup>7</sup>

But this is rather rhetorical, because we can tell she only thinks of answering this question by confessing her profound conviction about the all-penetrating character of this difference.

I am convinced that the species humanity embraces the double species man and woman; that the essence of the complete human being is characterized by this duality; and that the entire structure of the essence demonstrates the specific character. There is a difference, not only in body structure and in particular physiological functions, but also in the entire corporeal life. The relationship of soul and body is different in man and woman; the relationship of soul to body differs in their psychic life as well as that of the spiritual faculties to each other.<sup>8</sup>

"God created man in His own image; He created them as male and female". When He put humanity into the world, not as a single but as a dual species, there had to be a different meaning of life for each species as well as a mutual one.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

*A. Woman's Natural Destination*

Man or woman, there is only one human nature. Consequently, men and women have a common natural destination, they aim at the same perfection, their fulfilment calls for the same definition, named happiness. As full-fledged human beings, women aim at happiness just as much as men. "Each woman participates in the general human nature." Aristotle talks about contemplation and about life according to right reason. Edith Stein on her part, borrows from *Genesis*:

God has given each human being a threefold destiny: to grow into the likeness of God through the development of his faculties, to procreate descendants, and to hold dominion over the earth. In addition, it is promised that a life of faith and personal union with the Redeemer will be rewarded by eternal contemplation of God. These destinies, natural and supernatural, are identical for both man and woman.<sup>10</sup>

The scriptural flavour of this description should not make us believe that is in contrast with the Aristotelian concept of happiness. The likeness of God is reminiscent of the speculative life about which Aristotle notes, at the end of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, that is has something of the divine. And the dominion over the earth poetically illustrates the practical rational life that is a prerequisite for the leisure of speculation. As for procreation, it signals the precariousness of human happiness by referring to its remedy: being mortal, mankind will only be able to contemplate and to dominate without interruption by forever entrusting these actions to new generations.

Man will need to be political to accomplish such a major, complex and difficult task. It is only by becoming a citizen that man will be able to attain a level of leisure which allows intellectual life; by relying on his peers that have the many different and complementary skills required to meet everyday necessities. Even before we talk about masculinity or femininity, there are profound individual differences between human beings. These differences call on each person to contribute in a very personal way to the human destiny. Each individual must recognise his own vocation through his distinctive talents and the unique circumstances of his life.

Individuality is bestowed by God just as is human nature in general. And individuality's self-fulfilment in purity is just as much the destiny of each human being. Each person finds his place in society through his own individual gifts. These in turn trace one's vocation: the function each is called to perform in society.<sup>11</sup>

Edith Stein, who is contemporary with the personalists, makes a case for individual differences: "There are also individual goals"<sup>12</sup>. These differences attribute a special role to each person, and not only on earth: they manifest God's intention of assigning a different place to each person in eternal life.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>11</sup> *La destination de la femme*, dans Édith Stein, *La femme*, introd., trad., annotations et annexes par Marie-Dominique Richard, Paris : Éd. du Cerf/Toulouse : Éd. du Carmel/Genève : Ad Solem, 2008, 119.

<sup>12</sup> *Vie chrétienne de la femme*, dans Édith Stein, *La femme*, *op. cit.*, 188.

Individuality has a meaning both in time and for eternity. It assigns to each human being not only his place on earth, but also his rank in the heavenly hierarchy. It is not a terrestrial imperfection that must be fought, but it is the specificity willed by God.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the need to find a remedy for mortality commands the necessary collaboration between men and women. As regards mortality, men and women incarnate their common destination differently. We must take into account the natural destinations of both men and women. Strictly speaking, only the end justifies the means. Consequently, differences between men and women can only be appreciated and understood on the condition of properly identifying the proper missions to which these differences prepare them.

To grow into the likeness of God, to hold dominion over the earth and to procreate descendants: these are the many facets of the natural destination of man, according to the philosopher Edith Stein. But these facets call for collaboration. We are not talking here about mere distribution: each individual or each of the sexes doesn't receive an exclusive mission for one aspect or the other. Men and women are called to accomplish everything together. However, concerning a particular aspect, precedence will be given to either man or woman, but with need of adequate assistance from his spouse.

These destinations, natural and supernatural, are identical for both man and woman. But in the realm of duties, differences determined by sex exist.<sup>14</sup>

a) Mother

It is clear that the task of ensuring the continuity of the human species belongs foremost to women. It is their principal destination: the nature of women calls them to become mothers. Of course, nature does not call for a mother to meet this need alone; the father must also participate. But, without question, the mother does the greater part and the father is her indispensable partner. The mother bears the brunt of the pregnancy, while the father's participation is evidently a one-shot event, at conception.

It is the mother who accompanies the children every day until they are old enough to emancipate themselves. It is her who feeds them, washes them, keeps them occupied, gives them her affection, assists them in their first steps, encourages them in their games and in their first initiatives, gives them their first teachings, teaches them to speak and to communicate, presides over their relationships with their brothers and sisters and with their first friends. It is through their mother's love that children learn that they are somebody, that they deserve to be appreciated, that they can play a role and make a contribution. The father, in all of this, has the role of a helper who is more or less distant: he provides the material and moral environments; he provides food, clothing, instruments; he ensures safety, sanctions waywardness; he replaces the mother to allow her to attend to more personal tasks, so that she may have some respite and not be too overwhelmed.

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<sup>13</sup> *La destination...*, 120.

<sup>14</sup> Edith Stein, *Essays On Woman, op. cit.*, 100.

The primary calling of woman is the procreation and raising of children; for this, the man is given to her as protector.<sup>15</sup>

Evidently, man's calling is more towards dominion over the Earth. But, in so doing, he too will need the assistance of his spouse.

Lordship over the earth is the primary vocation of man: for this, the woman is placed at his side as helpmate.<sup>16</sup>

The complementary relationship of man and woman in the original order of nature appears clearly: man's primary vocation appears to be that of ruler and the paternal vocation secondary (not subordinate to his vocation as ruler but an integral part of it); woman's primary vocation is maternal: her role as ruler is secondary and included in a certain way in her maternal vocation.<sup>17</sup>

To this end, nature gives to each the appropriate talents for their primary mission, but without totally denying them to the spouse who is called to give assistance.

The same gifts occur in both, but in different proportions and relation.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear however that these talents cannot be equally distributed, because the two missions are different to the point of being opposite, even contrary. Dominion and conquest mostly require force, and conversely everyday support requires thoughtfulness and sensitivity.

In the case of the man, gifts for struggle, conquest, and dominion are especially necessary: bodily force for taking possession of the exterior world, intellect for a cognitive type of penetration of the world, strength of character and power of realisation in order to fashion the world in a creative way. With the woman are necessary capabilities of caring, protecting, and promoting the being in becoming and growing. She has the gift thereby to live in an intimately bound physical compass and to collect her forces quietly; on the other hand, she needs to be able to endure pain, to adapt and abnegate herself. She is psychically directed to the concrete, the individual, and the personal: she needs the ability to grasp the concrete in its individuality and to adapt herself to it, and the longing to help this peculiarity to its development.<sup>19</sup>

### *1. Natural qualifications*

Edith Stein always insists on saying that the mission of maternity can't bear specialization. Woman's mission is not to give birth to and bring up monsters, but accomplished human beings. Woman spontaneously seek equilibrium and harmony and hates all excesses. Woman wants her children to develop all their faculties harmoniously, and not one faculty to the detriment of the others. She loves each child as a whole and her affection is not limited to a specific characteristic. Men on the contrary seek efficacy, and to this end easily give way to specialization: they

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

willingly put aside certain tasks and faculties to better succeed in the development and use of others.

The feminine species expresses a unity and wholeness of the total psychosomatic personality and a harmonious development of faculties. The masculine species strives to enhance individual abilities in order that they may attain their highest achievements.<sup>20</sup>

This distribution of gifts makes women better suited to be mothers and men to be conquerors. Consequently, this prepares men and women to different contributions for their common mission of revealing God's image. Women do this especially with a cohesive harmony and men with a greater emphasis on the excellence of a given faculty.

To reveal God's image in themselves is the mission assigned to man and woman... they must also do this in specific ways...: woman strives towards the divine perfection more by the harmonious development of all her faculties; man through a more intense development of particular ones.<sup>21</sup>

As a mother, woman receives from nature the capability of being one with her child, to the point of depending on him in the running of her life. It is impossible for woman to ignore the child in the period from conception to his development within her. Even after giving him a material existence outside of her, she keeps a very intimate bond with her child. For all of her life, she finds it difficult to go about her business independently of the needs of her offspring.

Woman is bound more intensely to a child both physically and spiritually, and the entire arrangement of her life is committed to this union; she finds in this her first duty. Man is placed by her side as helper and protector.<sup>22</sup>

In order for her to be best suited to her role as a mother, nature has customized her special sense of discernment and feeling. Popular wisdom exalts feminine intuition almost as if it was a *sui generis* faculty. It should be noted how woman's attention and thought focuses with remarkable skill on the singular and the concrete. Noting this stunning gift of knowing the person and his need, which woman needs to properly take care of her child, and which she receives from nature, Edith is well tempted to see in it an exclusive faculty that she designates as "the affective sense". In short, since this responds better to the good of the child, the knowledge of woman is intimately subjective; it is in no way neutral. Feelings immediately accompany this knowledge: she cannot learn without taking an emotional stand regarding the person concerned.

Her peculiar characteristic of discernment suits her duty as companion and mother; her strength lies in her intuitive grasp of the concrete and the living, especially of the personal. She has the gift of adapting herself to the inner life of others, to their goal orientation and working methods. Feelings

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-188.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

are central to her as the faculty which grasps concrete being in its unique nature and specific value; and it is through feeling that she expresses her attitude. She desires to bring humanity in its specific and individual character in herself and in others to the most perfect development possible.<sup>23</sup>

Edith Stein uses very strong terms when she insists on the natural destination of woman to be mother. For her, it is not merely a question of physical or superficial bodily dispositions. Woman's very soul is intended for this end. On first reading, this affirmation might shake us, but with proper thought we are compelled to agree. A person's entire body is for the benefit of the soul. Each particular disposition of the body, other than accidents of matter, answers a special need of the soul it serves. If woman's body is endowed with a sensitivity and affectivity so much centered on the singular and the personal, it is because it is destined to serve a soul whose purpose is to love and assist the people it is close to. For our philosopher, it is without doubt that anyone who denies this must be biased.

Only the person blinded by the passion of controversy could deny that woman in soul and body is formed for a particular purpose. The clear and irrevocable word of Scripture declares what daily experience teaches from the beginning of the world: woman is destined to be wife and mother. Both physically and spiritually she is endowed for this purpose, as is seen clearly from practical experience. However, ... such a spiritual characteristic does exist. Of course, woman shares a basic human nature, but basically her faculties are different from men; therefore, a differing type of soul must exist as well.<sup>24</sup>

Everything in woman predisposes her to be knowledgeable and interested in the whole of a person. And this is exactly what a child needs: that the person having the child's care be equipped with all that is necessary for his integrity and for the integral development of his being.

Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is living, personal, and whole. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning. Lifeless matter, the fact, can hold primary interest for her only insofar as it serves the living and the personal, not ordinarily for its own sake. Relevant to this is another matter: abstraction in every sense is alien to the feminine nature. The living and personal to which her care extends is a concrete whole and is protected and encouraged as a totality; this does not mean that one part is sacrificed to another, not the mind to the body or one spiritual faculty at the expense of the others. She aspires to this totality in herself and in others.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, for the benefit of this mission, woman's intelligence is poorly adapted to abstraction, and her affectivity is hardly interested in it. Man, on the contrary, needs a capacity for abstraction in order to comprehend the essence of

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

things. This enables him to hold dominion over them as much as to contemplate them.

Her theoretical and her practical views correspond; her natural line of thought is not so much conceptual and analytical as it is directed intuitively and emotionally to the concrete. This natural endowment enables woman to guard and teach her own children. But this basic attitude is not intended just for them; she should behave in this way also to her husband and to all those in contact with her.<sup>26</sup>

While being concerned with the global being of the child, Edith Stein not only seeks protection of the body, but also protection of the soul. This is what brings woman to love unconditionally and totally, and to provide care and human warmth.

The child needs protection and care not only for his body but also for his soul. To an even greater extent than in the relationship between spouses, are required here warm and caring love, delicate understanding, silent and spontaneous dedication to make life bloom, so that it not wither away for lack of warmth and of food or not be destroyed by any brutal intervention or hindered in its natural growth.<sup>27</sup>

The intuition that is required for the good of the child and for his integral development is profound. In order to fulfill her mission of motherhood, the woman needs a special gift that allows her to detect in her child that which is not yet present. She must have such intimacy with the child, that she perceives in their embryonic form the talents that might develop. This need is so particular and so profound, that in observing the natural efficiency of woman in this matter, Edith Stein is again tempted to credit her with another special faculty which she calls *intropathy (Einfühlung)*. To fulfill her mission, the mother must enter into her children's live itself, live it with them, yet always ready to retire when they are able to take it on by themselves. She then becomes an increasingly discrete companion who imposes less and less in order to facilitate the blooming of a free personality.

Her mission as mother... must primarily care for the children and bring them to development. She must guide and then gradually withdraw to attain, in face of the mature human being, the role of a companion. This demands, on the one hand, an even more refined gift of sympathy because it is necessary to comprehend the dispositions and faculties of which the young people themselves are as yet unaware; she has to feel her way towards that which wishes to become, but which as yet does not exist.<sup>28</sup>

## *2. Profound influence*

This is all extremely sensitive and bears a great responsibility. Being so gifted, woman's influence on her child's soul is without measure. What becomes of her child will, for the most part, depend on her.

On the other hand, the possibility of influence is greater. The youthful soul is still in the formative stage and declares itself more easily and openly

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

<sup>27</sup> *La destination...*, 121.

<sup>28</sup> *Essays On Woman, op. cit.*, 109.

because it does not offer resistance to extraneous influences. However, all this increases the mother's responsibility.<sup>29</sup>

From the closeness, constant care, warmth and comprehension of his mother with which she surrounds him, the child develops self-confidence and becomes convinced that he has a part on this earth, that his existence has meaning and that he is destined to have a happy life. Insofar as woman adequately uses her gifts to brighten the childhood of her offspring, they will always be certain that there is an outcome for them, that life has meaning and that there is an opening for them. However, if deprived of this maternal contact, children will remain timid and always in doubt about the legitimacy of their existence and their decisions. All in all, woman has the innate capability to shape the character of her children.

There is no natural force that can measure up to the mother's influence regarding its importance for the character and destiny of a person. If we meet people who go their way freely, straight and open, from whom light and warmth goes out, then we can almost certainly assume that they had a sunny childhood and that that childhood sun was a healthy mother's love. When we meet people who are shy and are suspicious or show other distortions and deviancies of the character, we can conclude with no less certainty that ... something was missing on the part of the mother.<sup>30</sup>

It is not only the character that results from maternal care, it is the child's destiny itself: whatever the concrete events of his life, he will be happy or unhappy according to the nature of the motherly love he will have received.

It is as far back as the womb that the child undergoes the determining influences that will shape not only his body but also his soul... What becomes of her child depends on the mother more than any other person: how his character develops and whether he is happy or unhappy. Because happiness or unhappiness is not so much decided by what stems from the outside as much as what we are. The mother's first duty is that she has 'to be there for her child'.<sup>31</sup>

I know a mother who had an eight year old daughter who was dying from a congenital disease that had made her suffer a lot during her short life. She asked her daughter what she had most loved and hated during these few years of life. She was quite surprised to hear her say: "But mom, I loved everything! »

Such an outcome presupposes that woman is conscious that she is the one who is there for her child and that it is not her child who is there for her. The goal of the woman mother is first and foremost the good of her child. This fact is inscribed deep in her genes and in her soul. Only a twisted education can lead a woman to reverse things so as to hijack her child's existence for her own fantasies. This will lead to grave consequences that can only prove by the absurd what is nature's true intention in shaping woman's nature, soul, heart and faculties.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

<sup>30</sup> *L'art éducatif maternel*, 229 (trad. Marc Gendreau).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 230 (trad. Marc Gendreau).



Real motherly love, in which the child thrives as do plants in the mild warmth of the sun, knows that the child 'is not there for her'. Therefore, the child is not a toy to fill in her empty time, nor is he there to satisfy her desire for tenderness, nor to satisfy her vanity or ambition.<sup>32</sup>

### *3. Social significance*

Concerning the theme of woman's specificity, Edith Stein does more than insist that woman has a nature of her own with natural tendencies and propensities that are also her own and are different from those found in man. She also elaborates on the fact that this specificity is the source of a 'specific value' in woman, inasmuch as she is kept from distortions and errors that ensue from what is broken in human nature due to the original sin. The human family reaps benefits from the fact that woman is woman, with her own specific nature. We can observe those benefits in the social sphere in particular.

Today, that which is to be of value must be made fruitful for the community. And our theme upholds that this possibility also exists for the intrinsic value of woman.<sup>33</sup>

Woman's healthy influence over her children guarantees social cohesion and is the remedy that the people need for all the vicissitudes of politics.

They must be mothers with a firm conception of life, knowing to what purpose they should rear their children, having an open vision of the developmental possibilities of their children; but also having an incorruptible perspective of the dangerous drives in them which must be curtailed and which must be seized with a powerful hand at the right moment. And these also must be mothers who know their place, who do not think that they are able to do everything themselves but, on the contrary, are able to let go of their children and place them in God's hand when the time comes, when the children have outgrown them. Such mothers are probably the most important agents for the recovery of the nation.<sup>34</sup>

Good relationships between family members depend greatly on the mother. It is especially her who helps the children develop a healthy relationship with their father.

Often the proper relationship between the father and children, which is of greatest significance for both parties, must above all be mediated by the mother.<sup>35</sup>

And this is the foundation of everything. The children will inherit from their father their conscience and the ability to tell good from evil. They look to their father with fear, because he is formidable, and all the rules that govern their actions come from him. But it is in seeing their mother enter into the will of their father, and finding her happiness in obeying him, that they will discover the benefits of obedience. Furthermore, they will become aware that salvation generally comes

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 231 (trad. MARC GENDREAU).

<sup>33</sup> Edith Stein, *Essays On Woman, op. cit.*, 255.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

from submitting to a legitimate authority, and that the profound nature of freedom is to not be enslaved by one's own whims. Woman naturally tends to submit to the will of her spouse, the father of her children, and this natural attitude is a catalyst to the efficacy of their education. Consequently, the child who later becomes an adult is able to obey laws, leaders or their boss, and eventually collaborate on any complex activity.

This entry into obedience is the foundation of education and must be initiated at the onset of life, under the aegis of maternal care. "Those who didn't learn to obey in early childhood will later in life only learn it through hard struggles, or never."<sup>36</sup> The mother's regular caring of her baby is its first aspect. Woman's nature causes her to be disciplined on the subject of diet and hygiene. But the distorted mother who is negligent in this matter and who makes her child's life start off in a disorderly and whimsical manner compromises everything. She will lead her child to be a tyrant destined to be unhappy and maladjusted.

Education must begin from the first day, namely education for cleanliness and regularity and some containment of urges: when the child receives his necessary meals only at specific hours, and not outside, he gets used to it and the organism adapts to this order. If you give in to his real or supposed wishes, he soon develops into a little tyrant. So regular habituation is a preliminary exercise for both obedience and order: these are two virtues that must also be acquired in the first few years.

As much as it is necessary to give the child freedom so that he can act and develop according to his nature and stage of development, so it is necessary that he feel a firm will over himself that regulates his life for his own good. By nature, the child needs firm guidance and basically demands it, even if, in the individual case, the educator's will often thwarts the child's desires, and even if the drive for power, the drive to assert oneself, inherent from the start in every human being, attempts to shake off every foreign rule of will.

If the little egoist notices that he is granted his wishes, that his wishes are fulfilled after an initial rejection, following some tormenting, pouting or roaring, that threats are not carried out, orders are withdrawn, he is then soon master of the house: to the plague of the family and above all to his own detriment. After all, he is not yet able to judge what is good for him, and obtains through threats things that are by no means useful to him. He also wastes his energies on deliberations and decisions about matters that should be regulated naturally (e.g. when and what to eat, what to wear, etc.) instead of using them in the most important domain for the development of his autonomy during these years: which is 'playing'...

Inappropriate guardianship is just as harmful as inappropriate freedom.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *L'art éducatif maternel*, 234 (trad. MARC GENDREAU).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-233 (trad. Marc Gendreau).

*4. Universality of Maternal Character*

Edith Stein insists that the fact that woman is naturally mother is not just seen through her relationship with her children. Everything that woman does naturally well is inspired by the maternal instinct. Woman's relationships are not only with her children. In all the relationships she has with whomever comes in contact with her, she has a natural propensity to put herself in the other person's shoes, to intuit his needs, his talents and his weaknesses, and to assist in the development of his personality.

A woman might not have had many children: maybe she spends most of her time and energy outside of a family. But whether it be in voluntary work or lucrative work, she will be most happy in any situation as long as she can make use of this maternal instinct. Here, she colours her activities with an attention to the other that gives him the best opportunity to harmoniously develop and exercise his personality.

Edith Stein lived in a time when feminism was at its beginning, when there were many debates about whether some professions were typically feminine or women were able to exercise any profession. She does not go to the extreme of pretending that woman can exercise any profession with the same ease or on the same footing as men. However she grants much latitude to women on this subject: particularly, she measures the feminine potential of any profession with the possibility it offers this motherly nature to be brought into play. Certain professions directly call for this charism: everything that concerns education and learning; and also care services: medicine, psychology, social services. Many other fields also call for it more or less directly: the making of laws and regulations that take concrete people into account, the administration of services, and so on.

b) Spouse

Nature was called to bring a remedy to the precariousness of human life, to mortality, which could compromise the permanence of God's image that man had the mission of bearing. The remedy to this is procreation. This concern with incarnating the image of God in rational life, implies a twofold purpose: conforming all actions to the good discerned by right reason and orienting human life towards a certain contemplation of God, especially in his creation of nature. Nature has arranged for man to entrust this twofold purpose to his progeny, so that it may take on this task after his death. This is so indispensable, for man to continue being the image of God and spreading his domination over the world, that Edith Stein names procreating as the third natural destination of man.

Moreover, in order for this remedy to be administered with the greatest efficacy, nature, when fashioning the soul and body of woman, took care to dispose them, in all their aspects, faculties and tendencies, to be those of a mother. Consequently, nature has made woman a human being completely adapted to the good of the child to be born, fully motivated to ensure that he become a full-fledged human being.

We have just shown that the specificity of the feminine mission is broader than just accompanying the child to adult life. Any human being who needs care and help to either achieve or to regain his full potential can benefit from woman's maternal instincts.

*I. Partner*

Edith Stein states that we must take into account that the maternal predisposition of woman entails a second dimension of feminine specificity: being made to be a mother, woman is also made to be a spouse. Nature predisposes her to be a partner and to assist man. “A normal and healthy woman has a natural longing to become a spouse and a mother.”<sup>38</sup> The book of Genesis says: “It is not good for the man to be alone.”<sup>39</sup> The task of having dominion over the earth, is too heavy for him to succeed alone. He must share this task and make it the object of collaboration. Even then, his individual share remains too heavy; he cannot succeed all by himself, he gets discouraged, he turns away from it and he risks many missteps. To maintain his bearing, he needs counsel, encouragement and support from someone suitable. And this is exactly the specificity of the feminine nature. All the natural gifts that make her a mother, also make her a spouse and a companion.

This maternal gift is joined to that of companion. It is her gift and happiness to share the life of another human being and, indeed, to take part in all things which come his way, in the greatest and smallest things, in joy as well as in suffering, in work, and in problems.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, man has a second mission that is also beyond him and that could crush him if woman weren't given him to assist him for, as Edith Stein says, “more than half”: this is the task of being a father.

The family burden which the husband bears in addition to his professional duties would seem all too heavy if his helpmate did not stand by his side; she is called in accordance with her nature to carry more than half of this load. She craves for an unhampered development of her personality just as much as she does to help another toward that same goal. And thus the husband will find that she can give him invaluable advice in guiding the lives of the children as well as of themselves; indeed, often he would fulfill his duties as leader best if he would yield to her and permit himself to be led by her. Part of her natural feminine concern for the right development of the beings surrounding her involves the creation of an ambience, of order and beauty conducive to their development.<sup>41</sup>

Man feels he is given a mission, and he takes it very seriously. All his energy is directed towards this goal. He needs to be taken seriously and to be helped. But each man in turn has his own mission and demands to be taken notice of and to be helped. Consequently nature has provided woman to give man assistance and encouragement. And also to break his tendency to completely subjugate himself to the object of his efforts.

Man is consumed by “his enterprise,” and he expects others will be interested and helpful; generally, it is difficult for him to become involved in other beings and their concerns.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *La destination...*, 122 (trad. MARC GENDREAU).

<sup>39</sup> Gn 2, 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Essays On Woman, op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

The faculties and gifts that woman is endowed with in order to ensure the good of the child also predispose her to be interested in the mission of others, to submit to it and to take it seriously. This is to the point that a woman, out of love for her companion, will be able to intuit manners of doing that otherwise would have been completely unknown to her. She will have the ability to be interested in objects that normally would have left her totally indifferent. Her love for her companion enables her to do all that is necessary to help him succeed in his project; and in return, her companion becomes capable of greater efficiency.

On the contrary, it is natural for woman, and she has the faculty to interest herself empathetically in areas of knowledge far from her own concerns and to which she would not pay heed if it were not that a personal interest drew her into contact with them. This endowment is bound closely to her maternal gift. An active sympathy for those who fall within her ken awakens their powers and heightens their achievements.<sup>43</sup>

Edith Stein points out that woman’s gift as a companion who is able to help her man maximise his capabilities has a similar effect on her children. As they become adults, they need someone who encourages them in their own path more than they need education or maternal care.

It is a concerned, formative, and truly maternal function, precisely one which even the adult needs. This function will come into play also with one’s own children, especially when they mature and the mother is released from their physical care.<sup>44</sup>

## *2. Obedience*

Edith Stein directly links this second aspect of feminine specificity to the fact that nature destines woman to obedience. From the beginning, man and woman were called to collaborate on a common mission: to convey the image of divinity and to this end, extend creation, hold dominion over the material universe and make use of it for the good of mankind. But collaboration necessarily implies coordination. Someone needs to discern and to decide how this collaboration will develop concretely. There can be no collaboration without someone in charge, and consequently, without obedience to someone in charge. Edith Stein sees very well that woman’s fate of assisting man, that nature’s calling to give her being and her life to her husband, commands obedience. By their specific nature, man is given command over woman and family, and woman is called to obey her husband.

Participation in her husband’s life requires subordination and obedience, as directed by God’s word.<sup>45</sup>

Through the laws of nature, God has given dominion over the earth, first to man and then to woman to assist him.

Man and woman are destined “to rule over the earth,” that means, to know the things of this world, to delight in it, and to develop it in creative

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

action. But these cultural achievements were allocated to man as his first duty; woman was placed at his side as helpmate.<sup>46</sup>

This brings every man to make this mission become concrete by carrying out a more specific object that becomes his own mission, the object of his life, his ambition. Woman is herself indifferent to such an object. She is even reticent to any form of specialisation that is liable to distract one from the harmonious development of the whole person. But by responding to this calling of nature that makes her a suitable help for a particular man, as his wife she now takes at heart this mission, the object for which he has an absorbing passion. She will want to do everything in order for her husband succeed in his enterprise. Of course all will have to be done under his guidance.

It is in accordance with nature that man serve his concern directly. The wife serves his cause for his sake; thus, it is reasonable that this happen under his guidance.<sup>47</sup>

However, woman's natural capacity for obedience is not restricted to the work of her husband. Even what is mostly under her responsibility, such as giving birth and educating children, she does under the authority of her husband. For this mission, the husband becomes an assistant: he provides the framework and the instruments, such as a house, food and clothing, and a safe environment. But even then, he remains naturally in charge and woman will find happiness by giving birth and educating her children under his authority.

That the duty of obedience extends also to the wife's immediate domain—the household and the upbringing of children—is probably derived less from the feminine individuality than from the natural vocation of man as guide and protector of his wife. The natural vocation corresponds also to woman's natural tendency towards obedience and service.<sup>48</sup>

To support this idea, Edit Stein even feels at ease to paraphrase Goethe's *Iphigenia*: "Obedient I feel my soul, always most beautifully free."<sup>49</sup> For her, it goes without doubt: nature has put man in charge of the family and of woman. She doesn't consider it either any different or more unjust than in the case of the animal body, where all its limbs recognise the head as being in charge and collaborate with it for the good of the whole body.

Just as in the single organism all limbs are ruled by the head, thereby maintaining the harmony of the entire being, so there must also be a head in the more extended organism; and in a sound organism there can be no contention concerning which is the head and which are the members and what are the functions of both.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Goethe, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Acte V, v. 1827 : "It is in obedience that my soul has always felt marvelously free."

<sup>50</sup> *Essays On Woman, op. cit.*, 67.

Naturally in charge, but not naturally a tyrant. It is in man's nature to command his wife. But he corresponds more fully to his nature when he commands her in the same way one commands someone who is free and equal, and who might even have greater discernment and experience in particular fields. In the household, the husband's prudence will consist most of the time in "deciding" what his wife will have "suggested", her being more aware of family affairs, of the needs of the household and of the particular needs of each child.

And since he himself is not perfect like Christ, but rather a creature with many gifts and many defects, his highest wisdom may be to permit the gifts of the other members to compensate for his defects, just as it could be the highest political wisdom of the sovereign to allow a judicious minister to rule. However, it is essential for the well-being of the organism that this should come about under the guidance of the head. If the body rebels against the head, the organism will suffer as much as if the head were to allow the body to atrophy.<sup>51</sup>

Woman's special gifts are magnificently pertinent in matters of knowledge and affectivity. To successfully help her husband, in his professional ambitions and in growing a family that will prolong him beyond death, woman deeply needs two attributes. First, "intropathy", the deep sense of what constitutes the strength and the significance of the other. Secondly, an "affective sense", which is a propensity to side with the best in her husband.

God gave woman as man's companion. And her specificity is adapted to this destination: to walk at another person's side with loving participation to his everyday life, with loyalty and willingness to serve, that is the feminine nature. Natural intropathy for others and their needs, adaptability and the willingness to adapt are included therein.<sup>52</sup>

Edith Stein is not unaware of the suffering woman will encounter in married life. The man to whom she will devote her life will rarely be a saint and his command will rarely be exempt from injustice and humiliation. But even if celibacy offers the perspective of avoiding this suffering, woman will feel her calling better fulfilled within marriage than without.

I believe that most "happy" marriages are mostly martyrdom, at least in part. But even in an unhappy marriage, women are on average better suited to their destination than outside of marriage.<sup>53</sup>

The call to assist her husband infuses all the dimensions of woman's life. It is fulfilled not only, often not at all, by acting as his secretary or by running his errands for small tasks relating to his profession. It consists mostly in having a vigilant attention to organize domestic life so that it doesn't constitute an obstacle to the success of her husband's work. In this regard, Edith Stein has views that surpass the imagination of anyone who has set to describe the feminine nature, and that can make any of today's feminists have a fit.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

<sup>52</sup> *La destination...*, 12 (trad. MARC GENDREAU).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123 (trad. MARC GENDREAU).

According to Genesis, woman was placed by man's side so that he would not be alone but would have a helpmate who suits him; she will primarily fulfill her vocation as spouse in making his concerns her own. Normally, we understand "his concerns" to mean his profession. The woman's participation in her husband's profession can be performed in various ways. In the first place, it will be her duty to shape their home life so that it does not hinder, but rather furthers, his professional work. If his work is in the home, she must see to it that disturbances are kept as far away from him as possible; if his work is away from the home, she must be sure that the home affords appropriate relaxation and recovery when he returns to it. There can be immediate participation in the performance of direct help.<sup>54</sup>

This makes us realize to what point these women are not very 'feminine' when they constantly recriminate against their husbands for the little help and presence they give to family life. But Edith Stein doesn't mean that all the husband's whims or any escape in work is justification for this feminine conduct. Part of the help that woman must contribute to the mission of her husband is that she remain attentive precisely to any danger on his part of any specialization of his life that could distort his nature as a man or compromise the development of his personality as a whole. In short, anything that could make him some sort of occupational monster.

But the woman who "suits" man as helpmate does not only participate in his work; she complements him, counteracting the dangers of his specifically masculine nature. It is her business to ensure to the best of her ability that he is not totally absorbed in his professional work, that he does not permit his humanity to become stunted, and that he does not neglect his family duties as father. She will be better able to do so the more she herself is mature as a personality; and it is vital here that she does not lose herself in association with her husband but, on the contrary, cultivates her own gifts and powers.<sup>55</sup>

Also, woman frequently has the duty to help all humanity towards victory in relation to her spouse. He generally has the need "to be an individual also" when he comes from his professional activity, but often he no longer has the strength to be able to do so on his own. The wife's concern must therefore be to take care that he does not look for compensation in shallow or dangerous diversions. A fine home creates an atmosphere in which the soul can freely breathe. And then the values which she longs for are materialized naturally. Tact and delicacy must discover what is to be settled at a given moment.<sup>56</sup>

There is something overwhelming about the fact that this natural destination implies so much self-abnegation and self-giving. Edith Stein recognizes this fact, though to marvel about it, while people today would tend to feel sorry about it, or even feel displeased.

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<sup>54</sup> *Essays On Woman, op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.



In order to develop to the highest level the humanity specific to husband and children, woman requires the attitude of selfless service. She cannot consider others as her property nor as means for her own purposes; on the contrary, she must consider others as gifts entrusted to her, and she can only do so when she also sees them as God's creatures towards whom she has a holy duty to fulfill.<sup>57</sup>

### *3. Professions*

We previously noted the often asked question concerning the distinction between masculine and feminine professions. Despite the evident fact that the principal operations of certain professions require some talents and aptitudes to be more or less exclusively masculine or feminine, it remains that the division between them is not as clear and categorized as it first seems.

This intention of nature, to make woman a suitable assistant for man, is made concrete to the point of giving her qualities that are more pertinent to the masculine nature. In a special manner, woman is naturally capable of an amazing adaptation.

An equipment equal to the man's is included in the adaptive ability, as well as the possibility of performing the same work as he does, either in common with him or in his place.<sup>58</sup>

Man and woman have the same basic human traits, although this or that trait predominates not only in the sexes but also in respective individuals. Therefore, women may closely approximate the masculine type and conversely.<sup>59</sup>

Of course, there are limits. When she undertakes mostly masculine activities, woman will have to somehow tame them: find how to accomplish them in a manner that changes them into feminine professions and find the proper angle for her to bring her specific gifts into play.

So the contemporary situation is characterized primarily by feminine singularity being accepted as self-evident. We women have become aware once again of our singularity. Many a woman who formerly denied it has perhaps become aware of it, painfully aware of it, if she has entered one of the traditionally masculine professions and sees herself forced into conditions of life and work alien to her nature. If her nature is strong enough, she has perhaps succeeded in converting the masculine profession into a feminine one. And this self-awareness could also develop the conviction that an intrinsic feminine value resides in the singularity.<sup>60</sup>

Edith Stein sees this profound complementarity already announced in the way that the Book of Genesis describes woman as a man's 'helpmate corresponding to him'. Such as the left hand assisting the right hand. Both hands have exactly the same nature, even if the right hand leads naturally and is more adept. But, if needed, the left hand can become practically as skilful as the right hand for almost anything.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

In certain individuals, the left hand surpasses the right. But this is not really to be wished for, since the marital relationship becomes very difficult when the husband absolutely needs his wife for everything. In such case, a woman would need much virtue to not forget that her husband remains naturally in charge. She would need to be wary of being impatient and of doing things in his place lest he would feel like he's not a man, with brings the risk of despair and of marriage breakdown.

A helpmate corresponding to him, '*Eser kenegdo*', which literally means "a helper as if vis-à-vis to him." ... But one can also think of a counterpart, a pendant, so that, indeed, they do resemble each other, yet not entirely, but rather, that they complement each other as one hand does the other.<sup>61</sup>

### *B. Specific Missteps*

In order to throw light on what, in the properly feminine constitution, prepares woman to follow her natural destination or her double mission, Edith Stein describes what she considers to be woman's specificity. But she notes that it can be difficult to discern what prepares woman for her role by the fact that concretely this specificity is deformed by the original sin, specifically in the conducts that result from it. Consequently, from woman's 'specificity' she sets apart an 'intrinsic value' that can and must stem from the former. Woman's actions and realisations can take on this 'intrinsic value', but it is eventually compromised by the break of the original sin. Edith Stein talks about specificity as a raw material and calls the specific value a "purified valuable feminine character"<sup>62</sup>.

#### a) Specificity

These considerations are particularly valuable to distinguish between feminine faults and feminine nature. Everything we see more often in woman is without doubt more specific to her, but it does not automatically constitute her nature. Again our philosopher displays an especially penetrating mind when she exposes typical feminine faults that are a consequence of the broken feminine nature. As an introduction, it will be useful to let her sum up the traits that nature has specifically given to man and woman to prepare them for their respective missions.

The first task now is to sketch briefly the singularity of women, for it is indeed only by doing this that the intrinsic value can be made comprehensible... I would like to emphasize only two criteria differentiating man from woman from those which are usually mentioned, since they have particular significance in helping us understand the intrinsic value of woman:

1) Man appears more objective: it is natural for him to dedicate his faculties to a discipline (be it mathematics or technology, a trade or business management) and thereby to subject himself to the precepts of this discipline. Woman's attitude is personal; and this has several meanings: in one instance she is happily involved with her total being in what she does; then, she has particular interest for the living, concrete person,

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

and, indeed, as much for her own personal life and personal affairs as for those of other persons.

2) Through submission to a discipline, man easily experiences a one-sided development. In woman, there lives a natural drive towards totality and self-containment. And, again, this drive has a twofold direction: she herself would like to become a complete human being, one who is fully developed in every way; and she would like to help others to become so, and by all means, she would like to do justice to the complete human being whenever she has to deal with persons.

Both of these characteristic impulses as they emerge from nature do not demonstrate yet any initial value; indeed, they can be harmful. But, correctly handled, they can become most valuable ...

The personal attitude is objectively justified and valuable because actually the human person is more precious than all objective values. All truth is discerned by persons; all beauty is beheld and measured by persons. All objective values exist in this sense for persons. And behind all things of value to be found in the world stands the person of the Creator who, as prefiguration, encloses all earthly values in Himself and transmits them. In the area of our common experience, the human being is the highest among creation since his personality is created in the image of God. It is the whole person about whom we are speaking: that human being in whom God's image is developed most purely, in whom the gifts which the Creator has bestowed do not wither but bloom, and in whom the faculties are balanced in conformity to God's image and God's will—the will led by intellect, and the lower faculties bridled by intellect and will.

Each human being is called naturally to this total humanity, and the desire for it lives in each one of us. We may consider that the drive for this which is particularly strong in woman is well related to her particular destiny of companion and mother. To be a companion, that means to be support and mainstay, and to be able to be so, a woman herself must stand firmly; however, this is possible only if inwardly everything is in right order and rests in equilibrium. To be a mother is to nourish and protect true humanity and bring it to development. But again, this necessitates that she possess true humanity herself, and that she is clear as to what it means; otherwise, she cannot lead others to it.<sup>63</sup>

#### b) Debasement

To be able to appropriately fulfil her missions, woman has a natural predisposition for dealing with the personal sphere. People greatly interest her. But this is not necessarily for the good. On the contrary, for many women this innate tendency is an occasion for many gross perversions.

One can become suitable for this double duty if one has the correct personal attitude. As we have already stated, woman does not possess this

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-256.

by nature. The initial form of feminine singularity is primarily a debasement and blockage of this true attitude.<sup>64</sup>

For the feminine disposition suffers from the joint flaw which human nature retains from original sin, which impedes her pure development, and which, if not opposed, leads to typical perversion.<sup>65</sup>

*1. Exacerbated quest for affection*

Because woman's mission is to continue the human species through conception, giving birth and raising children, for her to be able to protect the child when necessity calls, she needs to muster the attention of her surroundings and especially of her husband. But in almost all women, this tendency degenerates into an obsessive need to bring attention to herself. Woman easily expects the world to revolve around her, she is constantly preoccupied about the effect of her appearance on others, she easily blames those close to her for not caring enough about her; she often comes to criticize her husband for working too much, for not being at home enough, for not being interested in changing this or that in the house for her. She never gets her fill of compliments about what she does relative to interior decoration or cooking.

On the one hand, it is a bias to secure her own personal importance by which she may busy herself and others; hence, on one part there is an addiction to love and admiration, and on the other part an inability to endure criticism which is experienced as an attack on her.<sup>66</sup>

Usually, the personal outlook appears to be exaggerated unwholesomely; in the first place, her inclination to center both her activities and those of others about her own person is expressed by vanity, desire for praise and recognition, and an unchecked need for communication.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, she needs this unconditional admiration from everyone who is close to her. However much she complains about the faults of her husband and of her children, if others talk about them, she will only bear hearing compliments concerning them.

These yearnings for importance, yearnings towards unlimited recognition, are extended to everything unique to the person. Her own husband must be recognized as the very best husband, her own children must be known as the most beautiful, clever, and gifted.<sup>68</sup>

Usually, the personal outlook appears to be exaggerated unwholesomely; ... it is seen in an excessive interest in others as in curiosity, gossip, and an indiscreet need to penetrate into the intimate life of others.<sup>69</sup>

The inclination that nature destined to help with her mission finally degenerates into an obstacle to this mission. For want of critical sense, woman can no longer

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-257.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

really help her husband and children to progress. For want of discretion or of being able to step aside, she obliges everyone to oppose her in order to perform their tasks and duties.

This is blind feminine love which dulls realistic judgment and renders her completely unsuitable for the designated feminine vocation.<sup>70</sup>

## *2. Instinct of Possession*

Being naturally focussed on the child and all that his needs require, woman has a very close relationship with the material goods of the family. Her own mission is not primarily to work on or to dominate nature through knowledge and transformation. Consequently, she can easily forget that her own mission is entirely committed to perpetuating this dominion. She can easily think about exterior work as being her husband's distraction and whim, or she might think his motivation is only to procure goods for the family. Therefore she can easily idolize these goods and can develop a jealous love for her house and its setup.

Abstract thought and creative action are of less concern to her than the possession and enjoyment of the good life. Therefore, the danger exists that she will commit herself only to that and that alone. And now, in addition, her reverent joy in the things of this world may degenerate into greed, leading her, on the one hand, to the anxious, avaricious scraping together and hoarding of things for which she has no use; and, on the other hand, a lapse into a mindless, idle instinctual life.<sup>71</sup>

This puts in place the ingredients that can lead to weakening of the family. First, there is a deterioration of marital relationships. This is an attitude that naturally brings woman to be subjugated by her husband. Without her proper spiritual and interior life, she sees her husband as the provider whom she must please, rather than the human being whose humanity she would help progress.

This leads in turn to the degeneration of her relationship with her husband: already threatened by man's degeneration, which pushes him to dominate, her free companionship by his side will be further undermined by her in yielding to her own instincts, thus making her all the more his slave.<sup>72</sup>

This attitude is generally matched by the reciprocal attitude: a woman who is attached to household belongings, tries to dominate her husband and children in order to impose respect for these belongings, with cleanliness in the house as the ultimate rule of life.

On the other hand, her anxiety to safeguard her property may lead her also to try to dominate man. And analogies can be seen in relation to the children. The woman who leads a life based solely on self-indulgence will attempt to shirk maternal duties just as a comparably oriented man will shirk his paternal duties... The woman who hovers anxiously over her children as if they were her own possessions will try to bind them to her in

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

every way, even by the greatest possible elimination of the father's rights. She will try to curtail their freedom of development; she will check their development and destroy their happiness instead of serving man, children, and all creatures in a reverential loving manner in order to foster their natural formation for the glory of God and thereby further their natural happiness.

The root of the evil lies again in her perverted relationship to God. Because woman rebelled against God at the time of the Fall and simultaneously assumed a superiority over man by seducing him, her punishment is subjugation to man's dominion. Because the sin which she encouraged him to commit was in all likelihood a sin of sensuality, woman is more intensely exposed to the danger of descent into stark carnality. And when this happens, she always becomes once again the evil seductress, whereas, paradoxically, God has specifically enjoined her to combat evil.<sup>73</sup>

### 3. *Curiosity*

On the other hand, nature has given woman the ability to be interested in others, to take people into account. This would have helped her in her double role of taking care of her children and of giving proper assistance to her husband, and to all those in her entourage in need of support for their undertakings. But because of sin, woman turns this precious gift into pathological curiosity, an inquisitiveness that paralyzes and perturbs the life of those that mix with her.

Along with this excessive vindication of her own person goes an excessive interest in others, a perverse desire to penetrate into personal lives, a passion of wanting to monopolize people.<sup>74</sup>

Her view reaching toward the whole leads easily to the frittering away of her powers: her antipathy for the necessary objective disciplining of individual abilities results in her superficial nibbling in all areas. And in her relations to others, it is manifested in her complete absorption with them beyond the measure required by maternal functions: the sympathetic mate becomes the obtrusive mischief-maker who cannot endure quiet, reserved growth; and because of this, she does not foster development but rather hinders and paralyzes it. The dominating will replaces joyful service. How many unhappy marriages can be attributed to this abnormality! How much alienation between mothers and growing children and even mature offspring!<sup>75</sup>

Nature's intention was to bestow the gift of self. But in concrete daily life it becomes the inability to live a properly personal life.

Excess of interest in both her own and in the stranger's personality merge in feminine surrender, the urge to lose herself completely in a human being; but in so doing, she does justice neither to self nor to the

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

humanity of another, and, at the same time, becomes unfit for exercising other duties.<sup>76</sup>

#### *4. Superficiality*

Again, to make her able to contribute to the harmonious development of those close to her, nature has made woman reticent to excessive specialisation and has given her equilibrium and a holistic preoccupation. This can often degenerate into superficiality, in the inability to bring any interest, or any undertaking, to its successful conclusion because of her unfulfillable need to constantly get interested in something else and to be in the know about everything.

Also connected to the false pursuit of prestige is a perverted desire for totality and inclusiveness, a mania to know everything and thereby to skim the surface of everything and to plunge deeply into nothing. However, such superficiality can never be true humanity. Whoever controls a matter thoroughly stands closer to true humanity than he who never stands on firm ground. Among those who have a thoroughly objective formation, there are certainly more men than women. However, in the small flock that approaches the goal of full humanity there seem to be more women than men.<sup>77</sup>

#### c) Specific Value

When we look at how feminine specificity is concretely incarnated in everyday life, it becomes difficult to find a lot of positive. We are not to be surprised by the measure of contempt that is regularly voiced when we say that this or that reaction is typically feminine. It is important to the extreme to realise that this is a debasement of feminine specificity and is not in the intention of nature itself. On the contrary, Edith Stein assures that inasmuch as the specific traits of woman develop according to the intention of nature, we will find ourselves in front of a specific feminine value that is capable of greatly enriching human life.

But how can we describe this specific feminine value? Foremost, how can we make it visible concretely? We could think of a corrective measure to temper those deviations by giving woman, a bit in spite of her, objective activities that men are more easily interested in. The fact of concentrating on realising an object, will help woman to slightly forget that which is too close to her usual concerns.

How is it then possible to extricate the purified valuable feminine character from the raw material of feminine singularity with all its faults and weaknesses, of which, as daughters of Eve, we all have a share? In the first instance, a good natural method for this is thoroughly objective work. Every such work, no matter of what kind, whether housework, a trade, science or anything else, necessitates submitting to the laws of the matter concerned; the whole person, thoughts just as all moods and dispositions, must be made subordinate to the work. And whoever has learned this, has

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

become objective, has lost something of the hyper-individuality and has attained a definite freedom of self.<sup>78</sup>

However, this remedy is indirect in nature. There is somewhat of a paradox in making a woman more masculine so that she may become more authentically feminine. Finding the proper remedy requires first to correctly identify the end: what will be this specific feminine value that masculinity needs in order to complement itself?

Because objective work, which we view as a remedy for the faults of feminine singularity, is something to which the average man is naturally inclined, it can thus be said as well that an allowance of masculine nature is the antidote for the hyper-feminine nature. But with this, we in reality propose that, after all, the matter cannot rest there. It would be to attain thereby only an analogy to the masculine species, as, in fact, it frequently was in the beginning of the feminist movement; and that would be neither a greater gain for us or for others. We must advance further from the objective outlook to the proper personal one, which is also the attitude that is actually most highly objective. But relevant to this personal outlook is a realization of true humanity, i.e., of its ideal image.<sup>79</sup>

In this respect, Edith Stein believes that natural wisdom is at a loss and that we need divine revelation to be properly enlightened. Or we should at least look to people whose nature has not been broken by sin. It is in Jesus Christ that we can observe this nature at its best, and it is in His mother that we find the true model of the feminine nature without deviations.

Supernatural means must now come to our help. To begin with, where do we have the concrete image of total humanity? God's image walked amongst us in human form, in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. If we reflect on how this image speaks to us..., it then opens our eyes.<sup>80</sup>

Edith Stein believes that since woman, more than man, is naturally destined to obey, she submits to God's plan, she lends herself to be shaped, in the same way that Jesus Christ submitted to the will of his Father. This is what makes her credit woman in particular with a flexibility to the divine plan to which every human being is called.

The intrinsic value of woman consists essentially in exceptional receptivity for God's work in the soul.<sup>81</sup>

Basically, therefore, woman's intrinsic value lies in making room within herself for God's being and works, and she does so by overcoming the drawbacks of her unique nature.<sup>82</sup>

But everything comes down to her root mission. Nature has made woman a mother. As such, she is endowed with a remarkable capacity to give. And we know

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



every human being needs support, encouragement, affection and protection. Consequently, to be a true woman, having all that is most positive and precious for humanity, is to be a mother, in the fullest sense of the word.

Everywhere the need exists for maternal sympathy and help, and thus we are able to recapitulate in the one word motherliness that which we have developed as the characteristic value of woman.<sup>83</sup>

In order to illustrate more concretely what she perceives in a woman who has blossomed the most, that is where we can better distinguish the specific value of woman at its best, our philosopher, who on this subject is more of a believer and theologian than a philosopher, finds it more adequate to give the Virgin Mary as an example. She sees best in her the mother and spouse completely given to her mission, and at the same time self-effacing enough not to hinder her mission in the least.

In the center of her life stands her son. She awaits His birth in blissful expectation; she watches over His childhood; near or far, indeed, wherever He wishes, she follows Him on His way; she holds the crucified body in her arms; she carries out the will of the departed.

But not as her action does she do all this: she is in this the Handmaid of the Lord; she fulfills that to which God has called her. And that is why she does not consider the child as her own property: she has welcomed Him from God's hands; she lays Him back into God's hands by dedicating Him in the Temple and by being with Him at the crucifixion.

Should we consider the Mother of God as spouse, we find a quiet, limitless trust which in turn depends on limitless trust, silent obedience, and an obviously faithful communion in suffering. She does all this in surrender to the will of God who has bestowed her husband upon her as human protector and visible guide.

The image of the Mother of God demonstrates the basic spiritual attitude which corresponds to woman's natural vocation; her relation to her husband is one of obedience, trust, and participation in his life as she furthers his objective tasks and personality development; to the child she gives true care, encouragement, and formation of his God-given talents; she offers both selfless surrender and a quiet withdrawal when unneeded. All is based on the concept of marriage and motherhood as a vocation from God; it is carried out for God's sake and under His guidance.<sup>84</sup>

No doubt this insistence on Mary invites faith. However, since she is a concrete illustration, her example strongly helps us to go beyond the sentimental ideas current nowadays: concerning the relationship between a woman and her husband, woman is invited to not let her husband dominate over her; and concerning the relationship with her children: she has difficulty letting them suffer what they need to suffer in order to become adults and to bring to good end their contribution in society.

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

*C. Individual destination*

From the onset, I mentioned that Edith Stein is very sensitive to the individual destination of each woman. She draws attention to the common destination of every human being, which is a calling as much for woman as it is for man. She also explains as clearly as possible the double mission that the feminine nature bestows specifically to woman: to give herself as a wife to her husband, who without her could not work for his cause as well, and to give him children and educate them so that they could take over in case his cause is jeopardized by his death. Edith Stein does however insist that this destination translates into a personal calling for each individual woman.

Each woman is called to give herself to a particular husband, and to bear their own distinct children. Some women are an exception. Whether it is because of special gifts or of particular life circumstances, some women will be called to give their lives in an exceptional way: as cloistered nuns, in prayer, silence and solitude, being spouses of Jesus Christ and mothers in a more universal way, as is the Church; or being nuns within an institute more overtly devoted to a service within society; or even as lay celibates. But for Edith Stein, it is certain this should always be within a particular incarnation of their calling to be spouses and mothers.

As every woman shares the general human nature, she is also an individual person with her own characteristics and particular gifts. The general human nature and individuality are not juxtaposed within the individual as separate components, but each one shows the human nature in an individual form.<sup>85</sup>

Consequently, Edith Stein believes that the rules of upbringing and of education cannot be general. There are particular requirements for the upbringing of each individual. When we get down to the specifics in determining which attitude or program should be adopted for upbringing, we must do it case by case. This is because of the very particular missions of certain individuals, which would be compromised if we tried to get everyone into line.

There is also an individual goal; which one it is cannot be stated in general terms: it is to be found on a case by case basis.<sup>86</sup>

Each human soul is created by God; each one receives from Him a character which distinguishes it from every other soul, and this individuality is to be developed within the broader context of humanity in general and of womanhood in particular.<sup>87</sup>

There are girls who seem to possess a natural tendency for family life: they have strong vitality and are warm-hearted; they need to have close relationships with other people within a communal way of life; they have an empathy for the care of children and are inclined to diverse practical activity. Girls whose instinctual life is weaker, who have a propensity

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<sup>85</sup> *La destination...*, 119.

<sup>86</sup> *Vie chrétienne...*, 188.

<sup>87</sup> *Essays on Woman, op. cit.*, Bk II, 201.

toward contemplation and solitude would seem to be more readily adaptable to the unmarried state.

But natural disposition alone is not decisive, for perfect suitability for either course of life is not automatically given along with the disposition. Marriage and family life require not only full development but also an extensive curtailing, control, and transformation of natural vitality and of social instincts. This is likewise true of the other path. Yet, life does not always lead to the path indicated by natural inclination; in fact, the vocation followed could be contrary to natural aptitude...

The fruit of an ideal educational program, i.e., a relevant one, should be that each girl would be fit for both marriage and celibacy.<sup>88</sup>

However, the individual missions that are the most difficult to identify and to bring to fruition are those that are most special. The unmarried woman for example. A woman who stays celibate in the hope of a better life is deluding herself: she might be spared some deep suffering, but for which she is naturally equipped to bear; she will however encounter even deeper suffering that is less natural for her and that risks destroying her feminine essence if she never discovers that her status is a very special calling of nature and of God.

The unmarried woman's life can often be easier and more carefree, but it is undoubtedly more difficult for her to live up to her female destination, and for many this also has a subjective effect in severe suffering. Some, for their whole lives, can never give up dreams that never come true, and consequently miss out on real life. Modern living conditions offer professional work as a substitute for domestic work, and many women jump into work with passion. But not all find true satisfaction in it, and still less are those who, while doing it, remain real women and manage to satisfy their destiny as women within their profession. The most intolerable of all diseases that make people a burden for themselves and others, hysteria, occurs in many as a result of unsatisfied instincts.<sup>89</sup>

Now we face the question especially important for our time: How might it be possible for the unmarried woman to fulfill her destiny apart from life in the convent? Without doubt, her state is particularly difficult. On the one hand, she may have had to renounce marriage and motherhood, not of her own free will but rather compelled by circumstances, ... or, on the other hand, she has been drawn towards virginal life since her youth..., but existing circumstances prevented her from fulfilling this wish. In both instances, the danger exists that she views her life as a failure... Moreover, it would seem that she lacks the aid to grace that is provided to the other feminine vocations. To operate merely by natural strength under a lifestyle in conflict with one's own nature can hardly be achieved.... At best, this can be endured only with weary resignation; but usually, it is met with bitterness and rebellion against one's "fate" or by flight into a world of illusion. That which is not personally chosen and made one's own, freely and joyfully, can be accomplished only by the woman who sees God's will

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>89</sup> *La destination...*, 123.

at work in the force of circumstances... Nothing happens without the knowledge and will of God.<sup>90</sup>

The lot of more and more women today is to lead a solitary life in the world. Whether they pursue a profession only to earn a living or to lose themselves in work through lack of something better, it is in the long run a grueling, exhausting struggle. But if they perceive in the external providential dispensations God's call inviting them to dedicate all their faculties to Him, and if they follow this call, then their lives as women become full and fruitful. This will be a life of love, a life in which all faculties come to development. It will be a spiritual maternity because the love of the bride of God embraces all the children of God.<sup>91</sup>

But, once it is known that, through circumstances of character and of state, it is God's calling to give one's life in a particular manner, a woman can do it in a great variety of professions in which she can more totally give herself. Admittedly, certain professions are closer to women's nature.

Close to that of spouse and mother, the profession of teacher and educator has always been valued as a truly feminine vocation.<sup>92</sup>

Others are also very close to the specific nature of woman, even if this is not clear at first sight. As in anything that involves giving care and that takes into account the specific needs of a person. For example, services given in a medical context.

Women who have once been in the care of a woman doctor do not willingly give themselves again to other treatment. It may be that a feeling of shame contributes to this fact. But I believe that something else is even more important. As a rule, the sick who visits or sends for a doctor does not seek merely to have a particular organ healed of a particular trouble; one feels himself "out of line" in his entire system; one seeks healing for body and soul, and one also desires a friendly, comprehensive sympathy... It should not be forgotten that in most cases it is not only the organ but, on the contrary, it is the entire person who is sick along with the organ... Such a regard lies in the nature of woman. And if she exercises her medical vocation in this manner, she can thus attain much more than healing the actual illness. She receives insight into diverse human situations; she necessarily gets to see material and moral need. This is a wide area for authentic feminine activity, and it signifies Christian charity at the same time.<sup>93</sup>

Edith Stein also recognises that woman have a place even in legislative and political work.

In addition, I would like to speak of the intrinsic value of woman in political life. In legislation, there is always danger that resolution "at the

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<sup>90</sup> *Essays on Woman, op. cit.*, Bk II, 124-125.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 267-268.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-263.

official level” will be based on the elaboration of the possibly most perfect paragraphs without their consideration of actual circumstances and consequences in practical life. Feminine singularity resists this abstract proceeding; woman is suited to act in accordance with the concrete human circumstance, and so she is able to serve as redress here... The authentic feminine longing to remedy human need (can be) thus victorious over the dilemma of party viewpoint.<sup>94</sup>

She recognises that scientific work normally puts woman off. Consequently, a woman needs to have some typically masculine qualities to be able to blossom in this field.

I believe that in reality there is less occasion here for the effect of feminine intrinsic value. Scholarship is the realm of the most austere objectivity. Hence, feminine singularity will only fructify where the subject deemed worthy of research is in a personal direction, i.e., in the humanities: history, literature, etc. Whoever chooses one of the abstract sciences—mathematics, natural sciences, pure philosophy, etc.—finds that as a rule, the masculine-intellectual type predominates in at least whatever is related to pure research.<sup>95</sup>

But precisely, she assures, every woman is endowed, in a more or less latent manner, with typically masculine capabilities and, ultimately, no supposedly masculine occupation is completely out of reach. This is due to nature's call that she be able to adequately assist man; she could not properly answer this call if she were completely deprived of any traits that are more masculine in nature. In this, we can see that nature has also provided for the too frequent and untimely disappearance of the husband, where the woman must bear in his place all the responsibilities of family, and even of occupation.

And there is no profession which cannot be practised by a woman. A self-sacrificing woman can accomplish astounding achievements when it is a question of replacing the breadwinner of fatherless children, of supporting abandoned children or aged parents. But, also, individual gifts and tendencies can lead to the most diversified activities. Indeed, no woman is only woman; like a man, each has her individual specialty and talent, and this talent gives her the capability of doing professional work, be it artistic, scientific, technical, etc. Essentially, the individual talent can enable her to embark on any discipline, even those remote from the usual feminine vocation.<sup>96</sup>

As a matter of fact, as I already mentioned, Edith Stein considers that for an activity or occupation to be feminine is not because of its content per se but rather because of the attitude with which it is approached. The masculine mind approaches an occupational object as if it were the most important thing, or something essential to take care of. On the other hand, the feminine mind approaches the same knowing

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 263-264.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

what is most important is the people concerned, mindful of the love she needs to give them for their good and happiness.

Every profession in which woman's soul comes into its own and which can be formed by woman's soul is an authentic woman's profession. The innermost formative principle of woman's soul is the love which flows from the divine heart.<sup>97</sup>

So, in the end, which activity should be given to men and which to woman? We can say that, generally speaking, it is their content that will spontaneously attract one or the other.

The differences between masculine and feminine natures indicate clearly that a specific aptitude for certain professions is present in each. Thus, the choice of a profession will usually resolve itself. Masculine vocations usually require bodily strength, the ability for predominantly abstract thought, and independent creativity: as an example, we might cite the hard physical labor required in industry, trade, and agriculture; or, to cite another example, the abstract thought required in technological fields such as mathematics and theoretical physics; and, finally, this can be seen even in the precision needed in clerical and administrative work of a mechanical nature and in certain branches of art.

True feminine qualities are required wherever feeling, intuition, empathy, and adaptability come into play. Above all, this activity involves the total person in caring for, cultivating, helping, understanding, and in encouraging the gifts of the other. And since woman is mainly concerned with serving people and making provisions for them, she is able to function well in all educational and medical professions, in all social work, in the human sciences, in the arts which depict humanity, as well as in the business world and in public and parochial administration.<sup>98</sup>

#### *D. Woman's upbringing*

There is another angle that Edith Stein takes at heart and that gives occasion to reiterate all that is distinct and complementary in women as compared to men: this is woman's upbringing. She forcefully argues that woman's special nature is quite evident. However, the break caused by original sin makes it precarious for this nature to be fulfilled or to blossom. Even though a woman cannot really succeed in becoming anything else than a woman – “nobody can make of himself something which he is not by nature. »<sup>99</sup> —, she can nevertheless fail to become so, and thus sink into some sort of distortion of her nature.

In order for this not to happen, one needs an appropriate upbringing that will take into account the end that is sought: to bring about a woman whose feminine nature has bloomed. This upbringing should also be built on the original individual seed set in each woman.

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>98</sup> *Inif.*, 81-82.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

The first fundamental formation happens within the soul. Just as an inner form resides in the seed of plants, an invisible force making a fir tree shoot up here and a beech there, there is in this way an inner mold set in human beings which urges the evolution into a certain direction and works towards a certain gestalt in blind singleness of purpose, that of the personality which is mature, fully developed, and uniquely individual.<sup>100</sup>

Some questions need answers right at the onset if the upbringing of a young girl is to take into account woman’s unique nature.

If we want to lay the foundation for a sound, enduring educational system for women, we must therefore ask ourselves: 1. What is woman’s nature and the educational goal prescribed for that nature: what inner formative powers do we have to count upon? 2. How can formal education help the inner process?<sup>101</sup>

To be effective, no educational method for women should elude these questions. It also should not totally set aside the individual differences in character that we have talked about. In the end, the educational method will determine for which occupation, perhaps masculine in appearance, a young girl is to be prepared for.

Extensive individual differences shall not be denied; in many instances, women indicate predominantly masculine traits. Each woman has the expectancy for a particular vocation by dint of individual predispositions and gifts; this vocation is irrespective of her feminine one. Consideration of individuality is a requirement for general education.<sup>102</sup>

But fundamentally, we are brought back to the two principal intentions of nature in the creation of woman: we should strive to prepare her to be a mother and a spouse. This is another occasion for our philosopher to re-examine everything in the soul and body of woman that is, at the onset, geared towards this end.

Woman’s nature is determined by her original vocation of spouse and mother. One depends on the other. The body of woman is fashioned “to be one flesh” with another and to nurse new human life in itself. A well-disciplined body is an accommodating instrument for the mind which animates it; at the same time, it is a source of power and a habitat for the mind. Just so, woman’s soul is designed to be subordinate to man in obedience and support; it is also fashioned to be a shelter in which other souls may unfold.<sup>103</sup>

Even her style of intelligence is peculiar. If we use the word intelligence to name this faculty, thinking about its more speculative and abstract activity, we run the risk of doubting woman’s own intelligence, which is rather concrete and subjective. Yet her intelligence is as such not by weakness, but to equip her for her forthcoming mission which is a total commitment to the service of child and husband.

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

And who would deny the intellect and will of girls? That would be questioning their full humanity. On the average, abstract and mere intellectual activity is not suitable for them; they want to understand reality completely, and they want to comprehend not merely with the intellect but also with the heart.<sup>104</sup>

The greatest part of this upbringing should develop the necessary qualities to exercise maternity and support. All the more because the latter will give their color to every feminine activity. Everything that a woman does, if she becomes an accomplished woman, and if she does not lose her femininity, will be relevant to the act of upbringing and supporting. She will do it to the utmost degree with her children and her husband, and at least morally within her social and professional environment.

Both spiritual companionship and spiritual motherliness are not limited to the physical spouse and mother relationships, but they extend to all people with whom woman comes into contact.<sup>105</sup>

Therefore, there are qualities that any women's education must aim for and Edith Stein takes care to name and describe them.

The soul of woman must therefore be *expansive* and open to all human beings; it must be *quiet* so that no small weak flame will be extinguished by stormy winds; *warm* so as not to benumb fragile buds; *clear*, so that no vermin will settle in dark corners and recesses; *self-contained*, so that no invasions from without can imperil the inner life; *empty of itself*, in order that extraneous life may have room in it; finally, *mistress of itself* and also of its body, so that the entire person is readily at the disposal of every call.

That is an ideal image of the gestalt of the feminine soul. The soul of the first woman was formed for this purpose, and so, too, was the soul of the Mother of God. In all other women since the Fall, there is an embryo of such development, but it needs particular cultivation if it is not to be suffocated among weeds rankly shooting up around it.<sup>106</sup>

Every one of these qualities speaks for itself, but they are surprising for present-day readers. In fact, without knowing it, we today look down on women. This is brought to light by the fact that, under the guise of coming to her help, to 'liberate' her or to give her a life that is worthwhile, we tend to change her into a man, giving her activities and qualities that are properly masculine. This clearly means that we look down on her particular characteristics. We do not see everything that is positive in her being made to obey, to support, to develop and to enter into the plans and the will of another. In particular, her ability to be silent and to withdraw is not readily welcome. However, Edith Stein explains well the tendency, and importance, for woman to be self-contained.

Even the relationship of soul and body is not completely similar in man and woman; with woman, the soul's union with the body is naturally more intimately emphasized... Woman's soul is present and lives more

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.



intensely in all parts of the body, and it is inwardly affected by that which happens to the body; whereas, with men, the body has more pronouncedly the character of an instrument which serves them in their work and which is accompanied by a certain detachment. This is closely related to the vocation of motherhood. The task of assimilating in oneself a living being which is evolving and growing, of containing and nourishing it, involves a certain self-containment.<sup>107</sup>

In writing about woman's upbringing, when Edith Stein wants to show what, beyond the female specificity, makes woman's specific value, she finds the best illustration of a successful upbringing in Mary Mother of God, in whom no tendency to sin has compromised the development of her femininity to its finest.

Except for (the virgin Mary), no one embodies feminine nature in its original purity. Every other woman has something in herself inherited from Eve, and she must search for the way from Eve to Mary. There is a bit of defiance in each woman which does not want to humble itself under any sovereignty. In each, there is something of that desire which reaches for forbidden fruit. And she is hindered by both these tendencies in what we clearly recognize as woman's work.

The girl must learn from youth... to adapt, to deny herself, and to make sacrifices; otherwise, she will enter into marriage with longings for undisturbed good fortune and the execution of all her wishes. At first, she will not learn correctly how to curb herself should she find her spouse disposed to her wishes; she will test how far her control goes, and when she reaches its limits, conflicts will arise. This leads to a rupture or to mutual exhaustion if her sensibility and inner make-up are not reversed.<sup>108</sup>

### **Aristotle**

After Edith Stein has shown in a positive light where the feminine nature resides, Aristotle's considerations on the family are now understood under a completely different light. We no longer see him just dismissing from political rule a human being who is 'handicapped' or lacking the required intelligence; but we see him taking into account that the care of a child and assistance to the head of the family require qualities that are altogether different, and practically incompatible with those required for political rule.

Taking care of the child, bringing another perspective and also helping the father to make the best decisions concerning the family good, and also being attentive to the equilibrium that the husband needs to preserve when he uses all his faculties to make a success of his contribution to the common economic and political good, all this requires a very concrete intelligence and affectivity, an attention to details concerning the everyday needs of the child, and a sensitivity to the individual good of each person.

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 95. – The last words are modified by Marc Gendreau; the original translation said: "... signifies a definite end in itself."

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Woman's reticence to clear-cut decisions comes from her never ending capacity to suggest better ways. Her concern for domestic order and her emotional distancing from major political commitments help her keep her husband mindful of taking time for leisure. This is not only to help his pursuit of justice and peace, but also to foster contemplation that will bring him to greater happiness. Her promptness to obey brings the children to respect their father, while at the same time, through his directives, giving them occasion to experience in advance the good of political law.

In short, to behave well and to be educated to easily do so, is not the same thing for man as it is for woman. To put it in Aristotle's terms, the virtues that need to be developed are not the same for women, even if the same words are used. Being courageous, prudent, self-controlled are not the same when speaking of a man or of a woman. All the virtues bear the same differentiation.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle strives to show that the City, or civil life, is the most perfect life for human being. It is the manner of living where leisure and adequate means favour activities where human happiness can be found: those that reason governs and those that it exercises as its own. Those that are its own: activities of contemplation, of speculative knowledge: wisdom, philosophy, science, along with their instrument, logic; and of practical knowledge: political and moral philosophy, medicine, many arts. Those that reason governs: political organization and administration, the practice of virtues: prudence, justice, courage, temperance.

Properly human activities of a practical type include economic activities, those that, at the basis of political organization, concern the family and the administration of the citizen's household. Aristotle recognizes four types of these activities, based on the four relationships that the citizen has as head of the family: husband, father, master and owner. I will consider only his relationships with his spouse, where their difference is best illustrated. And I will say nothing about the master-slave relationships, which are irrelevant to our subject, and which would drag us into long and delicate considerations.

#### *A. Marital political authority*

The family, like the city, includes a variety of activities. The city ultimately leads to philosophise, but first, in preparing for the latter, it involves providing justice, security, peace, health, education, agriculture and industry. Moreover, a family centers on maintaining the human species and this implies having a wife, and fathering children and educating them with her help, and also owning and taking care of a house, clothes and tools. Such a web of activities demands determinate coordination.

##### a) Need for a Head of the Family

In our times, family life is spontaneously seen as a life of freedom and of consensus, and not a life where one orders and the other obeys. We can almost include the children in this egalitarian equation. At the opposite, as with any community, the family needs a leader. To have many collaborating to the same end is not possible without a coordinated action. And no coordination can escape the necessity that, in the end, someone in particular will make the final call. As desirable as a consensus between all participants might be, it cannot efficiently lead

to making all the necessary decisions. All the more when the people concerned are varied in nature and opinion.

So, who will command? It goes without saying that the adult commands the child. But within a couple, between individuals who are equal in nature and title, what will be fair? How can the contribution that each spouse brings to the good of the family be better coordinated? For Aristotle, the command has to be *political* in nature, which is that of *an equal over an equal*. Even for two equals, there is a need for coordination and for someone to take on this task, as is evident in political society.

But, having said this, why should the husband automatically assume this authority? Doesn't his wife's equality by nature entail that both should assume it alternately? Doesn't justice demand that we should let chance determine who will assume it? Within a society that recognises its citizens as equal, is it not the case that each takes his turn with authority for the duration of a mandate? This is what Aristotle himself observes.

In most political regimes, the commander and the commanded alternate, because by nature they wish to be equal and not to differ.<sup>109</sup>

b) The husband, natural head of the family

Yet, even when Aristotle insists on the equality of nature of both man and woman, it seems evident to him that a man commands his wife, and this in a permanent manner.

To exercise authority (ἄρχειν) over his wife and children is, in both cases, to command free individuals, but not in the same manner: with his wife, it will be in a political manner and with his children, in a royal manner.<sup>110</sup>

Simpsons, in trying to understand Aristotle's *Politics* by translating and commenting it, incidentally remarks how political commanding implies that the person who commands and the one who is commanded are equal and free. This is precisely inherent to Aristotle's conception and puts an end to the prejudice stating that Aristotle looks down on women as inferior beings.

Aristotle shows that man's command over woman is political...He previously explained that political command is one of equal over equals; here, he obviously takes for granted that woman is free and equal: she is surely not a slave... and, unlike a child, she is an adult just the same as man.<sup>111</sup>

And so why exclude woman from being head of the family? Aristotle feels the need to tackle this question, as he understands that political command normally implies alternation.

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<sup>109</sup> *Pol.*, I, 12, 1259b4-6.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 1259a39-b1.

<sup>111</sup> Peter L. Phillips Simpson, *A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998, 63.

It is in this sense that Aristotle assumes that the husband's command over his wife is political, since he readily considers an objection that such an assertion brings about: why wouldn't man and woman alternate in command, such as generally happens in political command? Because the political commander and commanded want to be on an equal footing and not display any difference.<sup>112</sup>

Aristotle answers that despite the general identity and equality of human nature in man and woman, the husband is by nature more apt to command than his wife, which is even more evident in the case of an adult in front of a child. But Aristotle allows for a deficiency in nature, since he is very conscious that many husbands exercise their command in a very inappropriate manner and would profit very much listening to their wives.

By nature man is more apt than woman to command, unless there is some deficiency in nature (εἰ μὴ που συνέστηκε παρὰ φύσιν).<sup>113</sup>

For him, this fact is self-evident so as not to require any argument. This is not the case for our contemporaries, but reading Edith Stein has prepared us for such an observation. Just as does Edith Stein, when Aristotle gives man a greater capacity for command, he speaks of a general fact; as we remarked, he doesn't deny that this general fact is affected by quite a lot of exceptions. But, as he pointed out, these exceptions are contrary to nature, παρὰ φύσιν. It is not very natural that some women inherit typically masculine qualities while men are deprived of them, or conversely, that some men have typically feminine qualities while women are deprived of them. And this would clearly bring suffering to all those concerned.

Edith Stein has also prepared us for what needs to be examined here, which is where this natural competence for command comes from. As long as this isn't made clear, to attribute it to one or the other will remain very subjective.

### *1. Commanding and obeying are different in nature*

Aristotle says that in the republic, the πολιτεία, the one who commands and the one who obeys share a perfectly identical nature: they are human. However, to command and to be commanded, although each is performed by a free person, remain activities of a different nature, different enough to originate from quite distinct capabilities. To command requires higher skills: a clear view of the common good, foresight that is confident about the means to attain this common good and a fertile imagination for taking the necessary steps to guarantee justice, peace, victory and education. To obey requires more humble skills: to cherish the common good, to understand or at least to accept that the success of civil life requires the coordination of particular activities, which would be impossible without a leader to whom to obey.

As long as every citizen has both sets of skills, and since they are not incompatible, anyone can take turns commanding or obeying, and it is only right that it should be so. However, we recognize that the value of these different skills is diverse, and that consequently those who exercise them are treated accordingly.

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Pol.*, I, 12, 1259b1-2.

It doesn't matter that the ruler has the same human nature, we honour him more, we protect him more, we let ourselves be imposed more by him, all because of the high responsibilities that we entrust him with.

During the time that one commands and that another is commanded, we strive for a difference in formalities, in titles and in honours.<sup>114</sup>

Simpsons paraphrases this in a more concrete and easily understood style.

Commanders, although otherwise equal, seek nevertheless during their command to be different from those they command, and they are in fact in their outward appearance, in the way we address them and in the honours they are due.<sup>115</sup>

The formalities that honour the head of the city are determined by convention: differences in dress, protocol, transport, housing and services. They are not tied to the nature of the person who governs, but by convention are tied to his position, which differs from that of an ordinary citizen.

Something similar occurs in the family. Here too, responsibility for command requires different qualities: having a marked interest for the common, political and domestic goods, being provident for family needs, being capable of deliberating while making decisions that are authoritative, having enough strength to provide security for the family, having a great capacity to work, and finding the external resources that the family needs. On the opposite, the skills of a subordinate concern the ordinary tasks for which the family exists: they are mainly about the capability to bear a child and all that is required for its proper outcome: sensitivity, attention to detail (for the proper care of the household, of clothing, of cleanliness, of education, of being there for the child, etc.), kindness, especially for everything that concerns the care and education of children from birth to adolescence. Aristotle observes that here it is not as easy to alternate. "Man on the contrary, always keeps the same relationship with woman."<sup>116</sup>

This is because, with respect to the good of the family, the difference between the skills of the leader and those of the subordinate are so great that they cannot readily be found in the same person: for example strength and kindness in the sense of authority and gentleness. Also, work outside the home and political life on the one hand, and bearing and caring for children on the other hand, are very difficult to reconcile both as activities and as skills.

As a solution, nature has therefore privileged giving a set of skills to one, which makes him a man, and the other set to another, which makes her a woman. Moreover, we can see this by the fact that the external attributes that correspond to these different roles are not determined by convention, but rather are natural and permanent. And there are also outward differences in appearance, in behaviour and in the respect shown by others, that go with exercising these responsibilities: when man is compared to woman, a person's height is greater and looks more imposing for a man; as for the physical and moral capacity to make oneself feared and obeyed,

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 1259b6-8.

<sup>115</sup> Simpsons, *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Pol.*, I, 12, 1259b6.

a man has a graver and more authoritative voice, while a woman's voice is softer and more affectionate.

This is also the case in the case of the political command of man over woman, except that these differences are permanent: man always differs from woman in outward appearance, in the way in which he is addressed and in honours; for example, he is more imposing, stronger, taller, and he continually receives the titles and honours due to a leader.<sup>117</sup>

This is particularly seen in children's natural attitude towards their parents: they spontaneously fear their father, but not their mother; they spontaneously expect unconditional attention and tenderness from their mother, but not from their father.

## *2. Alternation doesn't define political authority*

So we understand that alternation does not constitute the nature of political command. The former generally accompanies the latter, but it does not constitute it. Alternation could even be part of another form of command without altering its nature.

Alternation of command, while it could be a particular trait and a general sign of political command, is not part of its definition... For example, there could theoretically be alternation in command between two individuals where one is master of the other. Nevertheless, the simple fact of alternating does not make the command become political. It is more despotic.<sup>118</sup>

And vice versa, the absence of alternation does not prevent command from being practiced by subordinates who are free and equal in nature.

In the same way, the fact that man permanently commands woman does not necessarily mean that his command over her is not political, or that it is not exercised over someone who is free and equal.<sup>119</sup>

However, in view of today's standards, we greatly need to read Edith Stein in order to come to understand "how woman is equal to man while being permanently commanded by him".

## *B. Natural male leadership*

There lies the heart of the question. Man and woman are sufficiently naturally equal for authority to be exercised politically between them and not despotically. Yet the profound differences between presiding over the family and carrying out the fundamental tasks requires two sets of skills that are so different, so opposed even, that the same individual cannot have them simultaneously. Command on the one side and childbirth on the other. Hence a delicate situation that is scandalous for our contemporaries: woman, who is naturally equal to man, is nevertheless his permanent subordinate. Our current mentality is quite allergic to having these two attributes combined.

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

What exactly is command about, so that a person who is well equipped for childbirth and the care of offspring would be deprived of it? The opposite is easier to grasp: man, since he finds himself equipped to command, purvey and protect, namely because of his objectivity, of his emotional freedom, his freedom of movement and his strength, finds himself deprived of the skills that are required to carry out the fundamental tasks of the family: he is unable to bear a child, to breastfeed, as he is not so much capable of kindness, of affection and of attention to detail.

Aristotle has a very original way of showing this fact, and it entails that unless there happens to be a natural deficiency in man, it should always be him who leads the family: a man and a woman each finds his own perfection in distinct virtues.

a) The distinctive virtues of man and of woman

On what does the excellence of man and woman rest? Ethics teaches that the virtues that lead to man's perfect activity, which is happiness, are prudence, justice, temperance, courage, and so on. Is woman so distinct that it would not be the same for her? Are those virtues alien to her? As for the excellent child, is he deprived of these virtues? Let us return to our subject: will the commander and the subordinate each aim for distinct virtues?

Do they have their distinctive excellence? Should woman be temperate, courageous and just? Is the good child unrestrained or temperate, or neither? For any commander or subordinate by nature, we should examine if they have the same excellences or differences. If both are gentlemen (καλοκαγαθίας), why should it be once and for all that one commands and the other is commanded?<sup>120</sup>

Bien évidemment, il y aurait absurdité à réserver ces Of course, it would be absurd that these virtues be destined only to man. A woman cannot excel as a woman without prudence, courage, temperance and justice. Neither can a child be an excellent child while being cowardly or reckless, careless, unjust or debauched. Yet, it cannot be a question of characterizing them by saying one is more and the other is less. To be excellent, a woman does not need *less than a man* to be just, or courageous, or temperate, or prudent. How can we reconcile this obvious fact with what we have acquired throughout this research, namely that the skills that characterize the roles of man and of woman are so different that their excellence needs to be conveyed by different virtues?

The difference cannot come from being more to being less, since to command and to be commanded are different species, and are not of the more or the less. Moreover, it would be surprising that only one and not the other would partake in these excellences: for if the commander is neither temperate nor just, how can he command properly? And if it is the subordinate who is not as such, how will he obey properly? Anyone who is unrestrained or lax will not do what should be done. So, it is obvious that both necessarily partake in an excellence. However, it must have some

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 1259b30-36.

differences, since we can find it among those who by nature either command or are commanded.<sup>121</sup>

In fact, the same conundrum occurs for any natural subordinate or leader: women, children and slaves are natural subordinates, although in different ways. Because if, on the one hand, the subordinates should also have the moral virtues, if both subordinates and leaders had between themselves the qualities of the perfect gentleman, it would seem that neither the subordinates, nor the leaders should always remain so; they should rather alternate between themselves, as do the leaders and subordinates in the politically governed cities. Here we cannot reply that they both can have the same virtues and still permanently be a leader or a subordinate, inasmuch as they have these virtues to a differing degree, the leader having more and the subordinate having less. This is because to lead and to be led are not different in a sense of degree, they are specifically different. The leader and the subordinate have a different function, and virtue is relative to function (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a15): the leader commands and leads, while the subordinate obeys and follows, but not: the subordinate commands, or leads, but to a lesser degree.<sup>122</sup>

Husband, wife and child all need their proper excellences. In the end, what needs to be seen is that while all have the same human nature, their excellences are close enough to bear the same names: temperance, courage, justice, prudence, and so on, but that nevertheless courage is not exactly the same thing nor does it inspire the same actions in either a man, a woman or a child. When we pay attention, it is already obvious that these virtues are not all in opposition to the same difficulties: not all the same foods or beverages are menacing to the abstinence and sobriety of a man, a woman or a child; not all the same temptations compromise their chastity; the courageous man or the courageous woman do not face mortal dangers in the same way.

More specially regarding the act of commanding, man naturally has more authority and woman has less, while woman naturally has greater docility and man has less. This is because of a qualitative difference in their faculty of deliberation, which is a natural skill for whom commands. This difference is even more obvious in the case of children.

b) Natural unfitnes for woman to exercise authority

To make man and woman collaborators who are exactly adapted to the success of family life, nature has given them a form of reason slightly, but clearly, different. The key phrase of Aristotle's whole consideration is very simple yet difficult to understand. However, the difficulty comes mostly from the affective disposition that comes from the present-day mentality which purports to be ultrademocratic and egalitarian.

Πᾶσιν ἐνυπάρχει μὲν τὰ μόρια τῆς ψυχῆς, ἀλλ' ἐνυπάρχει διαφερόντως... Τὸ δὲ θῆλυ ἔχει μὲν τὸ βουλευτικόν, ἀλλ' ἄκυρον, ὁ δὲ παῖς ἔχει μὲν, ἀλλ' ἀτελές. — The same parts of the soul are found in everyone,

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 1259b36-60a4.

<sup>122</sup> Simpsons, 65.



but in a different way... Woman has the capacity to deliberate, but without authority; the child also has it, but it is incomplete.<sup>123</sup>

Everyone has a soul made up of the same parts or faculties: intelligence, will, sense, concupiscible appetite, irascible appetite, motor faculty. These words contradict Edith Stein’s propensity for crediting woman with distinct faculties: “intropathy”, “affective sense” and everything else she might think of, unless we only see here a poetic superlative designed to mark the differences that Aristotle is precisely mentioning. Otherwise, there would be a specific difference, as is the case with an animal that is deprived of intelligence and will. But the intelligence and the will of man and of woman, of an adult and of a child, present some differences nevertheless.

In fact, there are already differences among individuals of the same sex and of the same age: speed of locomotion, physical force and visual acuity all differ greatly from one individual to the next. They prepare each person for a different task, a different part in elaborating the common good. Differences in quality, and also in degree, help some for specific tasks, but disqualify others. When all these natural differences are taken into account, not everyone can do every job with the same ease, and should not in fact equally practice all the trades. On a more general level, the softness and gentleness of a woman’s touch make her better suited for a child’s care than a man’s ruggedness.

Aristotle does not describe all of the faculties in detail. Since he is concerned with only one function, authority or command, he considers which type of intelligence and will is required for its excellence. He calls it τὸ βουλευτικόν, which is generally translated as the *faculty of deliberating*. When faced with a goal, deliberating includes all the reasoning that imagines all the different feasible avenues, makes out the most effective, chooses it and has it carried out. The excellence of this complex skill is called prudence, more specifically family or political prudence when deliberations are concerned with the common good. To exercise command with competence requires such prudence. When it’s a matter of acquiring it, some are more gifted than others. Of course, the capacity for deliberation varies in each individual, and eventually this will make him a more or less competent leader. But there will be more profound differences when this skill is shared between man and woman.

The case of the child is the simpler one. Nothing is mature in him, especially not his faculty to deliberate: “The child has it, but it is incomplete”. Consequently, giving children command of the City is out of the question. Here it is not a matter of prejudice nor of contempt.

Aristotle says that “The slave doesn’t have it at all”. We must understand this negation as a metaphor. The individual whose personal qualities have prepared him for service rather than command is still a human being, and he has all the necessary faculties; consequently he also has the faculty to deliberate. But it can be so weak that it may not suffice to govern himself. So it is in his interest that he follow someone else’s counsel, even for actions that concern his private life. In fact even today, as egalitarian as we might be, we have to admit that many people do not have

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<sup>123</sup> *Pol.*, I, 13, 1260a10-14.

a strong enough capacity for deliberating to govern. If we did not think so, we would not require elections to designate who will command. We would draw at random who will command and who will obey.

What is harder to discern in this, is the difference between man and woman. Aristotle's words have been written about extensively: "*Woman is capable of deliberating, but ἄκυρον.*" Woman is intelligent and has all the parts of human intelligence and she can exercise all its activities. This can vary more or less from one woman to the next, the same as for men, but, *as a woman, she has the faculty to deliberate*: faced with a goal, she can, more or less like man, imagine different means, compare them and choose between them, and certain women much more than certain men. For the last 40 years, I have been amazed at the speed at which my wife judges situations and imagines means, long before I have finished thinking about it. But Aristotle says that her faculty to deliberate is ἄκυρον. What does this mean?

First, thinking that it is a question of culture is going on the wrong track.

There is a controversy here on the subject of what Aristotle means: is this lack of control simply an established fact: that women are not admitted to have control in most cities and households, or a question of nature: that woman is by nature lacking this control?<sup>124</sup>

An injustice imposed on women by those nasty men! This is what today's feminists think. But Simpsons can rightly see that we can't attribute such an opinion to Aristotle.

This interpretation can hardly be supported, since this would mean that Aristotle thinks that command of men over women would be conventional and not natural, which he has expressly denied. Moreover, he says that this lack of control is a weakness of the soul, not some factual inadequacy that would be tied to concrete political conditions.<sup>125</sup>

The question is becoming clearer. But what exactly is this weakness?

It is not difficult to speculate which type of weakness Aristotle is thinking about. It is that women, given their constitution, are more subject to certain bodily functions: the functions associated with child-bearing and the passions that are tied to them, which in present terms are the effects of hormones and the menstrual cycle. Consequently, women are less capable of self-imposing the result of their deliberation.<sup>126</sup>

Women can always have career or political plans, but when it comes to their execution they always get entangled by all the time, worry, energy that they need to devote to their menstruations, their pregnancies, their childbirths, and the care of their children. They have little time to devote to political government, and emotionally it is difficult for them to remain steadfastly interested.

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<sup>124</sup> Simpsons, 65.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

Since their bodily constitution is weaker, they often lack the force and the will to impose these results to others. This control must therefore be provided by man. This is without doubt why man must permanently command her, even if he commands someone who is equal.<sup>127</sup>

For example, a woman is easily more intelligent than her husband and better capable to discern the proper decisions for the family, for education and for the upkeep of the household. But the means and the decisions that she suggests will only become reality insofar as her husband appreciates them to their full value and confirms them through his own authority. Children have little respect for their mother’s orders that are not backed, or are contradicted, by their father; moreover, the mother herself often needs that her husband remind her of the adequate suggestions she has made and that he has ratified, so that she can be faithful to put them into practice and keep them in mind, because she so easily either forgets them or changes her mind.

Can we better translate and interpret this ἄκρον? I believe so. Simplicius gets close to Aristotle’s intention, which is to talk about nature, and difference in nature. But in the end, he goes back to a question of circumstances or of accident. Since woman bears and takes care of children, she lacks time and energy, and she is tied up emotionally. Aristotle speaks more radically. Woman doesn’t “happen” to give birth; it is her nature, and this nature requires a certain type of intelligence and affectivity, and even a certain type of deliberation, that are not suitable for command. *Κυρία* is *mastery, power or estate*, in short it is *authority*. What Aristotle observes is that woman, however very inventive in finding means, often even more than man, has by nature less authority and force to put them into fruition. By nature, she also has less authority on others.

This simple observation is easy to prove. We can already see it in the household by the way that the children — and even the dog! — react to commands given by either their mother or by their father: more often than not their mother can shout all she wants, children behave as they wish. But the father has only to come into the house, and each child feels enough fear to act differently, to obey, or to take up their post. This is quite clearly evidenced even despite the so called wimpy fathers that exist in our culture. This is particularly manifested as a constant drama in single parent families, where mothers do their best to act like fathers.

Of course, this is a constancy, a constancy by nature. But it is open to many exceptions: a certain number of women manage to harden themselves enough to the point of arousing fear, and to secure as much authority as can many men. But these women will not easily be qualified as “feminine”. In fact, they lose more in this than they gain, and the admiration that is expressed to them for their authority — the *Iron Lady* — is mitigated by the contempt that is brought upon them from their lack of properly feminine qualities — a *tomboy!* —.

The egalitarianism of our current democratic experience is easily offended by this statement of fact, and it stubbornly refuses it. In fact, to understand and appreciate this bestowal of nature, we need to view it not as just a deficiency or a disability of woman. This is not the case. Human life is directed at a good that is so

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

complex and that requires activities and skills that are so diverse, that nature has allotted the natural skills to this end accordingly. It takes into account, among other things, that certain activities require opposing skills that are hard to come across simultaneously in the same individual.

This is most obvious when we consider the requirements of the ability of taking care of small children. The toughness and the force that are necessary to command are not easily compatible with the gentleness, the attention to detail and the sensitivity that are necessary to take care of small children. Nature has marvellously well thought of woman in giving her all the sensitivity combined with the gentleness that are required to satisfy the second need.

### **Conclusion**

We can clearly see it now. When Edith Stein accepted the numerous invitations to give talks to the women of her time, especially those who had the task of organizing women's education, she discovered and described with a striking perspective the specific qualities that nature has provided woman with. Her comments are precious, especially for the reader of Aristotle, because it does away with a too spontaneous contempt for woman when we realize that nature has not destined her to command.

As true as this might be, it is not a failing of nature. Edith Stein shows in the best light that nature has constituted woman very well. It gave her the precious and indispensable skills for which man was ineligible because of the objectivity and the authority that he needs for command.

The continuation of the human species, the preparation of individuals who can take up the torch and pursue humanity's endeavours, requires being capable of giving birth, of sensitivity, of attention to detail, of attentiveness to the child's good and to the harmonious development of his gifts. These could not be imparted to a man who needs freedom of movement, to a conqueror who should be capable of abstracting himself from the individual and of peremptorily imposing decisions. This requires a totally different being.

When feminism wants to masculinize woman and give her access to typically masculine activities, it does not repair an injustice; it is rather an injustice in itself which stems from a profound contempt of the particular nature of woman. The liberation that it seeks for woman implies a grave underestimation of the necessities that the development of new human beings impose and of all that is needed to configure a woman's whole being so that these necessities are adequately met.

**Παιδεία**









