

*Quodlibets, or Scholastic Disquisitions*

MENAGE observes that the scholastic questions were called *Questiones Quodlibeticæ*; and they were generally so ridiculous that we have retained the word *Quodlibet* in our vernacular language, to express anything ridiculously subtle; something which comes at length to be distinguished into nothingness,

“With all the rash dexterity of wit.”

The history of the scholastic philosophy might furnish a philosophical writer with an instructive theme; it would enter into the history of the human mind, and fill a niche in our literary annals. The works of the scholastics, with the debates of these *Quodlibetarians*, at once show the greatness and the littleness of the human intellect; for though they often degenerate into incredible absurdities, those who have examined the works of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus have confessed their admiration of the Herculean texture of brain which they exhausted in demolishing their aerial fabrics.

The following is a slight sketch of the school divinity.

The Christian doctrines in the primitive ages of the gospel were adapted to the simple comprehension of the multitude; metaphysical subtilties were not even

employed by the Fathers, of whom several are eloquent. The Homilies explained by an obvious interpretation some scriptural point, or inferred by artless illustration some moral doctrine. When the Arabians became the only learned people, and their empire extended over the greatest part of the known world, they impressed their own genius on those nations with whom they were allied as friends, or revered as masters. The Arabian genius was fond of abstruse studies; it was highly metaphysical and mathematical, for the fine arts their religion did not admit them to cultivate; and it appears that the first knowledge which modern Europe obtained of Euclid and Aristotle was through the medium of Latin translations of Arabic versions. The Christians in the west received their first lessons from the Arabians in the east; and Aristotle, with his Arabic commentaries, was enthroned in the schools of Christendom.

Then burst into birth from the dark cave of metaphysics a numerous and ugly spawn of monstrous sects; unnatural children of the same foul mother, who never met but for mutual destruction. Religion became what is called the study of divinity; and they all attempted to reduce the worship of God into a system! the creed into a thesis! Every point relating to religion was debated

through an endless chain of infinite questions, incomprehensible distinctions, with differences mediate and immediate, the concrete and the abstract, a perpetual civil war carried on against common sense in all the Aristotelian severity. There existed a rage for Aristotle; and Melancthon complains that in sacred assemblies the ethics of Aristotle were read to the people instead of the gospel. Aristotle was placed ahead of St. Paul; and St. Thomas Aquinas in his works distinguishes him by the title of "The Philosopher;" inferring doubtless that no other man could possibly be a philosopher who disagreed with Aristotle. Of the blind rites paid to Aristotle, the anecdotes of the Nominalists and Realists are noticed in the article "Literary controversy" in this work.

Had their subtle questions and perpetual wranglings only been addressed to the metaphysician in his closet, and had nothing but strokes of the pen occurred, the scholastic divinity would only have formed an episode in the calm narrative of literary history; but it has claims to be registered in political annals, from the numerous persecutions and tragical events with which they too long puzzled their followers, and disturbed the repose of Europe. The Thomists, and the Scotists, the Occamites, and many others, soared into

the regions of mysticism.

Peter Lombard had laboriously compiled after the celebrated Abelard's "Introduction to Divinity," his four books of "Sentences," from the writings of the Fathers; and for this he is called "The Master of Sentences." These Sentences, on which we have so many commentaries, are a collection of passages from the Fathers, the real or apparent contradictions of whom he endeavours to reconcile. But his successors were not satisfied to be mere commentators on these "Sentences," which they now only made use of as a row of pegs to hang on their fine-spun metaphysical cobwebs. They at length collected all these quodlibetical questions into enormous volumes, under the terrifying form, for those who have seen them, of *Summaries of Divinity!* They contrived by their chimerical speculations, says their modern adversary Grimaldi, to question the plainest truths, to wrest the simple meaning of the Holy Scriptures, and give some appearance of truth to the most ridiculous and monstrous opinions.

One of the subtle questions which agitated the world in the tenth century, relating to dialectics, was concerning *universals* (as for example, man, horse, dog, &c.) signifying not *this* or *that* in particular, but *all* in general. They distinguished *universals*, or what we call abstract

terms, by the *genera* and *species rerum*; and they never could decide whether these were *substances*—or *names*! That is, whether the abstract idea we form of a horse was not really a *being* as much as the horse we ride! All this and some congenial points respecting the origin of our ideas, and what ideas were, and whether we really had an idea of a thing before we discovered the thing itself—in a word, what they called universals, and the essence of universals; of all this nonsense on which they at length proceeded to accusations of heresy, and for which many learned men were excommunicated, stoned, and what not, the whole was derived from the reveries of Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno, about the nature of ideas; than which subject to the present day no discussion ever degenerated into such insanity. A modern metaphysician infers that we have no ideas at all!

Of these scholastic divines, the most illustrious was Saint THOMAS AQUINAS, styled the Angelical Doctor. Seventeen folio volumes not only testify his industry, but even his genius. He was a great man busied all his life with making the charades of metaphysics.

My learned friend Sharon Turner has favoured me with a notice of his greatest work—his “Sum of all Theology,” *Summa totius Theologiæ*, Paris, 1615. It is a metaphysiological treatise, or the most abstruse meta-

physics of theology. It occupies above 1250 folio pages, of very small close print in double columns. It may be worth noticing that to this work are appended 19 folio pages of double columns of errata, and about 200 of additional index!

The whole is thrown into an Aristotelian form; the difficulties or questions are proposed first, and the answers are then appended. There are 168 articles on Love—358 on Angels—200 on the Soul—85 on Demons—151 on the Intellect—134 on Law—3 on the Catamenia—237 on Sins—17 on Virginity, and others on a variety of topics.

The scholastic tree is covered with prodigal foliage, but is barren of fruit; and when the scholastics employed themselves in solving the deepest mysteries, their philosophy became nothing more than an instrument in the hands of the Roman Pontiff. Aquinas has composed 358 articles on angels, of which a few of the heads have been culled for the reader.

He treats of angels, their substance, orders, offices, natures, habits, &c.—as if he himself had been an old experienced angel!

Angels were not before the world!

Angels might have been before the world!

Angels were created by God—They were created immediately by him—They were created in the Empyrean sky—They were created in grace—They were created in imperfect beatitude. After a severe chain of reasoning he shows that angels are incorporeal compared to us, but corporeal compared to God.

An angel is composed of action and potentiality; the more superior he is, he has the less potentiality. They have not matter properly. Every angel differs from another angel in species. An angel is of the same species as a soul. Angels have not naturally a body united to them. They may assume bodies; but they do not want to assume bodies for themselves, but for us.

The bodies assumed by angels are of thick air.

The bodies they assume have not the natural virtues which they show, nor the operations of life, but those which are common to inanimate things.

An angel may be the same with a body.

In the same body there are, the soul formally giving being, and operating natural operations; and the angel operating supernatural operations.

Angels administer and govern every corporeal creature.

God, an angel, and the soul, are not contained in space, but contain it.

Many angels cannot be in the same space.

The motion of an angel in space is nothing else than different contacts of different successive places.

The motion of an angel is a succession of his different operations.

His motion may be continuous and discontinuous as he will.

The continuous motion of an angel is necessary through every medium, but may be discontinuous without a medium.

The velocity of the motion of an angel is not according to the quantity of his strength, but according to his will.

The motion of the illumination of an angel is threefold, or circular, straight, and oblique.

In this account of the motion of an angel we are reminded of the beautiful description of Milton, who marks it by a continuous motion,

“Smooth-sliding without step.”

The reader desirous of being *merry* with Aquinas's angels may find them in Martinus Scriblerus, in Ch. VII. who inquires if angels pass from one extreme to another without going through the *middle*? And if angels know things more clearly in a morning? How many angels can dance on the point of a very fine needle, without jostling one another?

All the questions are answered with a subtlety and nicety of distinction more difficult to comprehend and remember than many problems in Euclid; and perhaps a few of the best might still be selected for youth as curious exercises of the understanding. However, a great part of these peculiar productions are loaded with the most trifling, irreverent, and even scandalous discussions. Even Aquinas could gravely debate, Whether Christ was not an Hermaphrodite? Whether there are excrements in Paradise? Whether the pious at the resurrection will rise with their bowels? Others again debated—Whether the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary in the shape of a serpent, of a dove, of a man, or of a woman? Did he seem to be young or old? In what dress was he? Was his garment white or of two colours? Was his linen clean or foul? Did he appear in the morning, noon, or evening? What was the colour of the Virgin Mary's hair? Was she acquainted with the

mechanic and liberal arts? Had she a thorough knowledge of the Book of Sentences, and all it contains? that is, Peter Lombard's compilation from the works of the Fathers, written 1200 years after her death.—But these are only trifling matters; they also agitated, Whether when during her conception the Virgin was seated, Christ too was seated, and whether when she lay down, Christ also lay down? The following question was a favourite topic for discussion, and thousands of the acutest logicians, through more than one century, never resolved it: “When a hog is carried to market with a rope tied about its neck, which is held at the other end by a man, whether is the hog carried to market by the rope or the man?”

In the tenth century (says Jortin, in his Remarks on Ecclesiastical History, Vol. V. p. 17.), after long, and ineffectual controversy about the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament, they at length universally agreed to strike a peace! Yet it must not be imagined that this mutual moderation and forbearance should be ascribed to the prudence and virtue of those times. It was mere ignorance and incapacity of reasoning which kept the peace, and deterred them from entering into debates to which they were unequal!

Lord Lyttelton, in his Life of Henry II., laments the

unhappy effects of the scholastic philosophy on the progress of the human mind. The minds of men were turned from classical studies to the subtleties of school divinity, which Rome encouraged as more profitable for the maintenance of her doctrines. It was a great misfortune to religion and to learning, that men of such acute understanding as Abelard and Lombard, who might have done much to reform the errors of the church, and to restore science in Europe, should have depraved both, by applying their admirable parts to weave these cobwebs of sophistry, and to confound the clear simplicity of evangelical truths by a false philosophy and a captious logic.