

Probable Certainty
By Ambroise Gardeil
Draft Translation by Matthew Miner, Ph.D.

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Translator’s General Remarks

Here, I am presenting a basic draft translation of Ambroise Gardeil, “La certitude probable,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 5 (1911): 237–266; *RSPT* 5, no. 3 (1911): 441–485; and “La Topicité,” *RSPT* 5, no. 4 (1911): 750–757. I also posted this text on *To Be a Thomist* (athomist.com), a website I host with Fr. Cajetan Cuddy, O.P. The present translation is stable, but it remains a pre-publication draft. (I would guess that it won’t get published anywhere, but I thought it so important an article that it should at least be made generally available to those interested.)

For some time, I have wanted to translate this text because of the importance of its subject matter. There is a significant deficiency in Thomistic presentations of logic, and I felt it quite keenly recently in my own teaching. Because Thomas Aquinas did not leave behind a commentary on Aristotle’s *Topics*, Thomists find themselves basically building an uncritical theory of dialectical discovery or “inventio” based upon the scattered comments of Aquinas and his own usage of dialectics in his proceedings. There were, however, texts in the tradition that did take up matters related to the *Topics*. As Gardeil quotes on many occasions, there is the work of Albert the Great dedicated to the topic. Fourteenth century figures such as the nominalist John Buridan did. And later Thomists such as Domingo da Soto did, as well as someone like Daniello Concina in the midst of his massive treatise *De conscientia* in his moral-theological works.

I am not prepared to (and perhaps never will) take up this matter in detail. There are those who study the history of these aspects of medieval logic far more deeply than do I. Nonetheless, I think it is a real problem that dialectical reasoning and probable certitude— aspects of human life that are immensely important for the progress of the mind toward truth—

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are not given concerted, scientific treatment by Thomists. Alas, Thomists tend to be weak logicians, outside of the matters covered in the *Posterior Analytics*. When one compares most Thomist manuals of logic to logical science outside of our “tribe,” one senses our mediocrity—a mediocrity that I accuse myself of as well. Maritain’s logic—which takes serious the developments that at least can be found in later scholasticism—is a living text, but it is only a first essay. The temptation to treat logic *solely* as an instrument of philosophy leads one to forget sage dictum of St. Thomas in *In Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, sol. 2 ad 3 (especially the text in bold):

It must be said that in teaching, we begin from that which is easier—unless necessity requires something else. Indeed, sometimes it is necessary in teaching to begin not with that which is easier but with that from whose knowledge depends the knowledge that will follow. And for this reason, it is necessary in teaching to begin with logic. **This is not because logic is easier than the other sciences. Indeed, it has the greatest difficulty since it is concerned with things understood secondarily [lit. de secundo intellectis].**¹

Instead, it is necessary to begin in teaching with logic because other sciences depend upon it (inasmuch as it teaches the manner of proceeding in all the sciences). As is said in the second book of the *Metaphysics*, it is first necessary to know the mode of science before knowing science itself.

To push a little further, but the truth must be stated: in these matters concerning logic, we find ourselves faced with a *signal* case of how a purely historical “Thomasian” approach to the

¹ Second intentions (which I will discuss at length in a series of postings planned for later in 2024 on *To Be a Thomist*) are, according to John of St. Thomas, abstractive according to the third degree of abstraction, though in a way distinct from the subject matter of metaphysics. They are a subject for very strenuous philosophical reflection.

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works of Thomas Aquinas comes up short. Those who immediately follow upon Thomas Aquinas were very keen to the fact that he had not written sufficient independent logical treatises. Think about how many logical works are attributed to him falsely in some of the early editions of his works! Eventually, nominalist logic called for an answer, and their developed in various authors (Soto, Javelli, John of St. Thomas, et al.) much deeper logical texts, written in a methodical manner. I’m not completely sure what to make of the work of Bochenski in the 20th century, but I do think that it is important that one take seriously the fact that a Thomism that actually matters for today must engage in these questions in a way that goes beyond the questions of the 13th century, particularly just those questions found in Thomas himself (though there is much to be found there, scattered abroad in various remarks).

Renewal requires far more research than I could do into this topic—it is indeed dissertation-level in nature (and it has partly been done, as I note below in a brief bibliography). We need teachers. And these essays by Gardeil are such an excellent “positioning of the problem.” (Correct first steps are very important!) They make clear the immense importance of probable certitude in our intellectual life. In point of fact, I would even say that they hint also (as does Thomas Aquinas himself) at the importance that should also be given to rhetoric and “poetic” argumentation. But all of this is matter for much greater elaboration!²

² No doubt, one might at times feel that there is a kind of “Averroism” of the *Decisive Treatise* sort in the remarks by Gardeil. But, it is quite sane to note that the great difficulty involved in reaching fully scientific demonstrations (in a state of fully established science). And one must have a way of navigating the difference between those who can hear scientific demonstrations and those who need to have demonstrations of lesser certitude, though it is a certitude that is indeed fit to their particular knowledge, abilities, situation, etc. It is not “esoteric” subterfuge to recognize this.

Along these lines, I concur fully with the following remark in Jacques Maritain, “Appendice 1: Sur le langage philosophique” in *Réflexions sur l’intelligence*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1930), 338: “I know of but one solution to this difficulty [concerning how to communicate such technical philosophical truths to intelligent non-philosophers]. In short, it is the same solution offered by the ancients: alongside the philosopher’s properly scientific and demonstrative work written above all for experts, the philosopher rightly should present the fruits of his works to the educated public, to ‘everyone,’ though using an expository style that henceforth will be that of the art of persuading (‘dialectical’ in the Aristotelian sense), a style aiming to beget within his listeners true opinions, rather than science. This was what led Plato and Aristotle to write their dialogues.”

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Just as a point of reference, also, for the reader. It is interesting to note, especially near the end of the article, how the core of classical Dominican casuistry, “probabiliorism” (“more probable-ism”), finds a kind of vindication in what Gardeil says here, at least as regards the nature of probability. In the end, he shows very clearly that probability has the property of being “more probable,” *probabiliority*: precisely, because *to be probable is to have more seeming truth than the opposed position, even though there is fear that that other position might perhaps be correct*. The tendency during the probabilist debates was to detach probability from truth and effectively use the term “probable” in a completely new way, as though someone could be faced with a whole host of “probable” judgments as potential guides for action, all being called “probable.” At most, though, according to the classical Aristotelian analysis, such “probability” was more akin to a possibility, a hypothesis, or something else of that sort. But it was not *probable*. Thus, cases of supposed “probability” were really questions of doubt and hesitation, though with somewhat justified solutions at hand—not, however, ones that would be *probable* in that strict sense of the term. This point is observed in the essay by Marie-Michel Labourdette and the book by Réginald Beaudouin (edited by Gardeil himself) found in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*, which I put together for Cluny Press a few years back.³ (Beaudouin makes mighty attempts to draw aspects of probabiliorism and Alphonsian equi-probabilism into a close relationship. Something also akin to this can be found in Garrigou-Lagrange’s *De conscientia* section of *De beatitudine*.⁴ This is not, however, the place to adjudicate the success of these attempts.)

³ See Benoît-Marie Merkelbach, Michel Labourdette, and Réginald Beaudouin, *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*, ed. and trans. Matthew K. Miner (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2022).

⁴ See Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Beatitudine* (Turin: Berruti, 1951), 373–396.

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For a kind of beginning regarding these matters, see L.-M. Régis, *L’Opinion selon Aristote* (Paris: Vrin, 1935); Edmund F. Byrne, *Probability and opinion: A Study in the Medieval Presuppositions of Post-Medieval Theories of Probability* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968); Albert R.R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Sara Rubinelli, *Ars Topica: The Classical Technique of Constructing Arguments from Aristotle to Cicero* (New York: Springer, 2009); Rudolf Schuessler, *The Debate on Probable Opinions in the Scholastic Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2007). Note, also, with Hacking especially, the *new* notion of probability that emerges in the modern period. Its connection with the casuist alteration of the scholastic notion of probability cannot be stressed enough. Regarding the *Topics* itself, in addition to the scholastic texts cited by Gardeil (and others just mentioned), in English one can consult editions of dialectical works by Boethius, and parts of the commentaries on the *Topics* by Alexander of Aphrodisias, and the short commentary on the text by Averroes (Ibn Rushd).

As a kind of summary of the overall implications of Gardeil’s work in these articles, I will note the following points of contact that can be deepened by taking into account his work and deepening it:

- A fuller Thomistic account of dialectical reasoning (*Topics*)
- A fuller Thomistic account of rhetorical reasoning, given that contingency plays a special role there as well. Gardeil here limits himself to dialectics. At times, though, one notes that the volitional property of probable certainty implies important points vis-à-vis

rhetorical reasoning (both as regards moral matters but as an adjunct to the instruction of scientific knowledge, etc.)

- A fuller Thomistic account of the way that scientific *habitus* (pl.) deploy opining in their discovery of truth. Also, a close study of the way that an utterly certain opinion is the final disposition for a scientific conclusion.
- As a point of general methodology, a consideration of Gardeil’s criticism of the modern notion of probability (especially when applied alongside the scholastic notion of science) would likely buttress the claim that Fr. Cuddy has made elsewhere, namely that the methods of theology (and I would also say of a certain kind of Catholic philosophy too) are a kind of dogmatic application of the old probabilism. What is needed, rather, is a full doctrine of *De locis theologicis* and, perhaps too, *De locis philosophicis*, although the latter will be quite different from the former. Nonetheless, the development of sciences requires an account of the methodology to be deployed in using sources *in service of the truth of the particular discipline*. I agree, in fact, with much of Gilson’s claims about the importance of historical methods in philosophical research. But, I am also fearful of a kind of pan-source fixation that transmutes philosophy and theology into a love of philosophers (and not wisdom) and a “theologianology,” as Fr. Cuddy has so well stated.
- The psychology of the emotions deals much with probable certainty. Discussing the distinction between mere active imagination and opining seems like a likely source of interesting insights.
- A deeper Thomistic account of the cognition of historical facts will doubtlessly and clearly benefit from a more expansive treatment of probable certainty.

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- Any account of social life must account for the important role played by probable certainty. It is the social glue of day to day life, and it also plays a pivotal role regarding how we understand the importance of competence in social life.
- Although Gardeil only hints at it a bit here, the cogitative power has a particularly important role to play in many matters related to probable certainty.
- Any future revisiting of moral casuistry (which is likely necessary) will need, nonetheless, to take into account analyses such as these (as well, obviously, as I have argued many times elsewhere, the virtue of prudence with all of its various annexed virtues.)
- As Gardeil himself notes, this work allows for certain logical rapprochements with (and nuances / corrections to) Newman’s more psychological work in *Grammar of Assent*

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...as regards contingent and variable realities
.... it suffices that one have probable certitude,
which attains the truth in the greater number of cases
even if it from time to time fails to reach the truth.
(ST II-II, q. 70, a. 2)

Is certainty absolute opposed to probability? Such a question will certainly be surprising, and perhaps shocking, to the eyes of many contemporary theologians, who are better versed in the thought of modern theologians—by which I mean authors writing from the mid-16th century to the present day—than in the study of classical logicians and theologians. Nothing is more frequent than to see it said, as though it were a self-evident truth, that probability is irreducible to certainty. For example, I will note a proposition that can be found amid the latest theses solemnly discussed in France, in we find asserted, with almost candid security: *Motiva credibilitatis non sunt probabilia argumenta sed certa*, the motives of credibility are certain, not probable, arguments. Evidently, the author of this statement does not belong, in his terminology, to the school of the Angelic Doctor, for whom the expression *probabilis certitudo* was normal and who, in a single question repeated it several times, and commented on it with such an insistence that we cannot consider it to be a merely passing remark.⁵

The currently reigning opinion dates from the early 16th century. Around 1544, Domingo de Soto referred to those who were its partisans as *Moderni*,⁶ *Juniores*,⁷ and *Doctores hujus temporis*. It was from then on so widespread that our author does not even attempt to oppose the current: “I say that, given the now-current approach that posits an essential distinction between

⁵ See ST II-II, q. 60.

⁶ Dominigo Soto, *In Dialecticam Aristotelis Comentarium Posteriorum*, bk. 1, q. 8 (*De scientia, fide, et opinione*) (Salamanca: 1554), p. 128 recto, col. 1

⁷ *Ibid.*, verso, col. 1.

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human faith (certain assent) and opinion (assent involving fear as an essential element), we will follow this use of terms by the dialecticians.”⁸ At the very most, he timidly reserved, albeit not without some hauteur, the rights of a more philosophical understanding of the question: “But, although we will speak as do the many, nonetheless may the wise think as do the few and speak after the manner of Aristotle.”⁹ The probabilists did not believe that they were bound by so many distinctions. They confidently and universally adopted the new language and conception of probability. This doesn’t mean, however, that it was smooth sailing thereafter. To cite just one example, we must have in mind probabilism’s new language and conception of probability (and not those of classical thinkers), when we read the proposition condemned by Innocent XI: “The assent of faith that is supernatural and of use for salvation stands with only probable knowledge of revelation, nay, with that fear by which one fears that God has perhaps not spoken.”¹⁰

⁸ *ibid.* recto, col. 1.

⁹ *ibid.*, recto, col. 2. Soto goes on, thereafter, to establish that this is the thought of St. Thomas himself.

¹⁰ Decree of the Holy Office (March 2, 1679), Denzinger, no. 1169/1038.

If the reader wishes to have textual proof for how the meaning of the word “probable” differs between this proposition and what can be found in classical authors, one can read the text of the *Decretals*, (cf. Decret. Greg. IX, bk. 5, de *De Sent. excomm.*, tit. 39, ch. 44, *Inquisitioni*, Turin edition, 1588, col. 2125–2126) summarized by Saint Thomas in *De veritate*, q. 17, a. 4, obj. 4: “According to the Law, if someone’s conscience judges that his wife is related to him by a degree of consanguinity that is prohibited, and if such a judgment is probable, then he must follow it against a precept of the Church, even if excommunication is attached to this precept... But an erroneous judgment of conscience... is in no way probable. Therefore, such a judgment does not bind.” And Saint Thomas replies: “To the fourth, it must be said that when conscience is not probable, then one must set it aside...” As we see, with the ancients we find ourselves in a completely different conceptual space.

It is noteworthy that, by a curious turn of events, as official ecclesiastical documents came to cite the condemned propositions held by probabilists, this became one of the main vectors for the popularization of their vocabulary. In order for the errors of the probabilists to be targeted, the words had to be understood with the meaning they attached to them. Many theologians did not realize that this meaning was new, and by joining in the Church’s condemnation of the proposition, they propagated the conceptual framework on which the terms of such propositions depended.—In *Le donné révélé* (1st ed., 1910, p. 47), I have pointed out a case that, all in all, is analogous to this one. [Gardeil there refers to proposition 22 of *Lamentabili*, which condemns the following proposition: “*The dogmas that the Church presents as revealed are not truths fallen out of heaven, but a given interpretation of religious facts procured by the human mind through its own laborious efforts.*” In *Le donné*, Gardeil remarks that one should recall that the terms in question are those of the opponent in error.]

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In my work *La Crédibilité et l'Apologétique*,¹¹ I followed the older vocabulary and thought, which is, in my opinion, the right way. As I considered the reservations and objections expressed in response to my text, it did not take long for me to realize that my point of view was not understood [by some of my readers].¹² It's not that I wish to react against present usage any more than De Soto did. I agree with a theologian whose *Treatise on Conscience* I have just published [i.e., Fr. Réginald Beaudouin¹³], who had guided my beginnings in moral theology, and with him, I feel that things have reached such a state, at least in casuistry, that it is pointless to resist the torrent.¹⁴ Nonetheless, this concession does not settle the speculative question of logic and methodology raised by the notion of the probable and its relationship to certainty.

It is from this particular angle of methodological logic that I would like to take up the question. For this reason, I will not here be concerned with discussing in detail the various perspectives that have emerged in opposition to my own. When such matters arise, my observations will be brief and will appear only in a few notes. It is in and of itself that I wish to address the question of *Certitudo probabilis*. Can we not realize, regarding the conceptual reality of non-scientific assent, considered from the perspective of logic, what Newman attempted in his *Essay on the Grammar of Assent*, as regards the vital experience of assent, considered from the perspective of psychological analysis? Classical thinkers knew and, on the whole, developed this *Logic of opinion-assent*, and at its core is the teaching concerning probable

¹¹ One should also consult Gardeil's lengthy entry, “Crédibilité” in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, in which he approaches matters with much more explicitly scholarly rigor.

¹² J.-V. Bainvel, “Un essai de systématisation apologétique,” *Revue pratique d'apologétique* 6 (1908), 161-181, 321-336 and 641-659; Etienne Hugueny, “L'évidence et Crédibilité,” *Revue thomiste* 9 (June 1909): 275-298; idem, “Réponse au R. P. Lagae,” *Revue thomiste* 10 (Sept. 1910): 642-651.

¹³ See Réginald Beaudouin, *Tractatus de conscientia*, in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*, ed. and trans. Matthew K. Miner (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2022), 157–320; original, Réginald Beaudouin, O.P., *Tractatus de conscientia*, ed. Ambroise Gardeil, O.P. (Tournai: Desclée, 1911).

¹⁴ Beaudouin, *Tractatus de Conscientia* (trans. Matthew K. Miner in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*), 196–197, 199–200, and above all 208. (**Translator's note:** By way of errata, I note that the opening words of the last question presented at this place should be “What are the reflex principles by which...”)

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certainty. Therefore, first and foremost, I shall strive to resuscitate this now-forgotten notion, one that is misunderstood and disfigured, yet—as I am quite convicted—still remains enlightening and relevant today. I will attempt to highlight the arguments and motives that support it and, because of their soundness, may—if I am not completely mistaken—make room for some interesting adjudication [of matters related to such certainty].

The opposition of the two terms in question—*probability* and *certainty*—determines the direction our thought must move as we attempt to unite them. We will begin with the object, the probable, and then, by means of a regressive and increasingly inward march, will descend to the attitude of the subject that corresponds to it. The stages of this dynamic progress can be staked out as follows.

I. The proven and the probable: question of existence (an sit)

II. The real definition and concrete structure of the probable: its subject, causative factors,¹⁵ and properties.

III. The assent of opinion, its definition, its subject and its subjective causes, its property: formido errandi.

IV. “Probable certainty”

I. The Proven and the Probable: Question of Existence (*an sit*)

We have two methods for determining conceptual realities: the *analysis* of the names commonly given to things,¹⁶ and *synthesis*, which shows that the concept thus distinguished, the *quid nominis*, belongs to a set of previously discovered conceptual realities which already have been systematized, that it has its own place, marked out in advance. These two procedures are immediate applications of the principle of methodology governing the discovery of objects that are entitled to assert to the human mind that they are realities for its consideration: *Voces sunt*

¹⁵ **Translator’s note:** The sense of “facteurs” in this article is something like “cause”, but in the interest of following Gardeil a little bit more closely, I am using a somewhat awkward expression “causative factor.”

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Topics*, bk. 2, ch. 2.

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*signa intellectuum, intellectus signa rerum.*¹⁷ The first passes from everyday words to the representative ideas of things and the second from the ideas of things, presupposed as already acquired and organized, to the words that make their case for being incorporated into the system. Depending on the case, it grants or denies them standing as valuable ideas.

1. **The quid nominis of the probable.**—Etymologically, and according to the usual terminology of the French language derived from Latin terminology, the word *probable* is opposed to the word *prouvé*, proven.¹⁸ On what grounds? Latin openly declares why: *Probabilis* is of the same type as *possibilis*. The endings of these words, *-ibilis*, generally evoke the idea of potentiality, of incompleteness in the actualization of a quality—in the specific case of *probable*, the incompleteness of proof. Greek does not offer the same etymological resources, for the word *ένδοξον*, meaning *probable*, is not of the same root as the word *δεικτικόν*, meaning demonstrative, *proven*. But, given the respective equivalence of the terms *ένδοξον* and *probabilis*, *δεικτικόν* and *probatum* is, in practice, accepted by all, we can rely here on the Latin terminology, especially as it is confirmed by standard usage.

We say, “*It is proven*,” when an argument determines our judgment without any possible need to return to the matter. The *proven*, in itself having the quality of an object, by rights comes to its completion in the subject. It is, we might say, a common quality, on the one hand objective evidence, on the other, subjective evidence.¹⁹ It is, as it were, a single and actual terminus, both of the movement of intelligible things being realized in the mind, and of the movement of the mind going out to encounter things. It is the act and the power ordered to this act, embracing and being welded together, as it were, in an irresistible and inamissible light.

¹⁷ See *In I Periherm.*, lect. 2; *STI*, q. 13, a. 1; *ibid.* q. 34, a. 1, etc.

¹⁸ Daniello Concina, *Ad theologiam christianam Apparatus*, bk. 3, ch. 4 (Rome: 1751), vol. 2, p. 365.

¹⁹ Reginald Beaudouin, *Tractatus de conscientia* (trans. Matthew K. Miner in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*), q. 2, a. 1, §1, sub-question 2 (p. 189).

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By contrast, when we say, “this is probable,” we have the feeling that we are concerned with a truth that cannot fully externalize itself and that cannot be fully realized within us. It has the effect of remaining *in via*, retained in and by the object. We say, “It is probable,” just as we say, “It is visible.”²⁰ Not everything that is visible is necessarily seen. It may be that the object is only partially visible, or that the lighting is defective, or that the eye’s adaptation to the object or to the light that manifests it (perhaps even perfectly) is deficient. Similarly, an intelligible object may be partially inaccessible to knowledge. The argument that brings it to light may not possess absolutely decisive efficacy. There may be a disproportion between the object, or its presentation, and the mind’s capacity. In all three cases, we are reduced to simply saying, “It is probable.” We fail to say, “It is proven.” Nonetheless, the object is recognized and accepted to some degree. Otherwise, we wouldn’t say, “It is probable.” Instead, we would be silent. Or we would say, “It is doubtful,” or at most, “It is possible.” However, although it is known and accepted, the object is not entitled to actualize itself, by rights, perfectly and in a firm judgment. By contrast, the proven truth, once grasped by the subject, is immediately acclimatized there: it is at home. The *probable* is a kind of truth. Indeed, it must be, since it receives the mind’s assent, such as it is. Yet, it does not dwell in the mind as though it were at home: we feel that its departure remains a constant possibility.²¹ In short, though it may sound like a wager (*gageure*), nonetheless it is exactly the case: the probable is true, though in a way that is *essentially optional (du vrai essentiellement facultatif)*.²²

²⁰ See Concina, *loc cit*.

²¹ See Marie-Benoît Schwalm, “La croyance naturelle et la Science,” *Revue thomiste* (1902): 634: “Whether you like it or not, verisimilitude, likeliness, attracts you and by itself moves your intellect, without however being sufficient by itself, let us note, to necessitate your adherence. What do you know, indeed, if from the obscure depths of things there will not one day emerge some victorious definition of your thesis?”

²² ST II-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad 4: “It is characteristic of opinion that when one holds it, one simultaneously consider it possible that matters could be otherwise.”

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This is enough to make it necessary to establish that the *proven* and the *probable* are different species in the genus of *truth*. As Aristotle states, “If one unit is enough to change the number, then likewise, the slightest difference in definitions changes the species.”²³ Take away from an argument even the slightest bit of the probative force that necessarily and, as it were, stably realizes it in the mind: you no longer have *proof* for a truth. The absolute evidence that springs from a necessary proof is indivisible. Whoever does not reach it in its indivisibility, even though he does indeed reach something, nonetheless reaches something else.

It is precisely because of this difference in species between the *proven* and the *probable* that Aristotle, in the material part of his *Organon*, could (and indeed had to) work out different treatises devoted to the logic of the *proven* and the logic of the *probable*, namely the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Topics*. And the fact that he succeeded in establishing these two disciplines, without fear of repetitions or reciprocal infiltrations [between the two subject matters and their *per se* demonstrations], confirms the duality of their objects. The distinction and autonomous development of two sciences is only possible where there are two formal objects.

2. The place of the probable among the formal objects of logical disciplines.—This transition brings us to the second part of our demonstration. After the stage of analysis, which has dissected the word in order to obtain the idea (contained, by the admission of all, in the word²⁴ and therefore real, at least, as far as we can judge from this undertaking), we now move on to the stage of synthesis, which will manifest the coherence and solidarity of the concept of the probable, thus recognized, in relation to the whole of our knowledge concerning this subject, and will make it, once again and on another head, recognized as the faithful translation of reality.

²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. 7, ch. 3, no. 10 (and lect. 3 in Thomas’s commentary).

²⁴ See *SCG*, bk. 1, ch. 1: “The philosopher judges that the usage of the multitude should be followed in the naming of things”; Aristotle, *Topics*, bk. 2, ch. 1.

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The whole into which we are going to try to fit the probable, already nominally defined, is the Aristotelian classification of the logical disciplines. Aristotelian logic has always held sway, with little contradiction and little esotericism. A body of knowledge that has withstood the questions and objections of so many centuries, one that has been, and remains, sufficient for the intellects of so many philosophers, scholars, and reasonable men, certainly possesses considerable objective value. *Sua mole stat*. It stands by weight of its own solidity.

Following St. Thomas, we can summarize the classification of Aristotelian logic as follows:

Reason, like nature, proceeds in three ways. A first process necessarily leads it to its result, which, in such cases, is necessarily the truth. To this process is connected necessary and scientific truth. By the second, truth is obtained in most cases, *ut in pluribus*, though not necessarily. The third procedure is flawed, because it fails to observe some indispensable principle of reasoning.

The part of Logic that deals with the first process is called *Theory of Judgment*, because scientific certainty is immediately linked to judgment (in the adequate sense of the word). It is also called *Analytic*, or the doctrine that teaches how to resolve [truths]. Indeed, we can only judge things by *resolving* them back to first principles.—Now, the certainty of a judgment depends first of all on the form of the reasoning that motivates it. Hence, there is the *Prior Analytics*, in which the syllogism is studied purely and simply. Then, it depends on the matter of reasoning—that is, on the intrinsic value and necessity of the propositions used. Hence, there is the *Posterior Analytics*, which deals with the demonstrative syllogism.

The second part of Logic, the Logic of *Inventio, Discovery*, is devoted to the second process. Discovery, in fact, does not always give way to certainty. To make it effective, it must resort to a supplementary judgment.²⁵ Therefore, the certainty of discovery involves

²⁵ This is referring to the case when an *a priori* judgment is brought to bear in the processes of discovery and consecrates their results in the name of absolute principles. See *ST I*, q. 79, a. 9, obj. 4 and ad 4: “The mind judging the truth or falsity of an opinion...does so by using certain principles in its examination of such propositions.” And, St. Thomas, *In lib. Boetii de Trinitate*, Proemii explanatio: “For as long as a question is debated with probable reasonings in which some doubt remains, it remains, as it were, formless and does not yet reach certainty concerning the truth. Therefore, it is said to be ‘formed’ when there is added to it a reason through which certainty concerning the truth is had.”

Translator note: I here reproduce a note that I have used elsewhere. The senses of *a posteriori* and *a priori* here are not the same as what is received from Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason. Although Kant is the inheritor of much medieval, renaissance, and baroque Scholasticism, his sense of the terms is quite different from the developed Scholastic position within the Thomist school. Although Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange may be using the terms a little bit loosely, he was well aware of how these terms were used by Thomist logicians in his day. Indeed, he

degrees, analogous to those found in the activity of physical agents. These do not always achieve their results; however, the more vigorous the agent, the rarer the failure. The same is true of the logical process we are here discussing: it approaches perfect certainty to a greater or lesser degree. Even if it does not always lead to science, it nevertheless produces belief, opinion, and probability, in proportion to the probability of the propositions that serve as its basis. In such cases, reason in a way pronounces on behalf of one side of the matter, while nonetheless retaining the apprehension that the opposite might be true. The *Topics* or *Dialectic* deals with this rational procedure.

If, at the end of this process, belief or opinion fail to take root in the mind, there sometimes remains at least some glimpse of the truth. In such cases, the mind, without being able to resolve itself to embrace one side of the argument, nonetheless inclines to side with it. This state of mind is what *Rhetoric* aims to strengthen. Beyond *Rhetoric*, all that is left is *Poetics*, which, by means of imagistic representations, strives to suggest ideas and feelings by which judgment will be inclined toward one side or the other.

All of this falls under *Logic*, insofar as in all of these cases we find the fundamental rational process of leading the mind from one idea to another. Beyond this, there would only be room for *Sophistics*, which Aristotle deals with in the book of *Sophistical Refutations*.²⁶

This overview is, so to speak, self-evident. At first glance, the idea of connecting *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* to *Logic* may seem disconcerting. However, it is perfectly understandable if we consider things from the same perspective as the Philosopher²⁷ and reflect for a moment the logical scope of these disciplines, agreeing to see that they are means for procuring a more or less consolidated state of mind with regard to Truth. From this perspective, they are causative factors of intellectual conviction, *ὄργανα*, and their place belongs in the *Organum*.

approved of Édouard Hugon's *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticae*, vol. 1: *Logica* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1927). In this text, see p. 384: “Demonstration *a priori* does not coincide with demonstration *propter quid*, nor does demonstration *a posteriori* coincide with demonstration *quia*. For demonstration *a priori* proceeds through causes of any sort, whether proximate or remote; however, demonstration *propter quid*...through proper, immediate, and adequate causes. Hence, every demonstration *propter quid* is a *priori*; however, not every demonstration *a priori* is *propter quid*. Demonstration *a posteriori* is only through an effect; however, demonstration *quia* is through an effect or [lit. et] through remote causes. Therefore, every *a posteriori* demonstration is *quia*, while it is not the case that every *quia* demonstration is a *priori*.” Although the immediate context justifies reading “et” as “or,” see also his remarks from p. 383: “Demonstration *quia*, taking the word ‘quia’ not as causal [i.e., meaning “because”] but meaning ‘that the thing is,’ proceeds either through a sign and effect or through remote, common, and inadequate causes.”

²⁶ St. Thomas, *In I Posteror* analytics, lect. 1.

²⁷ **Translator note:** Technically, Thomas thus sides with a more Arab scholastic understanding of the books of logic in the Aristotelian corpus. On this topic, see the work of Deborah Black, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990).

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But, without insisting on these final ramifications of Logic, which are not relevant to the issue under discussion, let gather the lesson that emerges for us from the synthesis that we have just read. In short: according to the man whom we could call the founder of Logic, and to St. Thomas, the master of the scholastic philosophers and theologians, wherever *proof is* lacking, *probability* prevails; beyond the realm of scientific certainty, we immediately enter the realm of belief and opinion. There is no middle ground.²⁸ This doctrine is universal and the division absolute.²⁹

Thus, whether we start from an analysis of the word through etymology and usage, or from an *a priori* synthesis, distinction, and systematization of the [subject] matter of knowledge and related disciplines, we can see the very existence and vital importance of probability. Inferior in effectiveness to proof properly so called, but superior to the persuasions of Rhetoric and the suggestions of Poetics, the probable occupies a special rank that deserves and legitimizes the specific study we propose to undertake here concerning it.

II. The Real Definition and Concrete Structure of the Probable

By a *real definition* of a thing, we mean: a notion that, instead of circumscribing the content of this thing by means of extrinsic notes, recognized by common accord (common names or a set of notions that have already proved their worth before the mind), strives to fix this content directly and unshakably, by uncovering the profound cause that makes it such, and not other than what it is. This profound cause is the essence, the nature of the thing, or more precisely still, its generative form, that is to say, the profound principle, reserved for it alone, that gives it

²⁸ See *In III Sent.* dist. 17, q. 1, a. 1, sol. 3, ad 3: “The object of the intellect is the truth, whose differences are the necessary and the contingent.”

²⁹ See the final chapter of the first book of the *Posterior analytics*, with lect. 44 in St. Thomas.

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its present determination. In this section, we propose to begin by uncovering the *proper form* and *generative principle* [*la génératrice*] of the probable.

However, this form has a matter, a *Subject*, to which it communicates its own quality, in this case probability.—Moreover, it also has its own extrinsic causes, to which it owes what it is: the study of these *Causative Factors* of probability is inseparable from the study of probability.—Finally, irradiating from the formal and constitutive character of probability, in the subject that participates in it, there are its characteristic *Properties*, which in turn contribute to our knowledge of the nature of the probable: the subject, causative factors, and properties of the probable form what we might call its concrete Structure.

Thus, we are led to divide our study of the probable into two parts:

1° *The real definition of the probable.*

2° *Concrete structure of the probable: its proper subject, specific causative factors, and properties.*

1. The Real Definition of the Probable.

If we are to understand the eminent logical dignity³⁰ that the ancients accorded to the probable—a dignity attested to by the existence of the methodological discipline reserved for it, the Topics—we must first rid our minds of all those casuistic speculations (even the best and most authoritative of them)³¹ which, having detached this intellectual shoot from its living root, namely, the mind, have isolated, dried up, dissected, and manipulated it, ultimately fixing its debris in their definitions and theorems, just as one fixes the organs of a herbarium plant in the pages of laboratory booklets. Let the amateurs, who are curious to look at cadaveric forms,

³⁰ See Concina, *op et libro cit*, ch. 4.

³¹ While correcting the proofs for this article, I received communication concerning the thesis by Dr. Stefano Mondino, professor at the Seminary of Mondovi: *Studio storico-critico sul Sistema morale di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori* (Monza, 1911). Chapter 9 of this study (*Concetto d'opinione secundo S. Tommaso e secundo S. Alfonso*) is a striking confirmation and application of the present observation.

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continue to indulge in their little works of histology. The fragmentation and confusion involved here are such that we can only benefit from returning the question to its very origins, turning back to the ancients and, with them, plunging the probable back into the milieu where it was born, there contemplating it and thus emerging spontaneously, full of sap and meaning, before the vital effort by which the human spirit, always at work, seeks to render itself equal [and adequate] to reality. This is the the sort of labor I once attempted for the notion of *Credibility*,³² and a few of those who mattered have thanked me for it.

The natural place, the οἰκεῖος τόπος, if I may say so, for probability, is in *Discovery*, *Inventio*.³³ The Founder of Logic and St. Thomas both agree on this point. *Inventio* is that bold step by which the mind, in possession of its primitive datum, concrete facts, essences, common sense notions and quiddities, and nominal definitions, sets out to discover the real essences and generative principles that dominate or regulate reality. This is the phase of trial and error, haphazard inductions, dialectical hunts for definitions,³⁴ the work of lying in wait for current opinions pro and con and then undertaking the task of comparing them with each other, provisionally classifying them, and undertaking a reasoned selection of the best among them. Aristotle left us models for this process in Book I of the *De Anima*, Book I of the *Physics*, Book I of the *Metaphysics*, Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Book II of the *Politics*.

³² **Translator’s note:** Above all in his *Crédibilité et apologétique* and the lengthy *DTC* article he wrote as well.

³³ See St. Thomas, *In De Caelo et Mundo*, lect. 22: “The resolution of doubts is the discovery (*inventio*) of the truth, and the reasons for opposed opinions are of great value for arriving a scientific grasp of the truth (*ad sciendam veritatem*).”

³⁴ **Translator’s note:** This is an important theme in the work of Fr. Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, even if his writings did not always allow him to present matters in this fashion. He often laments how scholasticism presents things *in facto esse*, ready made and complete. His own labors and duties of state very often required him to present a tradition, the tradition of the *schola Thomae*. Nonetheless, at his best moments—and are they all that rare?—his thought breathes with the teacher’s awareness that the presentation of *inventio in fieri* is the best way to enliven a student’s mind.

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Everything about *inventio* betrays the dynamic process of a mind on the march forward. The driving force of this progress is the hope of bringing about, in a supreme élan, the conjunction of two terms, two ideas, two realities, which are so close to each other that they will point the finger, so to speak, at the *a priori* rational principle which, riding upon the rising tide of accumulated clues, will strike with a sudden blow the connection that they bring to light, in the form of a full, necessary, and definitive truth.³⁵ Thus, in the books of the *De Anima*, the dialectical elaborations of Book I, which are slow and self-reflexive, though always ascending, are followed by the short, resolute analysis at the beginning of Book II, which consecrates all the work accomplished and at last delivers the definition of the living being.

Now, before this later and categorical judgment is rendered, shall we say that the mind has remained, in terms of truth, at a state of absolute zero? Obviously not! It is clear that, although it does not yet possess truth, it is approaching it and knows that it is making progress.³⁶ It no longer experiences the trial and error of the beginning: its progress is becoming increasingly more steady, with the help of milestones that need less and less correction. If there are still partial hazards to run, at least the spirit of completely returning to the start has gradually disappeared from his outlook. Without yet being absolutely fixed, the intellect’s oscillation is less and less pronounced, almost coming to a halt, at certain moments, in a state of invincible reassurance, which seems like an unambiguous prelude to the state of [firm] adherence.

³⁵ See St. Thomas, *In libros Boetii de Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1: “In another way, a process is called rational from the terminus in which it comes to a halt in its proceeding, for the ultimate terminus to which the inquiry of reason should lead is the understanding of the principles into which we judge by way of resolution. Indeed, when this happens, it is not called a natural process or proof but, rather, a demonstration. However, when the inquiry of reason does not reach the ultimate terminus but stops in the midst of the inquiry itself, namely when the path remains open to the inquirer regarding either option (and this happens when it proceeds through probable reasons, which of their nature lead to opinion and belief, not scientific knowledge), in such cases the rational process is distinct from the demonstrative one. And in this way, one can proceed rationally in any science, as the way to necessary conclusions is prepared by the probable reasonings.”

³⁶ See *ST III*, q. 9, a. 3, ad 2: “Opinion... est via ad scientiam.... Opinion... is the way toward science.”

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To adhere: but to what? We adhere, it seems, only to the truth. “For we are said to assent to something only when we adhere to it as to something true,” says Saint Thomas.³⁷ No doubt. But could it not be the case that truth would have its forerunner and, as it were, *its likely counterpart* [*son semblable*]? At last, we have pronounced the word. In a search that progresses along its continuous movement, we may not find the decisive truth, the result of an efficacious proof, but we can already possess something close to it, the *probable*, the result of a probable proof.

The probable or the verisimilar [*vraisemblable*] (they are one and the same) is not doubt, as we like to say in this age of “more or less [true]” and logical confusion.³⁸ Doubt is the initial point of departure posed by the given, the datum. It is the question without which research would not have taken place. It is also the momentary equilibrium produced in the mind by the sight of arguments that are equivalent, an equilibrium that is soon broken in any process of discovery that progresses onward.

Nor is the probable conjecture, suspicion, or hypothesis. All these undoubtedly have a role to play in the forward march towards the unknown. But as we move forward, these inconsistent states of mind increasingly give way to more affirmative states of mind, which deserve a new name. And what better name to give them, than one borrowed from the ultimate goal that they are approaching, namely *truth* [*vrai, veri-*] and *proof* [*preuve*].

“Probable truths are likely, verisimilar ones. *Probabilia sunt verisimilia*,” writes Albert the Great at the beginning of his *Topics*.³⁹ The probable is the likeness of the true. We immediately can hear modern logicians crying out: “What a trite and meaningless statement!”—

³⁷ See *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

³⁸ See Ambroise Gardeil, “Réponse à M. Bainvel,” *Revue pratique d'Apologétique* (1908, no. 2): p. 185; and St. Mondino, *Studio storico-critico sul Sistema morale di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori*, 103–104.

³⁹ Albert the Great, *Topicorum*, bk. 1, tract. 1, c. 2. See St. Thomas, *In Libros Boet, de Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 4.

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Not so! By formulating this definition at the beginning of a treatise on scientific logic, this vigorous logician undoubtedly intended to formulate an illuminating proposition. He wished to mark out, in a brief definition, the basis for the probable’s right to present itself as an object worthy of interest to the human mind, and consequently, worthy of possessing its own rules and the special set of logical instruments that will enable it to be reached with all desirable rigor.

There’s no need to insist further about this matter. Based on our observations up to this point, the dignity and rights of the probable before the human mind are sufficiently clear. It possesses the dignity and right of being, in the absence of the proven true, that which really approaches the latter, its replacement and normal and authorized substitute, the dignity and right of being the *vrai-semblable*, having *verisimilitude*, in the full sense of the word, i.e. *similar to the true*.

2. The Concrete Structure of the Probable

As we said above,⁴⁰ the concrete structure of the probable results from three elements: its subject of inherence, its causes or specific causative factors, and its properties.

A. The subject of probability.—Probability is an objective quality of the genus of truth. Now, objective truth is immediately realized in statements of judgment—the proximate and immediate subject of probability will therefore be propositions. Sometimes, however, statements have an affinity and close connection with one another—for example, those that deal with the same aspect of things. Sometimes, too, these statements are united in overall disciplines, having a homogeneous character. Are some of these disciplines designated to give preferential hospitality to the probable? This is the question concerning the remote subject of probability.

⁴⁰ At the beginning of section II of this study.

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And since the best way to understand something is to circumscribe it little by little, by first examining its most remote aspects, we will start by considering this last question.

1° In what disciplines is there a place for probability?—As we have seen, it is in the research labors of the stage of discovery (*inventio*) that the lofty significance of probability asserts itself more strongly, revealing itself in all its impressive objectivity. The scientist who progresses in his research has no doubt of the intimate relationship between probability and truth. And, moreover, the success that often crowns the labors of scientific discovery bears witness to the fact that we were not mistaken when we saw probability as the path to, and prelude of, absolute truth.

But it would be a mistake to confine the probable to scientific research capable of producing an effective result that no longer needs to be taken up anew. It can happen that certain matters may not lend themselves to categorical solutions. There are subjects of investigation which, normally, *naturaliter*, as St. Thomas says, are not fully accessible to the intellect.⁴¹ The impossibility of definitive determination does not, however, prevent them from being matters of truth. Be that as it may, we will never manage to scrutinize and uncover this truth. Yet, perhaps we can extract it, to a certain extent, through non-apodictic—though still-valid—means of proof and therefore, through probable arguments.⁴²

We can even go so far as to say that this manifests the most interesting part of the matter of knowledge: those objects that touch us most closely, because they are in some way ourselves, are very specially claimants to probability alone.

Thus, as St. Thomas observes:

⁴¹ St. Thomas, *In libros Boetii de Trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1: “*Quae non sunt intellectui naturaliter possibiles.*”

⁴² See the paragraph beginning, “The second part of Logic, the Logic of Inventio,” above.

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In contingent realities, such as the realities of nature and human things, it suffices that one attain that kind of truth which will be found verified in most cases (*ut in pluribus*), even though from time to time (*ut in paucioribus*), they may involve error.⁴³

And elsewhere, he states:

There cannot be as much certainty in a variable and contingent matter as is had in a necessary matter... One commits the same sort of ‘sin’ by accepting a mathematician’s use of oratory and by demanding mathematical demonstrations from an orator.⁴⁴

Similarly:

As the Philosopher says in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we must not demand the same certainty in all things. Demonstrative proofs should not be sought regarding human acts, which are subject to court rulings and whose existence can only be revealed by testimony. In this order of contingent and variable things, sufficient certainty is had through *probable certainty* which ordinarily reaches (*ut in pluribus*) the true, though in some a minority of cases (*ut in paucioribus*) it deviates from it.⁴⁵

Such remarks are so obviously the translation of the actual reality of things that it is useless to insist on the point. All the probable needs is to be acclimated here and that will suffice for it to have, in such matters, its specific places. [*C’en est assez pour que le probable ait dans ces sortes de matières ses entrées spéciales, qu’il y soit comme acclimaté.*]

Therefore, we can conclude that there are two kinds of disciplines subject to probable investigations: 1° scientific disciplines, in their preliminary research to resolutely establish explanatory demonstrations, 2° and disciplines whose object is contingent laws and facts,

⁴³ *ST I-II*, q. 94, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴⁴ *In I Ethic*, lect. 3; cf. *ibid.* lect. 11.

⁴⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 70, a. 2

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particularly the laws and facts of human life, of moral life, a matter in which the use of probability constitutes a normal and specific procedure.

2° Which sort of propositions are susceptible to being qualified as probable?—From what we have just said, it would seem that contingent propositions, those that do not necessarily attain the truth, are the only ones propositions that qualify for this designation. Isn't necessity the exclusive property of necessary truths? How can a necessary proposition be subject to probability, which is mark of incomplete and unachieved truth?

And, nonetheless, all the masters of logic admit that propositions that are certain, in themselves necessary, can fall under probability.⁴⁶ Indeed, according to them, this remark is of the utmost importance when it comes to defining the object of the *Topics* or general theory of Probability.⁴⁷

Let's start by clarifying what we mean by necessary truth.

First and foremost, every proposition whose terms include or imply each other immediately and obviously before the mind, as first principles do, is necessary.

Equally, by full rights, we can say that any conclusion drawn by way of necessary consequence, from necessarily true principles, is itself necessary.

And, in the broadest sense of the term, we can say that a proposition that states, as something having happened, a contingent fact that has actually occurred, can be called necessary because it has become impossible for it not to have been.⁴⁸ “Past things pass over into a kind of necessity, because it is impossible that what has taken place would not be.”⁴⁹ If Socrates is

⁴⁶ See Boethius, *Post. anal. Interp.*, bk. 2, ch. 4 (PL 64, col. 746); cf. Mondino, *Studio storico-critico sul Sistema morale di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori*, 101.

⁴⁷ We will explain this in a work specifically dedicated to Topicality (see the final article in this collection).

⁴⁸ See Albert the Great, *In I Poster. An.*, tr. 5, ch. 9, §Dicamus igitur (Vivès, vol. 2, p. 150, col 1) excludes from science facts considered precisely as singular: he does not speak of past facts as such.

⁴⁹ *ST I*, q. 25, a. 4; See *II-II*, q. 49, a. 6; *In VI Ethic*, lect. 2, in fine.

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sitting, it is necessary for him to be sitting, while he is sitting.⁵⁰ The psychological basis of this necessity is the impossibility for experience not to experience what it experiences and, having experienced it, not to attest to it as a reality, which although it is contingent in itself, nonetheless, on the assumption that it has been experienced, is something that necessarily exists. This is, of course, a clear and immediate experience⁵¹ and a testimony that only pronounces itself according to the strict limits of what can be and has been experienced.

Now, in what way can such propositions be subject to probability?

Obviously, this will be possible only on the condition that the mind is not in immediate contact with the reasons that make these propositions necessary truths.⁵² But, what is required for such a condition to hold?

There are two ways, which the ancients subtly analyzed:

1° A necessary proposition can be considered in isolation from its necessitating criteria or arguments. Thus, it is considered in its material content and placed in relation to non-necessary, contingent, and probable evidence. This is what makes Albert the Great say that the probable is not always a contingent truth but sometimes is a necessary truth, which, at present, is presented to the mind only by means of signs that are not absolutely convincing.⁵³ In such cases, there is no longer intrinsic contingency in the object itself but, rather, only contingency in the object as presented to the mind, *objectum ut objectum*.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *In I Perihermeneias*, lect. 14.

⁵¹ See *In VI Ethic*, lect. 3 §Scientia: “For then it is only possible to have certitude about them when they fall under the senses.”

⁵² Albert the Great, *In I Poster. An.*, tr. 5, ch. 9, §*Dicamus igitur*, §*Adhuc alia differentia*, and §*Sciendum autem* (Vivès, vol. 2, p. 150 and 153).

⁵³ Albert the Great, *Topicorum*, bk. 1, ch. 2 (Vivès, vol. 2, p. 240).

⁵⁴ See *ST I*, q. 12, a. 7; I-II, q. 67, a. 3.

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2° But there is another case: the necessary proposition can be considered, as probable, even as it appears to the mind equipped along with its necessitating arguments. Indeed, it may happen that such are grasped confusedly and imperfectly by the person who adheres to them. He sees them well enough to admit them, but he does not analyze them, which would nevertheless be indispensable in order for them to have the rigor for being probative: “If someone,” says Saint Thomas, “only knows in a probable way the truth that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, he does not have perfect knowledge of it, for he does not reach the full measure of this object’s knowability.” And yet, he adds: “There is nothing concerning this theorem that he does not know—neither the subject, nor the predicate, nor their synthesis [in a judgment]. Only, all of this is not known as much as it can be known.”⁵⁵ And as Domingo de Soto observes, it is as though one were saying that in order to motivate an assent of opinion, in the absence of an object that is in reality contingent, it suffices to have an object that one considers to be contingent, because its necessary character is not perceived in an evidential way. And, from this very fact, the learned logician concludes that contingency, which is the essence of the object of opinion, that is, of the essence of the probable, is not always of objective origin; its cause sometimes lies in the subject’s lack of aptitude.⁵⁶

In sum there are three kinds of propositions that are submitted to probability.

The first are essentially contingent, on account of the very nature of the things they express. These are certain theses of physics and experimental science, truths of fact, whether

⁵⁵ *ST I*, q. 12, a. 7, ad 2; cf. *In I Poster. An.*, lect 44 (§*Sunt autem*); *In Boet. de Trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1.

⁵⁶ Domingo da Soto, *In I Poster. An.*, q. 8, §*Descendendo ad materiam opinionis*, 2nd conclusion (Salamanca: 1554), p. 128 recto, col. 1.

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psychological, moral or historical—everything that does not lend itself to rigorous scientific determination.

The others are propositions that, although they are intrinsically capable of receiving necessary demonstration, scientific determination, they nonetheless happen to offer themselves to the mind under a contingent aspect.

However, the contingency of this presentation can, in turn, result from two causes, the first objective, the second subjective.

a) In the first case, instead of a necessary truth offering itself with rigorous arguments that can support it, it is currently accessible only under the cover of contingent arguments, or *signs*, as the old logicians say. Thanks to these signs, the mind can truly know the object, its properties, and its laws; however, it does not have absolute, immediate, or demonstrative evidence of them. The object, not in itself, but in its actual presentation to knowledge, *ut objectum*,⁵⁷ is ultimately contingent. This is true of the dialectical propositions that mark out scientific discovery.

b) In the second case, the object is a matter of scientific knowledge, not only because the things it represents are a matter of science, but because the arguments that set forth its necessity are present to one’s mind. According to Albert the Great and Domingo de Soto, this can go so far that one can even believe that what he has before him is necessarily true. Nonetheless, because he is unable to grasp the full force of the necessity involved in the arguments, the object he perceives remains contingent.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For the precise meaning of this expression, see Cajetan, *In ST I*, q. 1, a. 3, no. 3 (*commenti*).

⁵⁸ See Albert the Great, *In I Poster. An.*, tr. 5, ch. 9: “What is known as an opinion... in as much as such an opinion concerning an immediate proposition falls upon it, is indeed known [*scitum*], although it is not accepted in the manner of science.” Domingo da Soto, *In I Poster. An.*, q. 8, p. 128 recto, col. 1: “When I only opine it is necessary, it is perhaps not necessary in my estimation.”

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Ultimately, the common characteristic of all probable propositions is contingency. However, this contingency has three sources: contingent things, contingent objective presentation, and contingent apprehension.

B. Causative factors of Probability.—There are two kinds of causative factors, some intrinsic to the probable object, others extrinsic, coming from outside and attaching themselves to it to support it. I have named *signs* and *testimonies*.

By *signs*, we mean phenomena that are generally sensible and apparent, namely qualities, causes, and effects, which, without having, or without currently appearing, to possess a necessary connection with the essence (as is the case for essential causes or properties that are convertible with the essence), nonetheless do not fail to designate the latter, to betray its existence and nature in a more or less precise and certain manner.

Testimonies are the approbations that sometimes the multitude, or at other times groups, or perhaps individuals with special competence give to a statement. Their authority is added to the statement from the outside, making it an object worthy of belief.

The first species of probability-causative factors finds its field of application in philosophical and scientific truths. The second belongs, above all, to the moral and political sciences and their applications and to human affairs, historical facts and, in general, to the objects of common knowledge on which all human life is based.

Moreover, this distinction of natures and this relative delimitation of spheres of influence should not be conceived as though it implied that these two probability-causative factors could not be active in a given case. Signs and testimonies are closely correlated. The value of testimony, on which its convincing effectiveness depends, can only be explained by objective reasons. In some cases, these reasons may well be necessary evidence or immediate experience,

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but most of the time they are merely probable signs. Conversely, the signs of verisimilitude, without having the effectiveness of demonstrations, are apt to produce approbation in all those who appreciate them, and this approbation in turn becomes testimony, for the use of those who have not verified the signs. This correlation and synergy between signs and testimonies is analyzed by Albert the Great in a passage that we must quote at length, as it sheds so much light on this question.:

Sometimes the signs of verisimilitude, of likeness, are encountered on the surfaces of things. Such are the external qualities of things, to which sense experience is related and whose effectiveness results from there mere experience of sensations. Thus, the whiteness of snow, for example, is the result of the fact that snow is made up of small particles of a transparent body reduced to dust,⁵⁹ so that light penetrating the interstices envelops the molecules. Such a sign immediately concerns the specificity of meaning.⁶⁰

At other times, the signs of verisimilitude, of likeness, are not to be found on the surface, but already in the interior, in the intermediate region between external phenomena and the essential principles of being. In this case, the probable is nothing more than what appears to many, for reasoning must intervene to interpret the sensible data. For example, the fact that a star in the tail of Ursa Minor (the Little Dipper) is located at the pole, due to the fact that no movement of its own is observed, is a judgement that comes under both reason and sensation.—If the indications are deepened until they become convertible with the essential reasons for things, the resulting probability is defined as that which appears to the learned alone. For example, the fact that the moon moves in its epicycle,⁶¹ because it penetrates deep into the earth's shadow: this is not the cause of the phenomenon, but it is nevertheless a sign of it.

Now, this third kind of probability, which is accessible only to the learned, is further subdivided, depending on whether its object is imposed on all the learned, on a large number, or only on the most outstanding, the most authoritative (*probabilibus*). And the reason for this is that sometimes the grasping of a sign that is convertible with the cause of being leaves room for sensation, in which case it is perceived by all the learned. In other cases, the sign is enclosed within the lines of substance and reveals itself only to the

⁵⁹The Venice edition (1506) reads: “*Nix est parve partes perspicui in parva comminuti.*” The Lyon edition (1651) followed by the Vivès edition, uses *conjuncti* instead of *comminuti*. This is unintelligible and incorrect.

⁶⁰ This is how we interpret the word *medium*. In point of fact, this is concerned with the proper medium of the senses (*medium proprium sensûs*) theorized by Aristotle in *De anima*, bk. 2. See St. Thomas, *In II De Anima*, lect. 14–23.

⁶¹ **Translator note:** Obviously, according to the physics of the day – thus showing an example of a mistaken necessary judgment.

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learned who have great experience, to the elite. Finally, it finally belongs to an intermediate region and be the province of those having average competency.⁶²

I shall not insist on how this page of psychological logic confirms some of the views put forward above.⁶³ However, I will point out the sharpened sense it provides concerning the true significance of the probable: its character as a growing approach to the full truth, which is its limit; its increasing resemblance to the true, as we encounter signs more closely connected with the essence of things.

Rather, the only reason that I have included this page from Albert the Great is in order to demonstrate the correlation of signs and testimonies. In this respect, it is most instructive. It reveals all the details and nuances of this correspondence. In all its degrees, the intrinsic probability of signs meets its equivalent in the extrinsic probability of approbation. These two probabilities appear to have been shaped to the measure of each other. Signs are, and remain, the fundamental causes of all probability. However, the more or less common approval that the argument encounters through the sign, the τεκμήριον, becomes for the probable a denunciatory criterion whose ability to sensed is of extreme importance. For all those who cannot access the signs, the sole argument will be testimony, with its value that is complementary to the value of the signs. For them, it is truly a cause, a causative factor of probability, the normal, and as it were imposed, substitute for the causative factors of intrinsic probability.

I will go further still. If we set aside scientific problems, in which nothing can replace personal verification, I have no hesitation in saying that the extrinsic causative factor of probability, the approbation or testimony of the crowd, of hosts, of those who are skilled, can be

⁶² Albert the Great, *Topicorum*, bk. 1, tract. 1, ch. 2.

⁶³ See the paragraphs beginning with, “The natural place, the οἰκεῖος τόπος...” above.

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preferred *in any case* to intrinsic causative factors, to signs. This statement will seem shocking to those who, judging the value of things from an individualistic point of view, set themselves up as the measure of all things. This is only correct, if we are willing to look at things from the objective point of view of logic. I will demonstrate the point as follows.

1° The probable undoubtedly has its foundation in the intrinsic value of the rational arguments *ex signis* that support it. Nevertheless, this value is only *fully actualized* through the shocking of the mind that grasps its value and expresses it in the assent of opinion. Before that, there is potential in it. Indeed, the probable, being contingent by nature, only responds imperfectly, *in actu primo*, to the approval it is capable of eliciting. The ultimate formal reason for probability is only found in the state of second act, that of exercise, at the moment of actual approbation. And one can see that this ultimate objective reason is correlative to this approbation. Ultimately, the probable is that which, at the same time as it is grasped, is in fact approved by all, by many, or by the wise.⁶⁴ It is *the approvable* in the full force of the term. Its actual capacity for approval is the light in which it offers itself, with its maximum realization, it is its formal object, its ultimate and decisive *ratio sub qua*.—First advantage.

2° Moreover, this last ultimate reason is unique and common, whatever the species of the probable in question. Whereas intrinsic probability depends on signs that are infinitely varied in nature and variegated in origin, which removes any possibility of giving it a general definition, the common and banal effect of this probability, namely the approval it receives and, therefore, which it was *in actu proximo* capable of producing, offers a universal means of defining the probable and, much more, of classifying it into its constant and easily recognizable species or

⁶⁴ *De facto*, not *de jure*, as in the case of the *proven*. See the section, “The quid nominis of the probable,” above. And yet, by its constancy, this fact itself declares that it possesses in the probable [opinion] a permanent *raison d’être*. However, this *raison d’être* does not have the power to remove the probable from the limits of contingency; it does not constitute a right that is necessary upon every hypothesis, as the case for proof properly so called.

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degrees, since the coefficient of intrinsic probability belonging to an argument is always in adequate correspondence with the coefficient of approval it entails.

This is undoubtedly why, in the works of the founders of Logic, we only find a definition of the probable based on extrinsic probability, i.e. the approval of the multitude, the majority, or the learned.⁶⁵ Only this criterion is general, and only it can serve as the basis for a universal methodological doctrine of probability. It is in vain to object that approval is the effect, not the cause... Undoubtedly, it is the effect, but by way of repercussion, it becomes a criterion, and consequently, a cause of assent: first, for those who have not seen the intrinsic proofs, and second, for the others themselves,⁶⁶ since they have only seen them with their individual intelligence, and since, in contingent matters, subject to differences of appreciation, nothing strengthens and justifies personal adherence more than the feeling of being in agreement with the adherence of all, of many, [or] of those who count.—Second advantage.

3° Let us add that, thanks to this common medium of approval and testimony, we can explain how obvious or necessary propositions can, in a general way, be regarded as probable. The reader may have been surprised, for example, to see Albert the Great’s proposition that *snow is white* taken as a type of probability. In itself, it is a truth of immediate experience, common to all, since, as Albert the Great himself notes, whiteness directly concerns the specificity of the sense of sight. The same is true of the pole’s position, established by the relative immobility of the pole star. That is all we need today to declare a scientific fact. The same applies to self-evident demonstrations and first principles or immediate propositions. There is no doubt that these truths are, above all, self-evident. But he who says the most also admits the least. By the

⁶⁵ See Aristotle, *Topics*, bk. 1, ch. 4; Boethius, *Top. Arist. Interpretatio*, bk. 1, ch. 8, 12 (PL 64, cols. 911, 916, 918).

⁶⁶ Gaetano San Severino, *Philosophia Christiana cum antiqua et nova comparata* (Naples: 1878), vol. 3, *Logica*, pt. 2, ch. 2, intro (p. 163ff).

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very fact that they are self-evident to all, to the many, [or] to the learned, these truths are approved by them and receive their testimony. As such, they rank among the probable.

And let it not be said that this is a useless shift in value. How many times, when I have tried to provoke in a mind a truly analytic knowledge of a first principle, have I come up against an irremediable inability for my listener to hear the terms properly, to abstract them with enough clarity for their reciprocal inclusion to appear. Instead of making things clear, I was confusing them. Before the explanation, my listener's mind grasped the truth; but afterwards—if you'll pardon the expression—he saw nothing but raging fire. Now, if this happens with first principles, how much more so is it the case with demonstrations, with scientific laws, and with the very facts of everyday experience. It is therefore useful, at least for those—and they are legion—whose minds are incapable of looking the intelligible in the face, that the most obvious truths be presented to them as reflected in common approbation and under the species of probability. And this explains the otherwise incomprehensible phenomenon that the lists of probable truths found in the ancients contain, as it were, only absolutely certain principles: certain, yes, in themselves; but probable on account of the common testimony that guarantees them and for the generality of intellects, which live only by faith, all the while believing that they live by reasons.—Third advantage.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ If we wished to seek further confirmations for the overriding merits of extrinsic probability, we could insist on the accepted and approved usage of it in moral theology, according to which extrinsic probability is placed in the first rank as a guide for confessors, students of casuistry, and even, in difficult questions, for masters of moral theology themselves. If what we have said is correct, this is completely legitimate from a rational point of view, indeed all the more so if we refer to the approval of teachers by competent authority. The fact that such a practice is recognized as the most commonly practiced in the great school of moral education that is the Catholic confessional is, moreover—even for minds not committed to our beliefs but nonetheless perceptive and impartial—a significant cross-check regarding the value of extrinsic probability in determining the just and the true in contingent matters. See Reginald Beaudouin, *Tractatus de Conscientia* (trans. Matthew K. Miner in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*), p. 231–234; Sertillanges, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Collection des grands philosophes (Paris: Alcan, 1910), vol. 2, 325.

We could also bear witness to the light that this conception of extrinsic probability casts on a key theological treatise. It harmonizes the *De locis theologicis* with the Topics of the ancients. But we have already explained this sufficiently in three articles published in this journal three years ago. See Ambroise Gardeil, “La notion du lieu

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Therefore, the conclusion of this section is that the intrinsic and extrinsic causative factors of probability, far from being mutually exclusive, intimately correlated. They are *convertible*, one might say, and, as such, can be substituted for one another. However, from a properly dialectical point of view—which differs in this respect from the scientific point of view—the definitive advantages are on the side of the extrinsic causative factors of probability because: 1° they are the exclusive criterion of the probable rendered at its maximum efficacy (and, thus, of the probable as such, *simpliciter dictum*);⁶⁸ 2° because extrinsic probability alone can serve as a unique form, uniformly characterizing all probable truths (as confirmed by the common definition of ancient logicians); and 3° because it alone is appropriated to all intellects and, thus, has a social value.

C. The property of the probable.—The formal element of the probable is the resemblance or approximation of the true. Its material element is contingent propositions, in the sense we just discussed: either because of their content, or because of the way they are presented to the mind or known by the mind. In the latter two cases, these propositions can be, in themselves, necessary and immediate. All this has already been established.⁶⁹

Now, the probable has two properties, which are respectively related to these two elements (the formal and the material). The first, which comes from its form, is its rational

théologique,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* (1908): 51ff, 246ff, 484ff. **Translator’s notes:** I plan to translate these for *To Be a Thomist*.

In his “Note: De Melchior Cano au P. Gardeil” (p. 210) Rémi Fourcade posits that probability, as an intrinsic property of the principles of dialectics, cannot be defined on the side of common adherence: “Far from being an effect of this adherence, it is, on the contrary, its cause.” He adds that if these principles are *common*, this is not because they derive from a banal and vulgar cause of assent, common opinion, but from their subject matter. He believes he has thus ruined the parallelism I have established between Aristotle’s *Topics* and the *De locis theologicis*.—What I have said above, however, shows that this is not the case, that the facts raised by Monsieur Hourcade are perfectly compatible with our position, and his position is the one that is inadequate and faulty.

⁶⁸ Just as we say that virtue as such, *simpliciter dicta in statu virtutis*, exists only when it is absolutely unimpeded—when it gives *good use*. Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 57, a. 3; q. 65, a. 1; also, Cajetan’s commentaries.

⁶⁹ See the paragraphs starting with “To adhere: but to what?” and “However, the contingency of this presentation can” above.

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solidity, its quality of being truly and solidly probable, a quality by which doubtful, unlikely, or less probable propositions are excluded from probability. The second, which comes from its matter, is topicality.

Only the first of these properties is relevant to our subject. We could not deal with topicality at present without diverting ourselves from our main aim, which is to demonstrate the relationship between certainty and probability, as affirmed by St. Thomas’ doctrine on probable certainty. We will therefore defer our study of this subject to another work. [See the text on “Topicality” at the end of this group of essays.]

As we said but a moment ago, the *probable* is the *verisimilar*, *that which is like unto the true*: this is its essence.

What conditions must an argument satisfy in order to be recognized as being similar to, or an approximation of, the truth?

It must, obviously, be supported by serious objective motives, which, without revealing the profound and essential cause of truth, have a truly effective relationship to it. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand how probability could, by rights, lead to full and apodictic truth, how it could be the legitimate and normal substitute for scientific determination where this is not possible.

So, once again, it is clear that that faint clues, such as poetic likenesses or persuasive rhetorical inductions, do not count as probable arguments. Anything that, of itself, leads to conjecture, suspicion or supposition of the truth, without going any further, undoubtedly deserves the sympathetic attention of a mind in search of the truth, especially in the early stages of one’s

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quest for it; however, it cannot establish that mind in the state where it positively inclines towards a solution.

The solidity of arguments can be experienced in different ways: by the accumulation and convergence of signs; by the consistency of certain clues revealing a permanent intimate cause, which seems to need to be nothing other than the essence; by the appearance of certain major clues, explaining a large number of phenomena; and indeed, by the common consent of men, the adherence of a large number, the testimony of specialists, sometimes of only one, if he is authoritative, etc.

These general facts are clear enough. They follow from what we said earlier, namely that the probable is something more than the hypothetical, the doubtful, the unlikely, that it ranks among the arguments capable of convincing objective, serious minds, and even, in questions of practice or morality, those who are prudent and will the good. Nonetheless, as the probability of one statement does not exclude the possibility of the truth of the opposite statement, it may happen that opposing statements, equally or unequally well-founded, are simultaneously present to a mind. In such cases, do they retain the solidity they borrow from their rational foundations, from the intrinsic or extrinsic motives that support them, such that one could indifferently consider either one of these opposed statements as though they both had verisimilitude?

It is no small temptation to admit this in the case of statements that one calls “equally probable statements.” The mind finds it to be impossible to eliminate one of them in favor of the other, and vice versa. Upon investigation of the evidence, it must consider both terms of the alternative to be well-founded.—In actual reality, however, it is impossible for this to be the case, as though two contradictory statements could be really similar to the truth, both verisimilar, both equally approaching the truth. Hence, according to the position we have presented thus far, it is

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impossible that one of them would possess, at the expense of the other, that actualized capacity of being cause of approval, which, as we have seen, constitutes the ultimate and decisive objective determination of the probable. And so, from this formal perspective of efficacy, neither of the two statements can be said to be truly similar to the true, truly probable.⁷⁰ This is pure logic. When faced with such an alternative, the mind can take up only one possible attitude: doubt, expectation, and the awareness that research must be taken up anew, until one of the two sides manifests, through new reasons, its objective preponderance.

St. Thomas elucidated this question in depth:

When our possible intellect finds itself confronted with two contradictory statements, it can take on various attitudes. Sometimes, it is not more inclined towards one alternative than the other, either because of an absolute lack of proof (as is the case in problems for which we do not possess the means for reaching a resolution),⁷¹ or because the reasons alleged on either side seem to us to be equivalent.⁷² In this case, what prevails is doubt, the fluctuation of the mind between opposed extremes. But sometimes, too, our intellect leans towards one of the alternatives, without however, the rational motive that inclines its judgment sufficing for providing it with complete determination. Thus, yes, it accepts one of the solutions, but it still has doubts about the other. This is the attitude of an opinion which, while adhering to one of the sides involved in the question, nonetheless retains apprehension (*formido*) about the opposing side.⁷³

In the third section of this work [in the next article], we will look into the apprehension inseparable from opinion, which St Thomas calls doubt and fear. It is, in fact, *the subjective state of the mind* in contact with the objective probable, and *not the objective probable itself*, with which we are exclusively concerned in this article. Now, from this uniquely objective perspective, what characterizes, according to Saint Thomas, statements said to be equally probable, or less probable than others, is their inability to influence assent. This is reserved for

⁷⁰ See Mondino, *Studio storico-critico sul Sistema morale di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori*, 105.

⁷¹ This is the “negative doubt” spoken of by modern theologians. See Reginald Beaudouin, *Tractatus de conscientia* (trans. Matthew K. Miner in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*), p. 210.

⁷² This is the case of “positive doubt” in modern theologians. See *ibid.*

⁷³ *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

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what is more probable. Only here do we find a rational motive that effectively inclines the mind to make a judgment, even though this motive is insufficient for producing an absolute determination in the mind. It is here, then, that we find true probability, which is defined precisely, in the final analysis, by the effective power to provoke adherence. In the case of contradictory statements, the probable is only realized in the form of a subjective judgment, an opinion, if it has the greatest probability, i.e. an effective preponderance of arguments based on signs or testimonies in its favor.

But, our modern probabilists will say: the more probable has as its obligatory correlative the less probable, and the less probable can have serious foundations capable of influencing the mind. It is therefore, they say, also solidly probable, and, consequently, “probabiliority” is not a property of probability.

However, in view of what we have said heretofore, to dispel this illusion. From the perspective of the probable as defined by its effectiveness in generating approval (and this is our outlook here too), *there is no such thing as the “less probable.”* There is only the probable, pure and simple. If but for a moment we were to admit the existence of an adverse probability, even a lesser one, that would be the end of the more probable, for the probable, as such, being what is worthy of approval, not *in actu signato*, but *in actu exercito*, the less probable, by the very fact that it is probable, is, by definition, actually entitled to provoke the mind’s adhesion. And so, we would have two opposing arguments that are both effectively deserving of approbation. Only one step remains to be taken, and since whatever is effective has all that it needs to act, there is no reason not to take that step: we would therefore have within the mind the realization of two contradictory judgments. This is impossible and absurd; therefore, one of the two arguments is not effective; therefore, one of the two “probables” is *not* probable... It’s not hard to tell which.

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This is what Saint Thomas expresses in an admirable sentence expressed with formal precision: “Testimony has probable, not infallible, certainty. Therefore, whatever that brings to bear probability regarding the opposed position renders such testimony inefficacious.”⁷⁴ In other words, the probable is no longer effective as soon as you can set a true probability in opposition to it. It thereby loses that relative certainty, that *certitudo probabilis*, which made it a legitimate cause of assent, capable, for example, of being, in matters of fact, authoritative before the law.⁷⁵ It is no use saying that the reasons on which it relied remain the same, that given the solidity of such reasons, absolute probability has also remained solid. In itself, perhaps, *in actu signato*—but not in its effectiveness over one’s judgment, not *in ordine ad assensum*.⁷⁶ However, what is an inert probability, one that is enclosed, and sealed up, a prisoner of the object? It cannot be that which is approaching the truth, the likeness of this absolute truth, which in itself ravishes the mind. All it took was the appearance of any other probability, precisely because it was a probability, to destroy the probative force of the one that it heretofore possessed. This is the sign that the true probable does not suffer, alongside and in front of itself, the presence of any true contrary probability—*true*, that is to say, *efficacious upon the mind*. This is the literal interpretation of the text quoted by Saint Thomas.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 70, a. 3.

⁷⁵ The question (*ST II-II*, q. 70) from which this quotation is taken deals with testimony in court.

⁷⁶ See Reginald Beaudouin, *Tractatus de conscientia* (trans. Matthew K. Miner in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*), p. 295–302. Regarding this entire question, one must read Concina, *Ad theologiam christianam Apparatus*, bk. 3, diss. 1, ch. 4.

⁷⁷ Compare this with the text of *De Veritate*, Q. 14, a. 1, quoted above. Cf. Mondino, *Studio storico-critico sul Sistema morale di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori*, 105.

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Therefore, let us conclude that an objective excellence and preponderance, excluding any currently acting rational value,⁷⁸ in other words, a current or virtual *probabiliority*⁷⁹ is the characteristic property of true probability.

By way of epilogue, we would like to connect this conclusion to what we said concerning the logical dignity of probability. What constitutes this dignity—this cannot be repeated too often—is that probability positively tends towards absolute truth, that it is its precursor, its true likeness. Now, let us place a mind in front of two unequally probable parties. In the presence of this unequal approximation of truth, can he really judge that the likeness of truth is on the less probable side? What scientist, what businessman, what upright mind, faced with such an alternative, would preferentially seek the truth on the side that presents itself as being less close to the truth, i.e. as actually being more likely to be false?⁸⁰ What are we to think of logicians who set up a system of equal treatment for both sides? Does it not pervert the notion of probability to claim that, in a normal way, the less probable (gratuitously assumed to be probable) shares with the more probable, on equal footing, the logical function of serving as the immediate rule of intellectual assent in contingent matters?

⁷⁸ As Fr. Timothé Richard rightly observes: when faced with the probable there are metaphysical *possibilities* of adverse probabilities—since contingency means the metaphysical possibility of the opposite—but there is no actual adverse probability. *Opinans... existimat POSSIBILE aliter se habere* (see note 22 above). However, the possible is nothing if not less than that which is acting. Act alone acts. (Or, le possible n’est rien moins qu’agissant. L’acte seule agit.) Cf. Timothée Richard, “L’assentiment dans la croyance et l’opinion,” *Revue Thomiste* 18 / 10 NS (September 1910): 590—617 (here, 606).— Mondino, *Studio storico-critico sul Sistema morale di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori*, 107.

⁷⁹ Virtual, if the probable is solitary. Such virtuality is actualized if it is put in the presence of a contrary proposition.

⁸⁰ See Pierre Mandonnet, “De la valeur des théories sur la probabilité morale,” *Revue Thomiste* 10 (1902): 315–335 (here, 334). On several points, I have drawn my inspiration from this excellent article.

Translator’s note: Also see Timothée Richard, *Le probabilisme moral et philosophie* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1922); Pierre Mandonnet, “Le décret d’Innocent XI contre le probabilisme,” *Revue Thomiste*, Vol. 9 (1901): 460–481, 520–539, and 652–673; Mandonnet, “La position du probabilisme dans l’Eglise catholique,” *Revue Thomiste*, Vol. 10 (1902): pp. 5–20.

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Anyone who has carefully pondered the facts of the matter as brought to light in this article—whose sole claim is to objectively set forth the lessons offered by reality itself—will be led ineluctably to hold that the improbable positions expressed by those who unjustly hold the fine name of probabilists must be attributed to preoccupations that are foreign to logic.

In all cases where there is an open contest between opposing statements, the property of the probable is *greater probability*. In cases of solitary probability [that is, a statement by itself without opposition to another], it is *serious probability*, the fact that it involves positively approaching the true, declared by arguments founded on reason and capable, therefore, of actively making an impression upon reason. Not to accept these consequences would be tantamount to arguing that the remarkable logical instrument placed at the disposal of the human intellect in its advance along the path of truth in difficult and yet most important matters can legitimately function in reverse and, normally, while pushing onward toward the truth, take the path that heads in the direction of falsehood!

In the next section, we will look at the subjective realization of the probable in *opinion*, and the form that, under certain conditions, this realization can take, namely *probable certainty*.

III. Opinion-Assent

Having set forth the definition, subject, causes or “causative factors,” and [metaphysical] property of the probable, we must now study the subjective reaction of the intellect under its influence. This is what we will call *Opinion-Assent*.

In harmony with the previous section’s divisions—and for the same reasons—we here divide the study of Opinion-Assent into three parts:

1° Definition of Opinion.

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- 2° Its subject and subjective causes or “causative factors”
- 3° Its property: *formido errandi, fear of error.*

1. Definition of Opinion.

Opinion is commonly regarded as being the act by which the mind corresponds to the appearance of a given probability within the field of one’s knowledge. This correspondence between probability and opinion is so generally accepted that we often mistake one for the other: we say, “an opinion” in order to thereby designate the object of the opinion, namely, a probable statement. This is a specific case of the general law of transposition that governs the relationship between faculties and their proper objects. Thus, for example, we say “faith” to signify the content of the object of faith and “science” to designate the object of the intellectual virtue of science. This sort of solidarity thus testifies that the probable is the proper object of opinion. The real definition of opinion, or at least its formal element, immediately follows from such customary speech: opinion has the probable as *its proper object*.

But how does opinion envision this object? Does it do so through an act of intuition, a simple gaze by the mind, or rather, by an act of judgment? The probable must itself tell us how it wishes to be considered. Opinion, as the mental aftereffect of the appearance of the probable, must reflect, in the form of a subjective attitude, the modalities of its objective mover. The law of parallelism between action and passion demands it.⁸¹

Now, as we saw earlier, the probable presents itself concretely as a proposition, as a statement involving a connection between two terms. The subjective reaction required by such an object can only be a judgment. If the mind were content to see by immediate intuition [i.e., through the first operation of the intellect] the terms present to it, the mind would meet the

⁸¹ Thus, Saint Thomas concludes that, since the object of faith is a proposition, the act of faith is a judgment and an assent, not an intuition. See *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1.

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demands of its object. It must in turn, and subjectively, join together what must be joined together and separate what must be separated. Any objective composition or division of terms is truth in potency, postulating its actualization in and through a formal judgment by the mind. It is up to the mind to declare that the composition or division is true or false, which is called *judging*. Opinion is therefore a *judgment*.⁸²

Let us push even further the regressive method from subject to object, which is our guiding thread, a step further.⁸³ And let us delve into the intimate characteristics of opinion, taking as our guiding light the characteristics of the objective probable under which opinion is actualized.

As we saw earlier, a probable statement involves two elements that appear to be in conflict, though they are intimately fused together within it. This state of internal distension is characteristic of the probable: on the one hand, the probable statement has a positive, accentuated truth value. It is a *likely statement* [*vraisemblable*],⁸⁴ i.e. close to the full truth. On the other hand, it is *contingent*, containing some kind of possibility that it may be false.

Let us trace out how these two objective modalities reverberate within the act of the subject who strives to intellectually assimilate the probable.

A. The influence of verisimilitude of the probable on opinion. The positive truth value that the probable claims for itself is matched by the mind’s adherence and assent. The mind has

⁸² **Translator’s note:** Note, therefore, the distinction between a complex statement and the judgment related to it.

⁸³ See the paragraph starting “It is from this particular angle of methodological logic that I would like to take up the question” in the first part of this article.

⁸⁴ **Translator’s note:** In this second article, I will mostly translate variables on *vraisemblable* using expressions related to “likely”. On several occasions in the previous article, I used “verisimilar” (sometimes with accompanying parallelisms in apposition), due to certain etymological points Fr. Gardeil made regarding “similarity to the truth”.

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only one law: to equal itself to reality, to truth. When the truth passes within its reach, “Adsum,” it answers “Here I am!” Now, there is truth in the probable. There’s a truth that comes from its important ties to reality, a truth that, at the moment of its contact with the mind, has left far behind the false verisimilitude and improbability of the less probable. The contest—if it ever took place—is over. The preponderance has been asserted. And, on the dialectical battlefield, all that remains is that which is like unto the true. How can the mind fail to give it a positive assent—measured by the preponderance of its objective truth? Here too, the law of equal action and reaction must run its course. Opinion is therefore an assent, a positive affirmation.

I do not wish to return to the topic concerning the lamentable confusion that has allowed some minds think that an opinion is something ultimately akin to doubt. I stressed this point sufficiently in the previous section.⁸⁵—It is, nonetheless, useful to mark out (from the perspective of the subject, and not, as in our earlier discussions, from that of the object⁸⁶) the reason why we wish to separate ourselves from these baleful theories of pseudo-probabilism.

Instead of considering the probable within the very reality of the life of the mind, it has been conceived in terms of an ideal, abstract mind. Real intelligence is essentially a living order to *What Is*, to the absolute truth. This has been overlooked [by those who enter the field of probabilist calculations]. The mind has been transmuted into a recorder of probabilities, something like the referee at a sports match, noting the blows struck by contradictory abstract probabilities and awarding points with benevolent impartiality.

This was, no more, no less, to forget the gravitational pull of this sanctuary, the immanent finality of intellectual labor. Indeed, what counts for a mind ordered to absolute truth is not what

⁸⁵ See the section “The Real Definition of the Probable” in the first part of this article.

⁸⁶ See the paragraph starting “To adhere: but to what?” in the first part of this article.

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is probable for such and such a reason, under such and such an aspect, relative to such and such another likeness. The road to error—the hell of the mind—is paved with such relative probabilities. The probability that counts is the one that appeals on behalf of its relation to absolute truth. And it is obvious why this is the case: the mind seeks *that which is*, purely and simply. Only probability concerning *what is*, concerning the absolute truth, is entitled to its consideration. Everything else is a mere curiosity for it, a chance occurrence that has nothing to tempt the objectivity of its habits. Now, the probability of the absolute truth is necessarily unique: it is what clutches hold to the truth as close as possible; in scholastic terminology, it is the ultimate preparatory disposition for the indivisible form that is truth. Consequently, a mind that is essentially passive towards absolute truth, as ours is, is necessarily impressed by probability; it leans towards it with all the weight of its own ordering to absolute truth, which attracts it in and through probability, its reflection and image of its face. But what is this inclination without an efficacious counterweight, if not assent?

If we truly grasp this point, we will then understand the expressions in which Saint Thomas constantly returns to the affirmative side of opinion. In opinion, he says, the mind is inclined more towards one side than towards the other.⁸⁷ The opining person accepts one of the two alternatives.⁸⁸ Elsewhere, he makes Aristotle's words his own: “While we can imagine at pleasure, we cannot opine at will.”⁸⁹ And why, we might ask, if not because opinion is related, as effect to cause, with a preponderance of truth?—Here, he establishes that opinion is already no longer research, but an affirmation, (*enunciatio*), and the one who truly opines holds that his

⁸⁷ See *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

⁸⁸ Ibid. See *ST I–II*, q. 67, a. 3.

⁸⁹ *In III De Anima*, lect. 4.

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opinion is true.⁹⁰ And elsewhere, he argues that opinion is an intellectual determination, whose regulating norm is truth, that to deviate from this rule is to commit an intellectual sin⁹¹ and, finally, that opinion is a kind of assent.⁹²

B. Influence of the contingency of the probable on opinion. The contingency of opinion corresponds to the contingency of probable truth.⁹³ In our earlier discussions, we presented the three modes of contingency pertaining to the probable: contingent matter, incapable of being the object of absolutely certain knowledge; matter that is necessary in itself, though apprehended with the aid of signs that do not reach to the depths of things, their profound or decisive reasons; or a necessary matter, though grasped imperfectly, as a result of the imperfection on the part of the mind grasping it. In all three cases, at the moment when it activates the mind, the intelligible does not have the absolute determination that reduces intellectual potency [to act] and leads to adherence. “It is of the very nature of opinion,” says Saint Thomas, “that what is esteemed to be such or such is likewise esteemed to be able to be otherwise.”⁹⁴ And this is so even while the mind esteems it to be true, as the corrected text in the Leonine edition declares even more expressly than the old text: *De ratione opinionis est quod id quod quis existimat, existimet possibile aliter se habere.*⁹⁵

What is this possibility? What is its cause? Could it not be opposing probabilities, which, without being able to tip the balance right now, at least delay and counteract its inclination?

⁹⁰ See *In IV Ethic*, lect. 8.

⁹¹ See *ibid.*

⁹² See *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 4.

⁹³ See *ST I*, q. 79, q. 9, a. 3: “However, (the intellect) imperfectly knows contingent things, just as they themselves have imperfect being [*esse*] and truth.”

⁹⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 4.

⁹⁵ The texts published prior to the Leonine edition had *id quod est opinatum* instead of *id quod quis existimat*. The opposition of the two estimates in opposite directions was less pronounced and less actual.

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By no means, because—and this point cannot be repeated too often—*the possible* is not the same thing as *the probable*. The possibility in question is the possibility inherent in all contingency. Since the proposition I accept as true by opinion-assent is a contingent proposition, absolutely speaking, it can be false. Such a possibility simply means that we are not currently dealing with a self-evident manifestation of the absolute truth.

And here is tangible proof of the point: normally, in every process of discovery, in every *inventio*, that really progresses toward its goal, the probable (being defined as that which really approaches absolute truth) leads to the absolute truth itself, *est via ad scientiam*. Whenever things go their normal way, the formulation expressed as an opinion is ultimately consecrated as the formulation expressed by science. Now, when scientific knowledge is thus brought about, it is quite clear that there is no longer any real probability against it. And there was, therefore, none before either. The possibility of error contained in the statement of opinion, now having become a scientific truth, did not imply the existence of any opposed probability. The possibility of error inherent in opinion comes simply from the fact that opinion is not yet science, although it tends towards it and often becomes it. It reminds us that, in matters of truth, as in everything else, the relative, however important, is never the absolute.

But, the objection will be raised: what is possible sometimes happens: *Quod est possibile esse, aliquando est*. Logically, then, there will be cases when the possibility of error inherent in opinion-assent will be actualized, when error will be discovered, when the contrary opinion that you declared was improbable and nil will, in fact, replace its rival.

In fact, this is how things sometimes turn out. The contingency of opinion translates into the appearance or reviviscence of adverse probabilities.

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And, the objection continues: in the latter case, it is not difficult for us to say why this reviviscence took place. While I adhered to the opinion that I considered probable, I did not fail to see in its surroundings opposed motives that were sufficiently well-founded for me to have considered them probable, before deeming them outmoded. It is simply the case that such motives can now take over anew, either because they now appear in a better light or even, without any intrinsic change, simply because the supplanting opinion has found itself for some reason, newly uncovered, in a previously bad position. And therefore, on its own, the opinion previously deemed improbable had not ceased to retain its probability.

And thus: the contingency or possibility of error inherent in opinion often covers over the existence of probabilities in the opposite direction.

In response: 1° It is certain that opinion, because it is contingent, does not exclude *the possibility* of contrary probabilities. He who concedes what is more also concedes what is less. Now, contingency in matters of truth is nothing other than a possibility of error, and therefore a possibility of contrary truth—and, therefore, *a fortiori*, a possibility of contrary probabilities. Otherwise, contingency would mean nothing.

But it is no less certain that the contingency of opinion does not, of itself, imply the existence of opposite probabilities. And, as we already said, in proof of this is the fact that opinion is the natural prelude to science. To assert that the contingency of opinion necessarily entails opposing probabilities is a baseless assumption.

In order for an alleged probability opposed to an assent of opinion to acquire the reality that this assent denies to it, something more than the contingency of opinion needs to be invoked: we need to provide a positive proof, with all the new costs associated with that, for the existence of such probability. Such a proof does not imply contradiction, so long as opinion has not yet

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become science.⁹⁶ But a chasm separates non-contradiction and existence, logical possibility and real possibility resulting from the presence of real and effective causes of assent. *Actori incumbit probatio*: let the alleged candidate for opinion-assent prove himself. That’s all we ask.

But, it will be said: in some cases it does prove itself; and just as you conclude from the fact of the transformation of opinion into science that the contingency of an opinion does not always imply the existence or the real possibility of contrary opinions, so too can one conclude, based upon the fact of the substitution of a new, previously neglected or rejected opinion in place of a reigning opinion that the contingency inherent in opinion entails, in certain cases, this existence or this real possibility and not merely a pure logical possibility.

This objection leads us to a second and definitive solution.

Therefore, I respond: 2° Yes, in some cases, a new opinion does indeed replace another opinion. But why is this? Quite simply, it is because, *per accidens*, we had judged to be probable what in fact was not probable. *Errare humanum est*. Similar errors occur in scientific and even metaphysical matters. Sometimes we reason wrongly or judge to be demonstrated something that, in fact, has not been.⁹⁷ This does not prevent science and metaphysics from being science and metaphysics.

The same applies to opinion. There are, in fact, false opinions, wrongly assented to on the basis of merely apparent probabilities. As things go, this in fact happens far more frequently in opinion than in science. This is due to the contingency of the matter attributed to probability and

⁹⁶ See *In III De Anima*, lect. 5: “Someone rids himself of a true opinion in three ways: first, when realities change... Second, when he has forgotten the former opinion; and third, when he no longer believes what he previously believed, having changed *due some other reason* [having come to light].”

⁹⁷ See *In Boet., de Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 4: “Although a demonstration [strictly so called] never concludes at something false, nonetheless man falls short therein because he believes that something is a demonstration when, in fact, it is not.

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that of the signs that are its benchmarks—the easy access that opinion offers, as we shall see later, to the interventions of the will. All this does not prevent opinion from being, *per se*, the normal prelude to scientific truth, the unswerving path that leads to science. If there are exceptions, we don’t care about them. In any order of things, *failures* are the inevitable price to pay for the promotion of a better good.⁹⁸ *Natura deficit in paucioribus*, nature fails in a few cases: that’s already something. Science, which in itself is infallible, immediately upon being realized in the mind then gives way to sophistry. How could opinion not be exposed to such accidents?⁹⁹

Therefore, whenever we can establish that one opinion has given way to another, this is a sign that the first was merely an apparent opinion. The cause of the reversal is not the contingency of the opinion, but simply the total absence of the value that makes up opinion itself. This is a common and vulgar accident, which can befall any perfection, which passes out of the region of the abstract and essences in order to be realized in the concrete.

In itself, opinion remains, despite its contingency, a positively true assent and, therefore, a real intellectual perfection, enriching the human mind with an entire province subject to

⁹⁸ See *De Malo*, q. 16, a. 6: “A false opinion is a kind of defective operation by the intellect just as a monstrous birth is a kind of defective operation of the soul... However, a defective operation always proceeds from the defect in some principle, just a birth defect proceeds from some defect in the seed. Hence, it is necessary that a false estimation proceeds from a defect in some cognitional principle.”

⁹⁹ It is in this sense that the Dialecticians discuss what they call *opinions*, i.e. statements that are often false in themselves but which have received the assent of others: “This does not hold: ‘The assent is certain, therefore it is true,’ although in our days among dialecticians it is considered good... Hence Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.3 says: ‘some assent to their false opinions no less than others do to their scientific knowledge.’ And Aristotle would have referred to those false assents as faith (Soto, *loc. cit.* p. 127 recto, col. 2)

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probability, inaccessible to science. Even in the domain of science, opinion projects its investigations and thus prepares or prolongs the full evidence of absolute truth.¹⁰⁰

* * *

Saint Thomas always has in mind these two poles involved in the question of opinion: *assent* and *contingency*. But, depending on the aspect of the problem under consideration, he sometimes insists on one side, and at other times, on its opposite. And those are not accustomed to his works through long and devoted reading are often brought to a halt by these divergences of expression. Reading the passages where the Holy Doctor insists on contingency, some see a denial of the assent value of opinion, or even neo-probabilist professions of faith. Therefore, as an epilogue to this section, it will be useful to give a harmonized view of all the remarks made by St. Thomas that have a representative value. We will omit doublets. These texts can be divided into three categories:

1° There are those texts that seem to exclude assent: “He accepts one part with fear of the other, and therefore does not assent.” (*Accipit unam partem cum formidine alterius, et ideo non assentit*).¹⁰¹ “He who doubts does not express assent since he does not adhere to one side more than the other... Similarly, neither does the person who opines, since his acceptance is not strengthened regarding the other side” (*Dubitans non habet assensum cum non inhaereat uni parti magis quam alii... Similiter nec opinans, cum non firmetur ejus acceptio circa alteram partem*).¹⁰² “It belongs to the very notion of opinion that one thing is accepted with fear that the other position might be true; hence it does not involve firm adherence.” (*De ratione opinionis est*

¹⁰⁰ See Ambroise Gardeil, “La notion du Lieu théologique,” *RSPT* 2 (1908): 55–56 (pages 10–11 in the Gabalda offprint edition).

¹⁰¹ *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. I.

¹⁰² *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

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*quod accipiatur unum cum formidine alterius, unde non habet firmam adhaesionem).*¹⁰³

“Opinion does not involve firm assent, for as the Philosopher says, it is something weak and feeble according to the Philosopher.” (*Opinio non habet firmum assensum. Est enim quiddam debile et infirmum*).¹⁰⁴ “That which inclines toward the formation of opinion in whatsoever way, or even strongly, is not a sufficient inductive reason; hence, it does not compel, nor through this can there be a perfect judgment concerning those things to which it assents.” (*Quod inclinatur ad opinandum qualitercumque vel etiam fortiter non est sufficiens inductivum rationis: unde non cogit nec per hoc potest esse perfectum iudicium de his quibus assentitur.*)¹⁰⁵

None of these texts absolutely states that opinion is not assent. The first, which is the most radical, is followed, in the body of the same article, by the following explanation: “The person who is opining has cogitation without perfect assent, though he has a kind of assent. (*Opinans habet cogitationem sine assensu perfecto, sed habet aliquid assensus.*)”¹⁰⁶ So what is the source of the absolute denial: “And therefore, he does not assent (*et ideo non assentit*)”)? Quite simply the fact that St. Thomas is speaking here under the influence of Avicenna and Isaac Israeli, who derived *assentire* from *sententia*,¹⁰⁷ and defined the latter as: “A distinct and *utterly certain* conception of the other side of a contradiction.”¹⁰⁸ Having admitted this absolute concerning the assent of opinion, all that is left for us is to conclude with Saint Thomas: “Through assent (namely, utterly certain assent) belief is separated... both from doubt and from

¹⁰³ *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 4.

¹⁰⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 9.

¹⁰⁵ *In Boetium de Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1.

¹⁰⁶ *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ See Avicenna, *Metaph*, bk. 2, ch. 4 and bk. 8, ch. 6.

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opinion. (*Per assensum [scilicet certissimum] separatur credere... et a dubitatione et ab opinione.*)”¹⁰⁹

In the other texts, the reader will note that, no matter how accentuated the reservations, we always there find an expression noting the positive character of the assent of opinion—“*accipit unam partem; acceptio circa alteram partem*, etc.—whereas doubt is declared to have no kind of assent. But this assent is neither perfect nor absolutely firm, which is the same as saying that it is contingent.

The word *formido*, if understood as being a fear intrinsic to opinion, means nothing other than the contingency of the act of opinion, as Domingo de Soto points out in his penetrating commentary on the Analytics, to which we shall return shortly. And the reason for this is obvious. Fear is a volitional phenomenon. Strictly speaking, an intellect does not fear. If its judgment is not perfect, it has apprehensions—but, through thought. We will soon consider this intellectual apprehension, and there we will see that it indicates nothing that isn’t contained in the idea of contingent assent. Moreover, I do not deny that volitional fear is normally found, not in opinion (which is an act of the mind) but, rather, in the person who opines, on account of the part that the will can have in this act. And this is why I consider it below as a property consequent to opinion, though extrinsic to its essence.¹¹⁰

As for Aristotle’s epithet, “*Opinio est quiddam debile et infirmum*,” it declares nothing more than what they are intended to assert, namely that the assent of opinion is not firm, in the

¹⁰⁹ *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1.—*De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1, *in fine*.

¹¹⁰ Those who invoke the quoted text (*De ratione opinionis est quod accipiatur unum cum formidine alterius*) in order to thereby to make volitional fear an intrinsic element of opinion fail to take into account the fact that the word *cum* does not necessarily designate an intrinsic element. The definition holds, even though *formido* is an extrinsic property, provided that, by its nature, it is attached to the essence. See “§3 The Property of Opinion: *formido errandi*” below.

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sense of being not necessary: *non cogit*. Their depreciatory intention is simply a manifestation of what every true philosopher feels when he compares the relative and the absolute. The relative nonetheless does remain what it is.

2. Next there is a group of texts that are more worrying at first glance, attributing to opinion either *a*) movements of doubt or *b*) an assent of simple preference, seeming to include an opposite assent.

a) “A man opines concerning that to which he adheres when his understanding does not terminate to one thing, while there continues to remain a movement towards the opposed statement. (*Homo opinatur illud cui adhaeret et non terminatur intellectus eius ad unum, quia semper remanet motus ad contrarium*).”¹¹¹ “They indeed accept one side, though they always remain in doubt concerning the opposite. (*Accipit quidem unam partem, tamen semper dubitat de opposite*).”¹¹² “And if this is with doubt and fear of the other side, this will be an opinion. (*Et si quidem hoc sit cum dubitatione et formidine alterius partis, erit opinio*).”¹¹³ These texts say more than a simple possibility of error. They point to positive acts of the mind, based on this possibility, and moving in the opposite direction to the probable, to the point of generating doubt. Yet these contrary movements, and above all this doubt, seem to be in contradiction with true assent.

However, St. Thomas does not judge this to be so, for he immediately interprets both texts to mean that assent is imperfect because it is accompanied by fear. Now, we know what he means by *fear*, *formido*.

¹¹¹ *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1.

¹¹² *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

¹¹³ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 9.

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Clearly, there are movements of the mind in the opining person that run counter to his assent. But this is due, as St Thomas says, to the fact that his intellect is not determined *ad unum* by opinion (as it is by science). This does not prevent him from assenting: “Homo opinatur *illud cui adhaeret*, et non terminatur intellectus ejus ad unum, quia semper remanet motus ad contrarium.” The same phenomenon occurs in faith, which is nevertheless a certain assent, and even in supernatural faith, because it has in common with opinion the fact that it is a thought that has not yet found its intellectual terminus, *cogitatio*.¹¹⁴ “The believer experiences some movement of doubt due to the fact that his intellect does not of itself terminate in the vision of the intelligible object. (*Credenti accidit aliquis motus dubitationis ex hoc quod intellectus ejus non est secundum se terminatus in sui intelligibilis visione.*)¹¹⁵ It is therefore inappropriate to use such texts to argue against the assent value of opinion.

Moreover, upon closer examination, these texts reveal that the doubt they portray is not what St. Thomas commonly understands by doubt. This “doubt” is one-sided: *motus ad contrarium,—dubitat de oppositâ,—cum dubitatione et formidine alterius partis*. Its terminus is not the object of the opinion, but its opposite. True doubt, on the other hand, concerns both sides of the alternative: “Faith... differs from opinion, which accepts one of two opposed statements with fear of the other, and from doubt, which wavers between two contraries. (*Fides... ab opinione differt, quae accipit alterum oppositorum cum formidine alterius, et a dubitatione quae fluctuat inter duo contraria.*)”¹¹⁶ “The doubter does not give assent, since he does not adhere to one side more than the other; similarly, neither does the person holding an opinion, since his acceptance is not strengthened around one [side]. (*Dubitans non habet assensum cum non*

¹¹⁴ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 1 - In III Sent., d. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1, *in fine*.

¹¹⁵ In III Sent. dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 3, ad 2. This is discussing supernatural faith.

¹¹⁶ In Boetium. De Trin., q. 3, a. 1.

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inhaereat uni parti magis quam alii; similiter nec opinans, cum non firmetur eius acceptio circa alterum.)”¹¹⁷ The difference is clear. The doubter succumbs to temptation. He focuses successively on the two parties involved, without assenting to either. The person who opines remains at his point of attachment [to the truth]. Nonetheless, his thoughts are stirred, pushing him to the opposite side: but in order for him to do what? To express a contrary assent? Not at all: *Dubitat de opposita*. This is not adherence. Thus, the person who opines neither doubts what he is adhering to, nor adheres to the opposite alternative. Ultimately, his opinion is an adherence: “Man opines regarding that to which he adheres. (*Homo opinatur illud cui adhaeret.*)”¹¹⁸ “He who assents determines his intellect to one side of the contradiction, thereby determining it. (*Qui assentit intellectum ad alterutram partem contradictionis determinat.*)”¹¹⁹

b) “The intellect assents to something... through a kind of choice volitionally leaning towards one side more than the other. And if this takes place with doubt and fear of the other side, one will have an opinion. (*Intellectus assentit alicui... per quamdam electionem voluntarie declinans in unam partem magis quam in aliam. Et si quidem hoc sit cum dubitatione et formidine alterius, erit opinio.*)”¹²⁰ “Opinion involves a kind of assent, insofar as one adheres more to one side than to the other. (*Opinio habet aliquis assensus in quantum uni adhaeret magis quam alii.*)”¹²¹—We leave the question concerning the will’s participation in the formation of opinion to the next section. We are only noting in these texts what is relevant to our present research. Now, if these expressions—*in unam partem magis quam in aliam, uni magis quam alii*—indicate a preponderance in the assent of opinion, they seem to connote, one might say, an

¹¹⁷ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1, *in fine*.

¹¹⁸ *In III Sent.* dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 4.

¹²¹ *In Sent. loc. cit.* a. 1.

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opposite, weaker assent... If we support one side more than another, we support the other—less, no doubt, but still we do support it.

This interpretation is unfounded. Whenever St. Thomas says that opinion adheres more to one side than to another, he does so in order to situate opinion vis-à-vis doubt, concerning which he said: “The person who is in a state of doubt does not have assent, for he does not adhere to one side more than to the other. (*Dubitans non habet assensum, cum non inhaereat uni parti magis quam alii*).¹²² And elsewhere: “Sometimes the intellect does not lean more towards one side than the other... And this is the disposition of the doubter, who fluctuates between the two sides of a contradiction. (*Quandoque intellectus non inclinatur magis ad unum quam ad aliud... et ista est dubitantis dispositio qui fluctuat inter duas partes contradictionis.*)”¹²³ To dismiss opinion and deny this fluctuation, the imposed formula is: “Opinion adheres more to one of the opposing sides than to the other. (*Intellectus inclinatur magis ad unum quam ad alterum.*)”¹²⁴ This formula is a pure negation of the previous one. Now, for this negation to be effective, it is not necessary for the opining person to have two unequal assents: it suffices that he have only one. This much is clear. And this is why St. Thomas always explains this, *uni magis quam alii*, by the single assent of opinion: “Sometimes the intellect leans more towards one side than to the other, but still, such leaning does not sufficiently move the intellect to determine it totally toward one side. Hence, it accepts one side, while still having doubts concerning the opposite. And this is the disposition of the person who opines. (*Quandoque intellectus inclinatur magis ad unum quam ad alterum sed tamen illud inclinans non sufficienter movet intellectum ad hoc quod determinet ipsum in unam partem totaliter. Unde accipit unam partem, tamen dubitat de*

¹²² *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

¹²³ *In Boetium. De Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1

¹²⁴ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1

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oppositâ. Et haec est dispositio opinantis.)...¹²⁵ *Dubitare de opposita*: this is the assent given to the side to which the opining person is least inclined. Behold how he adheres to that one side less than to the other. What a unique kind of adherence!

3° A seemingly more far-reaching text, though one that is even easier to explain, is this one: “Opinion relates to both the true and the false. (*Opinio se habet ad verum et falsum.*)”¹²⁶ The following text, “Opinion and suspicion can be of both truth and falsehood (*opinio vero et suspicio possunt esse veri et falsi*),”¹²⁷ already brings with itself the corrective of possibility—*possunt*—which brings us back to the possibility of error inherent in the contingency of opinion. But St. Thomas explains himself in a way that leaves no obscurity about his thought: “Since the act of the intellect is good in that it considers the true, it is necessary that a habit existing in the intellect can be a virtue only if it enables the person possessing it to infallibly declare the truth. For this reason, opinion is not an intellectual virtue, but science and understanding are, as is said in the sixth book of the Ethics. (*Cum actus intellectus sit bonus ex hoc quod verum considerat, oportet quod habitus in intellectu existens virtus esse non possit, nisi sit talis quo infallibiliter verum dicatur; ratione cujus opinio non est virtus intellectualis, sed scientia et intellectus, ut dicitur in VI Ethicorum.*)”¹²⁸ “It happens that by opinion and suspicion falsehood is sometimes declared... However, it is against the nature of virtue to be the principle of a bad act. And thus, it is clear that suspicion and opinion cannot be called intellectual virtues. (*Contingit quod opinione et suspicione quandoque dicitur falsum... Est autem contra rationem virtutis, ut sit principium mali actus. Et sic patet quod suspicio et opinio non possunt dici intellectuales virtutes.*)”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ ST I-II, q. 55, a. 4c.

¹²⁶ ST I-II, q. 55, a. 4c.

¹²⁷ ST I-II, q. 57, a. 2, ad 3.

¹²⁸ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 8, c.

¹²⁹ *In VI Ethic*, lect. 3.

Such is my attempt to provide a concordance of the relevant texts in Saint Thomas. I submit it to the judgment of competent Thomists. They may feel the need to provide some remarks on some points of detail. But, on the other hand, I am sure they will recognize that this harmonization leaves no doubt as to the master thread in St. Thomas’s thought concerning this matter: opinion is contingent assent.

2. The subject of opinion and its subjective factors

As St. Thomas says formally: opinion is an act of the speculative intellect—of the possible intellect.¹³⁰ As every immanent act is necessarily received in the faculty that produces it, the immediate subject of opinion is the intellectual power.

But is it the intellectual power alone?

A similar question arises for faith in testimony, and it is commonly resolved in the negative. The act of faith issues from reason in its speculative operation, yet the subject of the virtue of faith is not speculative reason alone but, rather, speculative reason as penetrated by the influence of the will: *non est in intellectu speculativo absolute sed secundum quod subditur imperio voluntatis*.¹³¹ And the reason for this—which, moreover, is something having general application,¹³² applying equally to prudence, temperance, and fortitude—is that, while faith

¹³⁰ *De Verit.*, q. 14, a. 1.—Discursive thought, *cogitatio*, which is the mode of knowledge characteristic of the act of opining, belongs *de iure* to the particular, or cogitative, reason—*pars opinativa*—an internal sense faculty according to Aristotle and Saint Thomas, though, in man, situated on the very borders of the intellectual faculty. See *In III Sent.* dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1, ad 3. Precisely because of this affinity, this mode of knowledge has been transposed to the intellectual part and designates there the act we commonly refer to as *thought*. (Ibid. and *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1, ad 9)

¹³¹ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 4; *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 3, sol. 2.—This state of the intellect, thus moved by the will, should not be confused with practical reason. See *ibid.*, ad 3 and *De Veritate ibidem*.

¹³² See *De Virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 7.

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comes to its consummation in an intellectual act, it originates in an act of the will which is essential to it. Given the obscurity of the object of faith, there would be no intellectual determination without this impulse toward the good. Lacking it, the act of faith cannot be elicited.

Now, the object of opinion is also, if not obscure, at least contingent. On its own, it is powerless to determine the mind. Nonetheless, opinion is a positive adherence. Is not this adherence due to the influence of the will, to a kind of choice, analogous to that of faith? And hence, should not the subject of opinion also be complex—at once an executing intelligence and an imperative will?¹³³

Does Saint Thomas lean in the direction of claiming that opinion has this kind of partially appetitive nature?—In a passage of the *Summa*, which seems to be an *a priori* and synthetic exposition of the various ways in which assent can occur, he expresses himself as follows:

The intellect’s assent is produced in two ways: 1° under the action of the object itself, in cases of self-evident truth (first principles) or inferred truth (scientific conclusions); 2° without sufficient motion on the part of its object and, therefore, as an effect of a volitional choice inclining (this assent) towards one side more than the other. If this is done while hesitating and fearing the other alternative, it will be opinion; if, with certainty and without fear, it will be faith.¹³⁴

This is not an isolated text. In ST I-II, Saint Thomas expresses himself as follows:

If apprehension furnishes data in such a way that the intellect naturally adheres to them—as in the case of first principles—assent or rejection do not lay within our power: they belong to the order of nature... However, there are data that do not produce such a conviction in the intellect that it cannot, for whatever reason, give or withhold its assent, or at least suspend it. In this case, assent or disagreement lays within our power and falls under our command.¹³⁵

¹³³ *Materialiter intellectus, formaliter voluntatis*, if we consider as formal principle that which is the principle actively determining the specification. *Formaliter intellectus, praesupposito actu voluntatis*, if we are considering the specifying object of the act of faith, an object that is, as it were, its form.

¹³⁴ ST II-II, q. 1, a. 4.

¹³⁵ ST I-II, q. 17, a. 6.

Opinion is not explicitly named in this second passage. Nonetheless, it is clearly in the crosshairs, along with faith. As regards the abstract principles involved, this text reproduces what was said in the previous one.

These texts are the only ones where we find in Saint Thomas the idea that opinion formally depends upon the will. The first, truth be told, is very explicit. No text in him contradicts it in an absolute fashion.¹³⁶ Moreover, it allows us to account for the *formido errandi* perpetually attributed to opinion by the Holy Doctor, for we can understand this fear as being a kind of volitional sentiment, which seems more literal. Thus, we cannot, and should not, pass over it before explaining it. It raises two distinct problems:

1° Is intervention by the will *essential* to the assent of opinion?—And if not:

¹³⁶ We are tempted to counterbalance this with the text from the Philosopher: “It is within our power to imagine, whenever we wish... Having an opinion does not depend on us. It must, in fact, declare truth or falsehood” (*De Anima*, 3.3; St. Thomas, lect. 4). However, as St. Thomas observes, this passage simply establishes that the person who utters an opinion does not do so without an objective motive, which is the cause of its truth. By contrast, we can arbitrarily imagine “golden mountains.” And this suffices for distinguishing opinion from imagination, though not enough to exclude the intervention of a will *choosing* between the options presented to it, though *without arbitrariness*, in virtue of certain reasonable motives which are, otherwise, non-necessary.

A text that at first glance seems more affirmative against volitional intervention is this one: “Science and opinion are not influenced by the will, but by reason alone” (*De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 3, ad 5). However, if we compare this with the objection to which Saint Thomas is responding, and with the context, we realize that the absence of volitional influence referred to is the absence of an absolutely necessary volitional intervention. The exercise of the perfect virtues, those that not only give the ability to act well, but to act well effectively (that is, right use), absolutely requires this intervention. Volitional rectification is essential to these virtues, and necessarily prerequisite for them to operate in this way. Science, which only provides the power to think well, not to act, and *a fortiori* opinion, do not require this volitional intervention: in the case of science because, given its self-sufficiency, it admits of no other intervention by the will than that which moves it to exercise it; and in that of opinion, because it is not an intellectual virtue, given its ability to be false. The fact remains, however, that, without requiring the will for its proper use, opinion nonetheless can appeal to it in order to put an end to the indeterminacy that it always seems to have to maintain from a purely intellectual perspective—and this is what Saint Thomas seems to be saying in the passage from the *Summa* quoted above.

2° How can Saint Thomas say that both faith and opinion require the motion of the will, indeed for the same reason (i.e., the object’s motive insufficiency), whereas this motion is *essential* to faith?

A. The will’s intervention in opinion.—“St Thomas’ thought concerning the will’s intervention in opinion must be understood as referring to the *normal* course of things and to what is *self-evident* given the nature of the realities involved. *Intelligitur regulariter et per se ex natura rei.*” Such are the rather enigmatic words of Domingo de Soto in his resolution to this issue.¹³⁷ Moreover, he maintains that this intervention by the will is not essential to opinion, that it allows exceptions, and that it nevertheless habitually belongs to it, always ready to be elicited.¹³⁸

We believe that his thought and that of Saint Thomas can be interpreted as follows:

Adhering to the probable is undoubtedly a purely intellectual act in itself. However, on the other hand, the probable represents a good for the whole man, and we will come to say what kind. As such, it is of interest to the will, the appetite of the complete living being, *appetitus animalis*,¹³⁹ whose function is to be moved by everything that is a good for man and to strive for its realization.

It is first and foremost the good of man as an intelligent being. From this perspective, man aspires to the good of his intellect, which is truth. Through its approximation to truth, the

¹³⁷ De Soto, *In Dial. Arist., Posteriorum*, bk. 1, q. 8 (§ *Quaestio haec, - Resp. ad arg.*), 1554 edition, p. 127 verso, col. 1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, resp. ad 2.

¹³⁹ The will is not, in the proper sense, a natural appetite, *appetitus naturalis*, immanent to any tendency of nature, immanent, for example, to the intellect’s tendency toward truth and of heavy bodies to fall vertically. It is an animal appetite, i.e. a function of the whole living being, dependent on everything of concern (in whatever capacity, partial or total) for the good of the living being. See *ST I*, q. 80, a. 1, with no. 3 of Cajetan’s commentary.

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probable truly represents (albeit in a still relative way) this good for the intellect. To approach the truth is already an intellectual good. It is easy to see why the will cannot be disinterested in this good and why, without intervening in the formal relations between the intelligible object and intellectual knowledge (which substantially constitute opinion-adherence), the will envelops in its self-interested activity the activity of the intellect, in order to promote, preserve, and defend, from its perspective, a truly well-founded opinion. This is a completely external intervention, a juxtaposed activity, which leaves everything in place, while nonetheless, through its resistance to unjustified fears, contributing to the consistency of opinion. This at least furnishes an initial interpretation for the expressions in Soto where he recognizes an intervention by the will as something normal and self-evident, given the nature of opinion.—We might add that, by virtue of its contingency and the temptations that follow, opinion is particularly susceptible to such volitional reinforcement. Science defends itself. By its very nature, opinion is less robust; scruples or unreasonable hesitations can practically rob the intellect of what is, nevertheless, one of its assets. It must be watched over by the faculty that oversees our praxis, the purveyor of the whole of life in its integrity, the will.

But, secondly, by the nature of its content, the object of opinion can interest the will in a very particular way. The probable is a contingent truth; contingent truths have as their object particular beings, and particular beings represent to the being endowed with a will those very goods which are more capable of impressing it, for they are the usual and proximate object of our preoccupations and of its inclinations. Loftier intelligibles represent goods that are undoubtedly nobler, but whose use is less frequent. Hence, it is quite understandable why the human appetite is inclined to follow very closely the progress, successes, or failures of opinion, which is precisely the intelligence-gathering capacity concerned with these connatural goods, and why it

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intervenes at any moment in order to move itself and support a particular opinion with the force of its desire or repugnance. Undoubtedly, as we have seen (with Aristotle), this does not go so far as to give rise to an opinion in the same way that we give free reign to our imagination:¹⁴⁰ in this respect, Saint Thomas notes that an opinion is not formulated in the mind without an objective reason. Nonetheless, as the Philosopher notes a little further on, while the imagination does not set the appetitive passions in motion (since we are aware that they are fictions) the opinion we form, for example, concerning difficulties, or concerning terrible dangers, or desirable things, moves us immediately.¹⁴¹ Why does this happen? Precisely because it is probably real. Opinion, therefore, places the will in relation to goods or evils that are probably real. Is not this of great interest to the faculty of the good?—From this point on, we can see that, *normally and of itself—of itself*, that is to say, not on account of its purely intellectual formation, but because of its habitual content—opinion arouses an appetitive activity.

And thus, without needing to reject what we determined concerning the intrinsically intellectual character of opinion, we can justify St. Thomas’ assertions attributing a normal intervention, *per se, ex natura rei*, to the will in opinion.

On the one hand, in fact, although the probable represents an object of speculation, it cannot free itself from the accompaniment of the objective *ratio* of goodness inherent in the true: the probable is good, because it approaches the absolute good of the intellect; and it is also good because it presents as something real a good of the whole man, all the more deserving of appreciation to the degree that it belongs to contingent realities, the preferred object of the will.

¹⁴⁰ See *In III De Anima*, lect. 4 (versio antiqua): “For this passion (phantasia) exists in us when we so wish... However, to hold an opinion is not within the ambit of our control. It is necessary to speak either falsely or truly.”

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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And so, on this objective side, the probable is penetrated by aspects of goodness, which although they remain external to it, nonetheless are inseparable from it, *per se, ex natura rei*.

On the other hand, although opinion itself is, in itself, a purely intellectual act, it cannot be separated from the man whose act it is. In man in the concrete, *voluntas sequitur intellectum*. Although external to the intellect, the volitional phenomenon necessarily accompanies the appearance of the intelligible, *per se, ex natura rei*. The nature of things is the very functional link between the exercise of the will and the exercise of the intellect, the former’s natural provider. Even if the object offered by the intellect were purely speculative and did not represent a good, the conquest of the truth itself would still be a human good.

But what is a phenomenon that, without belonging to the essence, nevertheless always accompanies it, is necessarily connected to it, and flows from the essence, *EX natura rei*. This is what we call a characteristic property, or a proper effect, which amounts to the same thing. It is not, as the scholastics say, *per se, primo modo*; rather, it is *per se, secundo aut quarto modo*.¹⁴²

Thus, for both objective and subjective reasons, the cooperation of the will with opinion is a property external to the essence of opinion, though characteristic of opinion. And this is certainly the meaning of the texts of Saint Thomas cited above.

B. The will’s intervention in faith and opinion. Points of agreement and of difference.—In the text we attempted to explain, the cooperation of the will is seen as a phenomenon common to faith and opinion. Now, the will is essential to faith; the motion of the will influences the

¹⁴² For the meaning of these expressions, see St. Thomas’s commentary *In I Posterior Analytics*, lect. 10.—Cf. Soto, *Op. cit.* ch. 4 (De modis per se, p. 91).

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specification of the act of faith¹⁴³ and, thus, reaches the essence of the act, since every tendency, every act in particular, derives its essential determination from the object to which it tends.

This invites us to clarify the role of the various volitional interventions found in faith, opinion, and even science. We will leave aside the motion of the will in exercise, namely, the simple application of the intellectual power to these various acts, as indeed to all human acts.

The interventions we are here considering are two in number: one common to faith and opinion and found to some degree in science; the other reserved for faith and testimony.

A. *Common* intervention.—This occurs whenever the object of apprehension evokes the idea of a good. This is the case for the moral sciences, religious faith, and opinion, whose object belongs to the order of contingencies, akin to the order of practical realities. The cause of this volitional intervention is the well-known psychological law: *voluntas sequitur intellectum*.

We must, however, note a difference in the ways in which the good acts on the will, depending on whether it accompanies scientific knowledge, opinion, or faith.

As far as science is concerned, the effect produced is a simple agreement of will, resulting in an active reaction that makes us consent more strongly to the object presented, and adds to scientific adherence that extrinsic supplement which makes for scientific convictions. Science, in fact, does not lend itself to motor reactions affecting the relationship between subject and object.

In opinion, there is the same fundamental attitude of the will. However, because of the contingency involved in the assent of opinion, we understand that the reverberation of appetite has more marked effects. Without changing the intrinsic relations between subject and object

¹⁴³ See *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 7c: “The will commands [*imperat*] the intellect not only as regards the performance of its act but also as regards the determination of its object, for at the will’s command (*imperio*), the intellect assents to a determinate belief.”

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(since opinion is essentially speculative in nature, and because it is inherently impossible to have opinions merely at will), the will reinforces and supports with its preferences the opinion that pleases it, for reasons of its own, which are foreign to the speculative plausibility of the opinion itself, and naturally, it does the same in the opposite direction for opinions that displease it.

This appetitive reverberation can also be found in the act of faith. “We experience,” says Soto, “that where evidence does not impose itself, affection takes on sovereign importance, some believing in Saint Augustine, others in Saint Jerome, others in Saint Thomas, etc.... When we are fond of a doctor, we are more likely to agree with his opinion than with that of another, on equal grounds.”¹⁴⁴

This special kind of appetitive reaction takes place, in faith as in opinion, because of their lack of evidence. Here is a kind of invitation and request for volitional supplements.

And we must here note that these supplements do not indifferently labor on behalf of truth or error. When they do not distort one’s judgment, and when their objective reasons are sound, they exercise in the direction of true goods and can thus help to ensure our possession of the truth. The entire doctrine concerning the formation of moral conscience, in those difficult matters that give rise only to opinion, derives from this observation, as does the doctrine of the moral substitutes of credibility.¹⁴⁵ The verdict rendered by prudence must first and foremost take into account objective realities, the elements of good and evil that appear in the object, but once likeliness (*le vraisemblable*) has been obtained, it must be empowered by reflex principles¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ See Soto, *In I Poster*, q. 8, *ed. cit.*, p. 127, verso, col. 1 and 2.

¹⁴⁵ See Ambroise Gardeil, *La Crédibilité et apologétique* (1908 ed.), p. 97.

¹⁴⁶ **Translator’s note:** He is here referring to the general principles used in the casuist tradition for steadying one’s judgment in difficult matters. (And, as I have argued elsewhere, e.g., in my introduction to *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments*, there are also no doubt more specific principles. I say this in view to even what Beaudouin says in the *De conscientia* edited by

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belonging the practical order, to serve as a categorical rule for an action that can only be categorical. The fulcrum for this supreme rectification is to be found in uprightness of the will’s intention. Therefore, we can easily see how, when firm and lofty, this intention can give rise to initiatives, directions, and forward impulses that legitimately complement speculative assurances, without ever absolutely replacing them.

This element, shared by both faith and opinion, is what St Thomas calls *appetitus quidam boni repromissi* in supernatural faith.¹⁴⁷ Of course, in the latter case, the appetite for the good, because of its supernaturality, offers a peerless kind of guarantee, one that neither human faith nor opinion shares. In arguing that the volitional motion in question is common to opinion and faith, even supernatural faith, I am retaining the differences. My point is simply this: in all three cases, on the one hand, the object is not self-evident, whatever might be the reason for this lack of evidence—insufficiency of motives in opinion, or obscurity in faith. This inevitability authorizes the will to undertake initiatives that cannot be found in science. On the other hand, motives belonging to the order of the good explain, by virtue of a uniform psychological mechanism, the extrinsic intervention of the will. I would add that, under certain conditions, these volitional interventions are legitimate and legitimately contribute to strengthening opinion and faith. To take Soto’s example again: is it not obvious that affection for tried and tested doctors such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas legitimately strengthens a Catholic theologian’s adherence to certain theological opinions? *A fortiori*, the love of eternal goods will legitimately

Gardeil. See also my treatment there concerning the role of appetite in practical reasoning. Also, see his essay on infused prudence in *The True Christian Life*.

¹⁴⁷ See *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 2, ad 10. See, in the body of the article: “However, the will, moved by the aforementioned good, proposes to the intellect something that does not appear as worthy of assent, and thus it determines the intellect towards that non-apparent thing, so that it may assent to it.”

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intervene, *servatis servandis*, to reinforce the prudential verdict or judgments of credibility and credentia.

It is to this motion *common to faith and opinion* that Saint Thomas alludes in the alleged text. Regularly, *per se, ex natura rei*, faith and opinion involve this intervention by the will, because both are inevitable on the side of their object, because both are capable of speaking to man about his good. In the case of opinion: because moral things, *res humanae*, constitute its proper domain, and also because the contingent objects it deals with are very particularly a matter of appetite. And in that of supernatural faith: because its object is immediately related to man’s destiny.

But this intervention by the will, however natural and imposed it might be, is not the motion that theologians declare to be essential to faith. It remains for us to demonstrate this point by establishing that, in the case of faith in testimony, the will exercises an influence upon the intellect in a way that is irreducible to the motion of exercise and to the motion that flows from the appetite for the moral good.

B. *Special* intervention by the will.—The object of faith in testimony and the object of opinion are both non-evident, but not in the same way. The object of opinion is non-evident in the sense that it is contingent in nature. It is not rigorously demonstrated. It is only verisimilar [*vraisemblable*]. And thus, from the perspective of *truth*, it furnishes an object which does not suffice for reducing the intellect [completely to act in adherence], though it does suffice for provoking assent, directly and of its own accord.

By contrast, the object of faith in testimony is totally unavoidable. A historical fact, for example, has, absolutely speaking, no reason to exist for the mind apart from the truthfulness of

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the testimony that affirms it. And this is all the more true for the case of divine mysteries.¹⁴⁸

Faith derives nothing from its immediate object. The truth of its object is entirely relative to the testimony. This is credibility.

Now, the human mind has two possible aptitudes towards testimony: an attitude of theoretical research and an attitude of intellectual dependence.

The first attitude is that of the mind that verifies, in an exclusively speculative way, the evidence of the witness’s veracity. This is the attitude of the historian and the magistrate. And, given that proof of the truthfulness of a witness is not a question of science but, rather, of probability, therefore the credibility of an assertion obtained in this way is ultimately no different from the truth of opinion, or ordinary probability. In the same way, in his *Topics*, Aristotle makes no distinction between the probability that results directly from the sight of objective verisimilitude and that which results from the testimony of all, from a number of people, and from those who have a particular competence.¹⁴⁹ There is no trace of a special volitional intervention in faith in testimony understood in this way. With a cold gaze, the historian analyzes the elements of veracity for a testimony and progressively transfers each probability acquired for or against, in credit or in debit to, the assertion that seeks to rely on this testimony. It is a question of logical correction. And the result is the probability of the assertion and scientific faith: “Even for the great facts of history..., it is only a question of a maximal accounting of probabilities based on inferences which it is never possible to verify entirely...”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ *In III Sent.*, dist. 24, q. 1, a. 2, sol. 1: “God evades what our intellect can form and is not penetrable [*pervius*] to it while we are wayfarers”

¹⁴⁹ See Soto, *Loc. cit.* p. 127 recto, col. 2: “As St. Thomas excellently noted, Aristotle uses the term *opinion* to refer to any human belief”

¹⁵⁰ See Ch. and V. Mortet, “Histoire” in *Grande Encyclopédie*, vol. 20, p. 142.

But another attitude is possible, at least in certain cases of testimony, and this second attitude essentially involves the will’s intervention in the intellectual act. Such is the case whenever the knowledge of one being is, by *the very nature of things*, the rule for the knowledge of other beings.

This is the case for God in relation to human knowledge. Let us look at a short passage from St. Thomas, who describes two attitudes: faith in opinion, and what we today call, without perhaps having sufficiently penetrated its foundation and mechanism, *faith in authority*. “To believe in a man, without the support of a probable reason,¹⁵¹ is a kind of levity, for the knowledge of one man is not naturally ordered to the knowledge of another man, so as to be measured thereby. However, human knowledge is ordered to the First Truth in this way.”¹⁵²—Consequently, another man’s knowledge, because it is not naturally my intellectual rule, represents a good of my mind only insofar as I have verified, *toties quoties*, each and every time, its validity. If, therefore, I adhere volitionally to the intellectual good represented by human testimony, it is less to his authority that I adhere, than to the reasons by which I have verified that what this authority says has probability. Thus, in the formation of human faith, the will plays a role of mere transmission: it transfers to the benefit of the assertion the probability of the verified witness.—By contrast, when there is a natural hierarchy between two reasons, one superior, the other inferior, the scientific authority of the superior reason *inherently* represents the good of the subordinate intelligence. “Whenever two beings are ordered to one another, it belongs to the perfection of the inferior being that it be subject to the superior being: thus it is a good for the

¹⁵¹ That is, plausible, worthy of approval. In the previous article, see the discussion starting with the paragraph “The currently reigning opinion...” and “To adhere: but to what?”

¹⁵² *In III Sent.* dist. 24, q. 1, a. 3, sol. 2, ad 1.

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passions of the concupiscible to be subordinated to reason.”¹⁵³—“Given that our natural knowledge is related to divine knowledge as inferior to superior, when our reason acquiesces (*consentit*) to the divine reason, it is an act of virtue, just as when the irascible submits to reason.”¹⁵⁴

Therefore, the authority of divine reason is, for every created reason, an absolute good to which the will must fasten itself for its own sake, indeed, absolutely. Once I am certain that I am in the presence of divine authority, my will gives itself to it, as to the absolute good of my mind [*esprit*], and when it turns to the intelligence to incline it to adhere to the testimony of this sovereign authority, it does so with the full élan of absolute adherence that the absolute good of the mind [*esprit*] deserves: “It is the good of the intellect that it be subject to a will that adheres to God. This is why faith liberates the intellect, by the very fact that it makes it captive to such a will.”¹⁵⁵ This intervention by of the will is essential faith in authority, since it is only through the will’s intermediacy that the intellect finds itself under the sway of its essential rule.

And, because we are here talking about supernatural faith, we must here add that the manifestation of the good represented by divine testimony is not only certified (as in faith in opinion) by the probable arguments concerning the grounds for credibility but [moreover, and more essentially,] by the very testimony of the First Truth, which, in supernatural faith, has the first and principal effect of being its own guarantee.¹⁵⁶ Thus, none of the inadequacies of the volitional motion of faith in opinion are to be found in divine faith. And, therefore, as St. Thomas again says: “The reason that inclines the will to believe the truths of faith is the First Truth,

¹⁵³ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 3, ad 8.

¹⁵⁴ *In Sent. loc. cit.* sol. 1, c.

¹⁵⁵ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 3, ad 8.

¹⁵⁶ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 8, ad 2 and ad 9.

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which is infallible, whereas the reason that inclines the will to believe other things is only a fallible sign (opinion) or the words of a man who may be mistaken or deceived (faith in opinion). Hence, the will does not communicate an infallible truth to the person who believes these things, whereas it communicates such infallible truth to him who believes the articles of faith.”¹⁵⁷

The Vatican Council set its seal upon this entire doctrine by placing at the head of its description of the act of faith, not the motion of the will that comes from the vantage of eternal goods but from that which is set in motion by the First Truth’s authority over human knowledge: *Since created reason is wholly subject to the Uncreated Truth, we are bound to render full obedience to God who Reveals.*¹⁵⁸

Nor, moreover, should we think that faith in authority is found only in divine faith. This is undoubtedly a typical case, given how formal is the dependence of created intelligence upon the First Truth and how absolute is the regulative vigour of divine science, which goes so far as to bear effective witness to itself within the very sanctuary of conscience.

But wherever one mind naturally depends upon another, we will find the essential intervention of the will in the formation of faith. The best analogy is that of a child’s mind in relation to his parents. Here, intellectual dependence is no longer a metaphysical necessity, as in the case of God; nonetheless, it is first and foremost physical and natural.—Man’s dependence on his master is broader, and yet, here again, we find, *mutatis mutandis*, faith in authority and the affection for the good of authority that is inseparable from it. To this feeling of legitimate reverence may be related the fact pointed out by Soto, concerning the faith we readily express for certain doctors. We love them because they are like sources of true testimony.—Extending this

¹⁵⁷ *In III Sent.* dist. 23, q. 2, a. 4, ad 2.

¹⁵⁸ See [First] Vatican Council, *Dei filius* ch. 3 (Denzinger, no. 3008 [1789]).

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still further, we could say that in all faith in testimony there enters a portion of the reverence felt for authority [*une part de culte de l'autorité*]. St. Thomas, following in the footsteps of St. Augustine, holds that veracity and, consequently, faith in the words of others, is the social bond par excellence. These two doctors base their teaching concerning lying on this, as a sin against society, which lives only on mutual faith.¹⁵⁹ Now, society is natural to man, and *in this sense* we can say that every mind naturally depends upon the science of others as upon a rule.¹⁶⁰ But it is clear that this regulating influence is, in practice, subject to such vagaries that the faith in authority that derives from it is more suited to the ideal city than to real society. Nonetheless, insofar as the indispensable conditions of truthfulness and sincerity are observed, faith in authority can be generalized, thus preserving for supernatural faith the broader analogical basis recognized by St. Thomas: “The believer is like a man who relies on the testimony of an honest man who sees what he, the believer, does not see.”¹⁶¹

Thus, apart from the common volitional motion, in which both opinion and faith participate, there is a motion of the will reserved for faith in authority, especially for divine faith. The common motion originates in the view of some kind of goodness, either that of the truth itself or that of the objects presented in the apprehension of truth (eternal goods or temporal ones). It belongs to opinion as well as to faith, *per se ex natura rei*, indispensably following upon every act of knowledge. The second motion is reserved for faith, not “*scientific faith*,” but faith

¹⁵⁹ *ST II-II*, q. 109 and 110; See Schwalm, *Aux Sources de l'Activité intégrale*, I. *Sincérité* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1911), 5, 20, 27, 33.

¹⁶⁰ *In Boetium. De Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1: “And because amid the social life of men one man must, in those matters wherein he does not suffice for himself, make use of another as he makes use of himself, therefore, it is necessary that he rely on what another person knows as regards matters that he himself does not know, just as in those things that he knows by himself. Consequently, in human intercourse, faith is necessary.”

¹⁶¹ *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 2.

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in authority. It appears only when an intelligence finds itself under the sway of a regulative intelligence. Its motive is the actual veridicality of the intelligence that is its rule. This volitional motion finds its perfect and absolute realization in divine faith alone, and this is undoubtedly what led Soto to say that perhaps, “*forte*,” when Saint Thomas defined opinion as assent accompanied by fear, he included in this definition all *human* faith, which is subject to fear, since error is absolutely opposed only to Catholic faith.¹⁶²

Be that as it may, we can now see how St. Thomas was able to place opinion and faith equally under the will’s influence. This is a general influence, common to all acts of intellect lacking perfect objective evidence. There are exceptions to this law. And thus, it is not essential, but only normal, for opinion to be under the influence of the will. And so, the will is neither a necessary [causative] factor, nor the essential subject of opinion, any more than it is, in this same respect, a [causative] factor or essential subject of faith itself.

And, thus, we see how St. Thomas, on the other hand, was able to reserve for faith in authority—and, in particular, for supernatural faith—an essential volitional intervention, and why, in his doctrine, divine faith has as its subject not only the intellect, but also the will, or rather the intellect under the sway of the will.

Therefore, it remains the case that the assent of opinion is, in itself, a purely intellectual act, one belonging to the intellect and received in it alone.

3. The property of opinion: *Formido errandi*.

We argued earlier that fear, understood as a volitional phenomenon, could not be included in the essential definition of opinion. What we just established about the role of the will in

¹⁶² De Soto, *In Dial. Arist. poster, ed. cit.* bk. 1, q. 8 (p. 128 recto, col. 2);

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opinion confirms our assertion, by virtue of the principle *eadem est ratio contrariorum*. If the will is not essential to opinion when it comes to inclining its assent, how and why should it be essential in regard to what is opposed to that assent?

Nonetheless, we have suggested in passing the idea that *formido errandi*, in the sense of a volitional phenomenon, can be considered a property of opinion. It remains for us to justify this assertion.

Aristotle did not deal with this perspective. The word “fear” itself, if Soto is to be believed, is absent from his studies of opinion:¹⁶³ “What today’s doctors mean when they say that opinion is an assent accompanied by fear, Aristotle calls a contingent assent... For him, fear is not the intrinsic reason for opinion, as it is for moderns.”¹⁶⁴

This position is a particular case of the philosopher’s logical formalism. A logician must see opinion as nothing more than a reaction by the intellect before a perceived object. Thus abstracted, the judgment of opinion is defined exactly by these two traits: *assent* and *contingency* in assent. The rest, which is up to the *man who opines*, has nothing to do with a definition.¹⁶⁵

In St. Thomas, by contrast, fear is named each time, so to speak, opinion is discussed. There is no indication, however, that the Holy Doctor intended fear to refer to an appetitive phenomenon. Soto believes he means it, like Aristotle, in the sense of contingency.¹⁶⁶ For him, opinion and probability correspond to each other: assent in proportion to veresimilitude; contingency for contingency.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, col. 1.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 127, verso, col. 2: “Hence, Aristotle would not have denied that a movement of the will is required for faith and opinion, but however, he only dealt with the principles of habits that are in the intellect, that is with propositions and terms from which reasoning is constructed.”

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.* (p. 128, recto, col. 1).

In any case, and this is certain, for St. Thomas there are judgments of opinion from which fear must be excluded. These are those that fall into the category of firm opinions. Saint Thomas and Aristotle set them apart under the name of faith, *fides*. We are not here talking about faith in testimony but, rather, faith in general, *fides communiter dicta*, i.e. established, firm, and certain belief.

“There is nothing opposed,” says De Soto, “to the fact that objective proofs can sometimes be so strong (*tam vehemens auctoritas*) that, despite the absence of evidence, *citra evidentiam*, the intellect is *convinced*, indeed without any volitional support¹⁶⁷—and even more so,” he adds, “despite the will’s resistance.”¹⁶⁸ “Let one so judge: Rome exists. (For those who have not seen Rome) it falls into the category of opinion. Strictly speaking, however, it is made without fear, unless we use the term ‘fear’ to refer to the simple fact that it is not opposed to such assent that it might be false, since it is not self-evident.”¹⁶⁹

This exception means, once again, that volitional fear is not of the essence of opinion. What is essential is never lacking. It also follows that, if we admit that faith or firm belief participates in the specific nature of opinion, volitional fear is not even a property of opinion. *Non convenit toti.*

But we can also consider opinion as constituting a genus, characterized by the contingency of assent, a genus comprising two species, faith (the superior species) and ordinary opinion which, following the rule frequently observed for inferior species,¹⁷⁰ would retain the name of the genus.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.* (p. 127, verso, col. 1).

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* col. 2.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.* (p. 128, recto, col. 1).

¹⁷⁰ See the example cited by Saint Thomas in *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 1, ad 3. Another example of this is when we use the word *animal* to designate all animals except man.

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If this is so, we can make this concession “to the crowd of modern dialecticians” that Soto once scolded: volitional fear can be considered a *property* of ordinary opinion. In other words, it is extrinsic to the nature of opinion, though it is its proper and normal consequence.

To prove this, we need only recall the reasons that led us to admit that the intervention of the will, without entering into the essence of opinion, was nevertheless ordinarily called for by it, *per se et ex natura rei*.¹⁷¹

If the intellect is not itself moved by terrifying spectacles or pleasant vistas, because it can only see (i.e. reflect), nonetheless the intelligent man is so moved, because he can feel and will.¹⁷²

Now, the contingency of opinion has everything needed for moving the intelligent man. On the one hand, he is made for truth, and truth only fully satisfies him when it is absolute. *Ignorabimus et restringamur*, we shall not now and thus we will keep check on our hopes for the truth: this is a defeat. This is not what the human mind [*esprit*] first bets on when it launches forth. On the other hand, the practical truths that are most necessary to man's life—most necessary because through them he communicates with the mobile elements of his daily life—are precisely those truths that are moreover a matter of opinion and its contingency.

And thus, when the hard work of discovery, of *inventio*, comes to its close, when the probable, that “dawning radiance of tomorrow’s science,”¹⁷³ rises at the end of a laborious night, the man who lives his life precisely as a man—under the scientist absorbed in the progress of his thought—naturally and inevitably feels a sense of dread—“What if this possibility of error, as yet unreduced to certainty, were suddenly to spread out like a dark cloud in a stormy sky! What if

¹⁷¹ See the section “I. The will’s intervention in opinion” above.

¹⁷² See *In III De anima*, lect. 4 (§ *amplius autem*).

¹⁷³ Marie-Benoît Schwalm, “La Croyance naturelle et la Science,” *Revue Thomiste* 5 (1897): 640.

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today’s contingency became tomorrow’s error!” He does not doubt... He remains attached to the ray of light filtering through the clouds, like the captain upon his bridge in the dark of night, with eyes fixed upon the lighthouse on the shore, alternately shining and then disappearing back into the darkness. But, because he cannot yet see the luminous source of this ray, he experiences a feeling of dread. This fear is not essential to opinion, but in the man who thus opines, it naturally springs forth, *per se, ex natura rei*.

And *a fortiori* is this so when it is no longer a question of a particular good, such as the outcome of some speculative labor, but when great goods—whether goods of the body or those of the soul, whether individual, familial, or social goods, and indeed, above all, infinite goods—are, as it were, suspended from the opinion we manage to form concerning them. What is *Copernicus’ opinion* in comparison to the solution to the problem of immortality? But also, what anguish it causes when it only manages to establish itself as an opinion in our mind! Perhaps this fear, connected to opinion as its property, gives the final word on the state of mind of someone like Pascal, who, while professing that those who bring perfect sincerity “will be satisfied and convinced by the proofs of a religion so divine, all gathered together here”¹⁷⁴ in his *Pensées*, and thus convinced himself, nevertheless retains a kind of self-reservation against the possibility of an intellectual volte-face, that refuge and that sort of central defensive retreat known as “Pascal’s wager.”

¹⁷⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Brunschvicg, p. 425.

IV. Probable Certainty

The analysis carried out in the first three parts of this study has provided us with the elements we need to solve the problem concerning “probable certainty.” Let us now deploy these instruments.

Earlier, we saw that assent to an opinion is essentially an act of the speculative intellect. It does, however, *normally* involve the cooperation of the will.¹⁷⁵

Hence, there are two modes for the formation of opinion-assent: 1° In exceptional cases, when the mind alone is at stake, an *opinio vehemens* appears, to which is reserved, not exclusively but by antonomasia, the term *fides*, i.e. very firm belief, subjectively very certain assent. Without having seen Rome, I believe that it exists—this is the example for this kind of faith found, in nearly stereotypical form, in older authors.—2° In cases when opinion is open to the will’s own concurrence, we then have common opinion. This, too, as we shall see, is called *fides*, on account of the subjective certainty to which it is susceptible, thanks to its strengthening by the will.

The genesis of “probable certainty” differs depending on which of these two classes of opinion is being considered.

1. Firm speculative belief, *Opinio vehemens*—*Fides*.

Since will’s intervention is not essential to the formation of opinion (as we established) it is not forbidden that we admit cases when opinion owes its existence solely to the speculative intellect.

Experience confirms the truth of this observation. We have already noted, with De Soto, the case when the mind finds itself in the presence of such considerable authority that, despite

¹⁷⁵ See the section “I. The will’s intervention in opinion” above.

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the lack of absolute evidence, it finds itself convinced, without the will having taken the slightest part in its act, *tam vehemens auctoritas ut citra evidentiam convincatur intellectus sine inclinatione voluntatis*.¹⁷⁶ This is more often the case when opinion is derived from verified testimony—in other words, in *scientific faith*—than in opinion directly begotten by signs.¹⁷⁷ However, this conviction is also born under the exclusive influence of the object. This is what happens, for example, when a moral law is realized in concrete facts. In itself, a moral law is an analytic principle. Mothers love their children, and the poor want to be rich. These are not opinions but, rather, absolute and self-evident truths, based on analysis of the subject. It is in a mother’s interest to love her child, and it is in a poor man’s interest to desire to escape from his poverty. However, if we descend from this abstract region to the terrain of concrete realities, we will find exceptions. But they will be rare, because in spite of everything, the form that gives rise to the law subsists in real and concrete cases: in real mothers or in real poor people. And, consequently, in the concrete, it remains infinitely probable *a priori*, that a given mother loves her son, and that a given poor man wishes to become rich.¹⁷⁸ The comedian mentioned by St. Augustine, who had summoned all the people of Hippo to the theater to hear their most secret thoughts, was stating a *probabilissima* when he told this people that the only thing that merchants thought about was buying low and selling high.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ De Soto, *In Dial. Arist. poster*, bk. 1, q. 8 (p. 127, verso col. 1).

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* col. 2.

¹⁷⁸ Albert the Great describes with great depth the twofold character of this kind of belief: “Of itself, opinion is not certain, though it becomes certain to those to whom it seems and appears so; and it is not certain except insofar as such an opinion concerning an immediate proposition (an analytic principle [*per se nota*]) falls upon it, because in this way it is known [*scitum*], although it is not accepted in the manner of science. Thus, to know [*scire*] is said to to opine strongly...” (*Poster*, bk. 1, tr. 5, ch. 9 [Vivès, vol. 2], p. 150–151).

¹⁷⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, bk. 13, ch. 5 (Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 5, a. 8).

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To these cases when probability is based on the nature of the subject and thus possesses an *a priori* foundation, we must add all those cases when very high probabilities result from the *a posteriori* processes of invention. Often, signs accumulate and converge so clearly towards a single point that we can certainly retrace their steps and even carry out an *experimentum crucis* on them. In such cases, the possibility of error inherent in the probable no longer has the slightest chance of passing into act, at least for the mind that is naturally positive and realistic. It is nothing more than a kind of logical expression, from which the probable, without ceasing to be the probable, cannot be extricated.

Therefore, in such a case one will elicit a purely speculative assent, an assent that is objectively and subjectively very certain, and which nevertheless, because of its contingency, will not exceed the limit of opinion.

Like the older logicians, modern probabilistic logicians admit this major certainty caused by *probabilissima*, very probable things. But most of them refuse to hold it to be purely speculative certainty. This is a consequence of their ideas concerning the fear attached to *all* opinion and concerning the possibility of error which, according to them, implies that the opposite statement also has *probability*. The will would intervene, in order to dispel unwise doubts provoked by the presence of *leviter probabilis* corresponding to *probabilissima* and to shrink otherwise unfounded fears. In so doing, it would be guided by reflex principles such as: prudent reason must regard minutiae as non-existent (*Parum pro nihilo accipit ratio*). Hence this consequence: since these principles are practical and, moreover, foreign to the objective reasons that directly motivate opinion, the certainty obtained in the case at hand, *in casu*, would ultimately be practical and reflex.

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The ancients would never have imagined such a stratagem. For them, in such a case, there was no fear of the contrary, no probability in the contrary. They, too, undoubtedly implied the principle, *Parum pro nihilo accipit ratio*, but instead of making it gravely explicit in the face of phantoms and imaginary fears, they regarded it as immanent to the natural functioning of reason. The good of reason is truth, and when it discovers in an exceptional probability a convincing sign of it, one that is like the ultimate disposition [to full and certain assent], it bears down upon this probable truth with all its weight, and does not even suspect the passing whisp that is opposed to it. It leaves no room for the will to intervene, either to help or to thwart it. Reason is not a scrupulous casuist who plays tricks with infinitesimal trivia. No, it is the vigorously realistic common sense of the Roman praetor, portrayed in a legal axiom, *De minimis non curat praetor*, the praetor is not concerned with trivial points.

This is how St. Thomas understood these things. As he writes:

We adhere only on the basis of objective reasons: the inherent light of first principles; the participated light of first principles found in the case of scientific assent; the light of verisimilitude in the case of opinion. And if likelihoods increase, they incline toward belief, faith being nothing other than an opinion supported by reason, *iuvatarationibus*.¹⁸⁰

Or, as he says elsewhere: *firmata rationibus*.¹⁸¹ As is clear, he mentions only reasons; everything is intellectual in this assent which Saint Thomas, after Aristotle, calls faith, and which is none other than the vehement opinion spoken of by Aristotle and Albert the Great, as Saint Thomas teaches us when he says: *Credere dicimur quod vehementer opinamur*.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ *In Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 4.

¹⁸¹ *In III Sent.* dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 3 ad 1.

¹⁸² *De Veritate* q. 14, a. 2, § 2. Cf. Aristotle, *Topics*, 1.5.

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Moreover, belief, however firm it may be, forever remains according to him an opinion. When Aristotle distinguished the virtues from opinion, he did not mention the latter among the intellectual virtues, i.e. habits that offer a guarantee of truth.¹⁸³ St. Thomas explains why: “What causes any sort of opinion to lean, *even strongly*, towards one side is not necessary and cannot give rise to a definitive judgment about the object.”¹⁸⁴ Despite its certainty, faith always includes the possibility of error.¹⁸⁵ Only, the chances of this possibility occurring are zero.

In short, firm and certain speculative belief occupies an intermediate place between science and common opinion. This is why St. Thomas allows us to understand vehement faith-opinion along the same lines of what Richard of Saint Victor perhaps applied to supernatural faith: *infra scientiam, supra opinionem*, below science but above opinion.¹⁸⁶ It has the speculative mode of science, but not the *de iure* certainty. But like opinion, it has the imposed contingency, though without its property: volitional fear. Firm belief constitutes a kind of transition species within the genus of assent, corresponding to what, in the genus of objective truth, is the transition species, *the very probable, the ultimate disposition to the generation of evident truth, already having a given property of this form that is to come, namely, certitude (probabilissima, ultima dispositio ad generationem evidentis veritatis, iam proprietatem aliquam istius advenientis formae, certitudinem nempe, praehabens)*.

And so, at least in this first case of opinion, the alliance between probability and certainty is realized in the realm of pure speculation: *Certitudo probabilis*.

¹⁸³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.2–3 and Thomas’s commentary, lect. 2 and 3.

¹⁸⁴ *In Boetium De Trinitate.*, q. 3, a. 1 and 4.

¹⁸⁵ ST II-II, q. 4, a. 5, ad 2.

¹⁸⁶ *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 2, ad 2.

2. Common assent of opinion.

Common opinion is that which is begotten in the speculative intellect by the experience of the ordinary probable.

Earlier above, we described the notion of the ordinary probable: that which is the verisimilar, that which positively draws close to the absolute truth. Opinion is neither doubt, nor the suspension of judgment, nor an abstract arbitration among supposedly opposing probabilities, but rather, an inclination of the intellect towards one side [of an issue] at the expense of the other, a true and positive assent.¹⁸⁷

The inclination of the common assent of opinion is so accentuated that Aristotle and St. Thomas did not hesitate to use the same name for it as they did for vehement opinion, the name reserved for firm belief, *fides*. Faith, says Aristotle, accompanies *all* opinion, for it is impossible for us not to believe what we have an opinion about.¹⁸⁸ And St. Thomas ups the ante: Every opinion is followed by *faith*, for everyone believes what he opines. But faith goes hand in hand with persuasion. Persuasion, in turn, logically requires¹⁸⁹ a reason. For there can be no persuasion without a rational motive.

Of course, this faith and reasoned persuasion do not confer a certificate of absolute infallibility on the opinion thus held to be true. Not only does the possibility of error remain, but since it is not controlled (as in the case of *opinio vehemens*) by experience of a probability so high that it touches on objective certainty and directly begets speculative conviction concerning its object, such common opinion therefore gives rise, according to the principles recognized

¹⁸⁷ See the sections “The influence of verisimilitude of the probable on opinion” as well as the textual study of Thomas concerning these matters.

¹⁸⁸ See Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.4.

¹⁸⁹ “According to the order of inference. (Secundum ordinem illationis.)” *Ibid.* lect. 5 (§Amplius omnem)

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above, to intervention by the will.¹⁹⁰ This intervention manifests itself, as we have said, in the form of fears to the contrary, running counter to the assent of opinion.¹⁹¹ And, as we shall now prove, it will also manifest itself in the form of resistance to these fears, and in the support lent to opinion in order maintain and strengthen it definitively in the direction of probability and, at last, to establish it as a *probable certainty*.

In the case of faith, Saint Thomas summarily described the mechanism by which the will intervenes in opinion. We have seen that the volitional movement we are discussing here is common to both faith and opinion.¹⁹² Therefore, we can legitimately transpose to opinion what St. Thomas says about the common volitional intervention involved in faith.

Apart from the case of first principles and scientific conclusions, “the intellect,” he says, “is determined by the will. The will, by its choice, fixes the mind’s assent to one of the two sides present, inspired by a motive sufficient for putting the will into action, though of itself it does not suffice for moving the intellect, namely: it seems *good* and useful to give its assent to this side.”¹⁹³

Let’s go back and now apply these data from Saint Thomas to opinion. This is the situation: the probable inclines the intellect to adhere. However, the latter is not mastered, as in the previous case. The possibility of error leaves room for thought, for *cogitatio*. Hence the appearance of fear or volitional apprehension in the person opining.

But, on the other hand, he realizes that, if the probable does not represent the absolute good for his intellect (i.e., the demonstrated truth), it nonetheless represents what directly leads

¹⁹⁰ See the section “The Will’s Intervention in faith and opinion” above. Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 4.

¹⁹¹ See the discussion starting with “But we can also consider opinion as constituting a genus” above.

¹⁹² See the section “The Will’s Intervention in faith and opinion” above.

¹⁹³ *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

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to it, what, in certain obscure matters, necessarily replaces it. Therefore, if under the sway of fear, he were to refuse his assent, he would have to renounce the benefit offered by the preponderance of truth manifested in the probable; he would remain at zero while his objective rule marks perhaps 19 out of 20. Now, does this redound to the good of his mind? Does he not, rather, thereby cease hunting the prey because he has seen some mere shadow along the way? If, on the other hand, he commits his faith, then first of all, he commits no absurdity, for he realizes that certain matters do not lend themselves to more precise determinations and that, in scientific research, the period of discovery cannot provide the precision of fully constituted science. Therefore, if he adheres he will be doing something reasonable. What’s more, this act is advantageous precisely from the perspective of his mind’s own good, ruled as it is by the law of striving to render itself equal to the true, meaning that assent to the plausible represents a state of mind well advanced in the pursuit of fulfilling this law. It is especially advantageous in scientific matters. Assent to the plausible (*vraisemblable*) provides solid footing, like a springboard from which we can launch onward towards what is even better, towards new progress. But, a springboard is only as good as its solid foundation. Therefore, the good of the mind requires that we hold the probable to be true, that we fix ourselves in adherence to the probable by means of a practically firm assent: “It is good and useful (for the mind) to give assent to the probable.”¹⁹⁴ This is adequately reflected in the well-known practical rule: *verisimilius est sequendum*, plausible truths must be followed. This precept of intellectual conduct is of direct interest to the will, which depends on the good of the whole man, including his intellect. Therefore, it will assimilate it sympathetically, repressing fearful impulses at their very source; it will reflect its imperative strength upon the intellectual power, and the latter, executing what its object inclined

¹⁹⁴ Cf. text quoted on previous page.

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the intellect itself to do, though without the object imposing this assent, will consent to the probable; it will have *Probable Certainty*.

In addition to these motives, drawn from the mind’s good, there are also motives drawn from the various ends of human life. Most of the time, the goods of all kinds that serve as the goal of our activity—individual goods of wealth or moral and even religious life, economic or social goods—are accessible to us only under the guise of probability. A great part of human activity depends on opinion-assent. Therefore, for the sake of the pursuit of our happiness, the need to attain these goods weighs heavily upon the intellect and demands the assent of firm opinion. How can we will and act if we do not believe, if our mind is not fixed on the immediate goals of action? Given that opinion is our ordinary lot in this order of things of such capital importance to us, it is good and useful, *decens et utile*, as Saint Thomas says, to commit one’s faith in opinion, to fix oneself by firm assent in the probable, to accept *Probable Certainty*.

Therefore, if we are not deluded by the scope of our prior considerations, we can say: with this volitional concurrence actively taking part, the acquisition of a certainty that is objectively motivated by well-understood probability (in the sense of “probability” classically used in philosophy and not according to the sense of the term found in the works of modern probabilist moralists) is a legitimate thing and an acquired fact.¹⁹⁵ All that remains is to analyze the characteristics of this certainty.

¹⁹⁵ Once we have seen the theory, it is very interesting to see how it is put into practice. Saint Thomas gives us a curious application in ST II-II, q. 70, which I mentioned earlier as the topical *locus* of probable certainty.

This question is concerned with how to establish the legitimacy and conditions of legal testimony. By the testimony of two or three witnesses, the fact of a crime is rendered only probable. But the judge's sentence can only be absolute. How can it be based on probability? Such is the problem.

Saint Thomas responds by invoking three orders of considerations. 1° There is the intrinsic value of the probable, which is sufficient in itself to motivate opinion in contingent

And first of all, this certainty is not speculative like that of absolutely firm belief. It is a practical certainty. But let us be clear about this word, “practical.”

As we have seen, the will’s motion upon the assent of opinion is not specifying, in contrast to the special motion of the will proper to faith. The probable is the light, the only light, of opinion as such: it specifies it directly as an intellectual act. Therefore, the role of the will can only be a kind of EXECUTIVE-MOVING ROLE, first by excluding the volitional fear exercised against opinion (*removens prohibens*) then positively, by way of efficient causality, by categorically determining the *exercise of the act*, the assent of opinion. Thanks to this double

matters. *In actibus enim humanis non potest haberi certitudo demonstrativa... Et ideo sufficit probabilis certitudo quae ut in pluribus veritatem attingat* (a. 2, in corp). These last words declare the speculative foundation of opinion: the probable is an approximation to the truth. 2° To this speculative value is added a practical value: *non debet negligi probabilis certitudo quae probabiliter haberi potest per testes* (ibid., ad 1). *Non debet*, must not, is a guiding principle for action. What is its basis? The good of the intelligence, which finds in the probable the truth as much as it can require in such matters: *Certitudo non est similiter quaerenda* (another practical principle) *in omni materia*, certainty must not be sought in the same way in all matters. 3° Finally, in addition to the first two motives, the social good intervenes: it is necessary that justice be done. To refuse to decide between the plaintiff and the defendant, between society and the accused, when there is evidence at hand, as much as can be asked for in such matters, would indeed be as unjust as to judge arbitrarily, since someone will certainly be harmed. Taking note of this social necessity for which the law is responsible, and also considering the rational good represented by the probable, the Law awards the legitimacy of probable certainty. *Rationabiliter institutum est de jure divino et humano quod dicto testium stetur* (ibid). The judge, under the pressure of these three certainties—the speculative certainty of the probable, its practical certainty as the good of the mind, and its practical certainty as the good of human society—pronounces his judgment. In other words, in virtue of these three titles, probable certainty has the absolute legitimacy of the most categorical action possible. Indeed, it may well be a question of sending a man to his death.

This same theme, less developed but perhaps more expressive, can be found in St. Thomas’s commentary on the words of St. John’s Gospel, “The Testimony of two men is true”: “One must understand that what is considered true in judgment must be regarded as true. This is because *true* certainty cannot be obtained in human actions; therefore, what can be considered *more certain*, which is through a multitude of witnesses, is accepted [as true]. For it is more probable that one person would lie than many” (S. Thomas, In VIII *Joannis evang.* lect. 2, no. 8, edit. Parma, vol. 10, p. 445).

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intervention, the intellect elicits, or should I say executes, an act of adherence, one that surely is contingent, though sufficiently firm for its action to be engaged. The mind is practically fixed and certain.

But this practical certainty itself can be of two kinds.

As we have said, the motives of the will are two in kind: the good of the mind itself; and the general ends of human life.

If the will is set in motion (as it is in scientific research, in questions of fact, etc.) by the desire to ensure the good of the mind, that is, in the absence of the absolute truth which is not found in the given circumstances, the possession of this predominant acquisition of objective truth contained in the probable, the motion exercised belongs to the physical—or better to the psychological—dynamics of the human intellect, which in the concrete order is the faculty of a human subject, which the will is also. The principle *Verisimilius est sequendum*, which is its immediate guiding principle is inspired only by the necessities of the mind. In such a case, practical certainty does not mean certainty concerning a practical *matter*, but only certainty obtained through an action ($\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$) of the will, acting moreover for a speculative purpose.

By contrast, if the will is set in motion by the interest that arises from the experience of whatever goods the opinion is concerned with, the certainty resulting from the will’s intervention is said to be *practical* in a new respect, namely due to the influence exerted on the will by ends essentially intended to provoke in relation to them the action, $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$, of the will and of the executive powers. The mind’s certainty serves the volitional intention of these ends; it is, therefore, ordered to their satisfaction. Hence, its goal is no longer simply, as before, to firmly ensure, within the mind, the relative adequation of intellect to the being authorized by the probable, even though this goal is not excluded and is, in fact, the *sine qua non* condition for

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obtaining the ulterior goal;¹⁹⁶ its purpose is, in addition, to ensure that the will has firm knowledge of the means suitable for realizing the ends of the will. The value of the opinion rendered certain by such a motion consists not only in its conformity with its direct object but also in its conformity with the appetite for the ends of human life.

From this follows an important consequence for the formation of certainty of opinion in practical matters. Allow me to quote myself from an earlier work:¹⁹⁷ When faced with a statement that concerns action, the mind does not act in isolation. Whenever the truth in question is the good, the whole of man is on the lookout. Abstractly considered, such influences *tergo*, from behind, are bad laborers in the service of the truth. However, there are cases when, to the contrary, their action is conducive to the strengthening of true knowledge. For example, if I am hesitating about the moral truth of a statement, nothing can make it easier for me to see what's true than the prior rectitude of my state of mind with regard to the certain principles of morality. The habit of honest, hatred of falsehood, the stripping away of illusory ends, and the love of true ends—in short, in St. Thomas' evocative expression, *veritas vitae*—are all moral dispositions whose after-effects are felt in the *truly moral* object and exalt its ability to be accepted as such by the mind. Thus, we here have reinforcement for probability in moral matters which, for an intellect used by the will for the will's own ends, must lead to reinforcements for one's adherence [to the truth].

Clearly, these moral reinforcements, which so often are decisive, cannot totally replace the objective light of the probable argument that presents the object. Undoubtedly, in itself, the

¹⁹⁶ The instrument serves the intentions of the principal cause that uses it only by normally performing its act, in this case assenting to the probable in proportion to its supporting motives.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Gardeil, *La Crédibilité et l'Apologétique*, 1st ed. *passim*, p.102ff. The present study was inspired by the desire to give a developed theoretical basis to certain notions I have set out in this work, and thus to prepare for the reworked edition that will appear at the end of 1911.

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good coincides with the true, but if we content ourselves to solely be led by the light of our intentions, we could very well deceive ourselves. As we have said, the role of these volitional supplements is an executive-moving one: they reinforce the influence of the probable, but never do they totally supplant it. It would be a mistake to assign to them the scope of a precise criterion for assessing probability. They only attain the object insofar as its content is in harmony with the true ends of human life, lived and active in the moral man—with man’s true morals.¹⁹⁸

Epilogue: Moral Certainty.

These considerations lead us straight to the understanding of a notion whose name we have not yet pronounced, because we were reserving it for the end, though, perhaps, it has presented itself many times to the mind of our reader in the course of this study. I mean, of course, *Moral Certainty*. What is the relationship between the probable certainty spoken of by Saint Thomas¹⁹⁹ and the moral certainty spoken of in the modern age?

This relationship is not simple, because the word MORAL has two meanings, both of which are relevant to our subject.

“This noun, *moral*, comes etymologically from the word *custom*, affected by slight variations. For in Greek *ethos*, when written with the short epsilon, ε, (ἔθος), means morals, moral virtue. Written with the long eta, η, it means custom (ἥθος). Thus, today, by the word, *moral*, we sometimes today mean custom and sometimes what has to do with vice and virtue.”²⁰⁰

“The word *mos* has two meanings. Sometimes, it means what is customary, as in this text from Acts 15: Unless you are acircumcised according to the custom, *morem*, of Moses, you

¹⁹⁸ Cf. *La Crédibilité et l'Apologétique* (1st ed.), *ibid*.

¹⁹⁹ I am not aware of anywhere that St. Thomas ever utters the word *moral certainty*.

²⁰⁰ In II *Ethic.*, lect. 1.

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cannot be saved. But sometimes it signifies a natural or quasi-natural inclination to a given action: this is the sense in which we speak of the *morals* of animals, as in this text from Macabees: *Leonum more irruentes in hostes prostraverunt eos*, charging like lions into the enemies, they overthrew them. And this is how the word *mos* is understood from Psalm 67: *qui habitare facis unius moris in domo*, you who make men of one manner to dwell in a house... In this way, moral virtue is denominated from the word *mos*, understood in the sense of a natural or quasi-natural inclination to action. And this meaning is very close to the other, for custom also changes into nature and produces inclinations similar to natural inclinations.”²⁰¹

Therefore, the word *moral* means: 1° that which is customary, ordinary, and habitual; 2° that which derives from a natural principle, from a habit, from the morals of a subject, whether natural or acquired; and 3° in this second case, it takes on a more precise meaning whenever good or bad habits are involved.

It is not difficult to fit these notions into one or the other of the modalities of probable certainty.

1° The probable certainty of firm speculative belief, or vehement opinion, is not a merely customary, habitual certainty, whose value would be founded on the ordinary success (*ut in pluribus*) of its claims to truth. It is something more than that. Without being *de iure* certainty, it is a certainty founded on our natural speculative inclination towards the truth. Where does the exercise of this inclination come from? From the speculative value of *probabilissima*—from its unparalleled probability, to the point that it is akin to absolute truth. The probability of the object of firm belief, *fides*, is, in fact, the immediate prelude to truth, its *maximal* approximation, its ultimate prior disposition (*ultima dispositio praevia*), its property announcing in advance the

²⁰¹ *ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 1.

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essence from which it emanates: absolute evidence. Therefore, in this first case, probable certainty is *moral certainty*, in the sense of certainty begotten by what we might call *the mores of the speculative mind*, which are summed up in its intrinsic tendency towards absolute truth.

2° In common opinion—if we consider only its speculative productive-factor—probable certainty coincides with moral certainty, in the sense of true, customary, and habitual ordinary certainty. The probable, *verum ut in pluribus*, cannot communicate more to the mind. It begets neither scientific evidence nor the firmness of belief. But let us not say that it has no certainty. *Certitudo scientiae consistit in duobus, scilicet in evidentia et firmitate adhaesionis; certitudo autem fidei consistit in uno tantum, scilicet in firmitate adhaesionis. Certitudo vero opinionis in neutro.*²⁰² The certainty of science consists of two things, namely evidence and firmness of adherence; the certainty of faith, however, consists of only one, namely firmness of adherence. But, the certainty of opinion consists of neither.

However, as we have said, this certainty leaves room for volitional intervention. And, from then on, it is susceptible to extrinsic strengthening, which will enable it to claim, on new grounds—practical ones, that is—the title of moral certainty.

3° If common opinion is conceived under the influence of the will as the provider of the intellect’s good, its intrinsic certainty is related to the fundamental inclination of the will toward the good of man in general. Now, this inclination of the will is an inclination of nature. The probable certainty of opinion will therefore be called moral certainty in the second sense of the word *moral*. In other words, it is according to man’s mores. And this is why, in practice, every man is naturally the believer of his opinions. *Opinionem sequitur fides et persuasio.*²⁰³ His will,

²⁰² *In III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 3, ad 1.

²⁰³ See *In III De Anima*, lect 5, quoted above in the paragraph starting “The inclination of the common assent of opinion...”

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naturally interested in the good of his mind as well as the good of all the rest of his faculties, inclines him to hold as true in practice what he believes to be true, even though absolute proof is lacking. This is a universally experienced fact.

4° If common opinion is considered under the influence of the willing of the natural ends of human life, it receives from this contact an additional practically-practical certainty which is added to the intrinsic speculative certainty of opinion and to the speculatively-practical certainty we have been talking about. This is the case with those beliefs that are so firm as to be absolutely and placidly held, the ineradicable beliefs of mankind. The certainty thus obtained, while remaining probable certainty (because of the immediate object of the mind’s adherence) is moral certainty at its most firm. It is at one with the mores of humanity.

5° Finally, if common opinion is considered under the influence of the willing of *rational* ends, the same law of practical reinforcement of its certainty follows its course. But the certainty thus obtained will be said to be *moral* in a very special sense.²⁰⁴ *Mores proprie dicuntur humani*, says Saint Ambrose, approved by Saint Thomas.²⁰⁵ The word *moral*, in this case, does not refer to just any old human mores, but rather, to the very principle of human mores truly worthy of the name—to reason, the faculty of supreme ends that constitute the specifically human Ideal. Through the intermediary of the will that is rectified in relation to this ideal, something of the inclination to the Good, which constitutes the fundamental mores of the honest man, is as it were diffused into the intellect and enables it to adhere with strong certainty to contingent objects in harmony with man’s true good. This certainty remains probable, in view of its objective reasons; but its firmness is moral, given that it is produced by the morality of the subject who possesses it.

²⁰⁴ The third sense of the word *moral*.

²⁰⁵ See *ST* I-II, q. 1, a. 3.

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Such certainty is surely legitimate, since the Good coincides in itself with the true [*sic*], having arisen from the same primary source. However, as our moral instincts can err in their estimation of true contingent goods, these moral reinforcements must never replace the intrinsic criterion of moral truth.²⁰⁶ Their role will remain that of an *auxiliary support* to the assent of opinion. Within these limits, we can speak of moral probable certainty and *moral probabilism*, as well as *moral dogmatism*—but only within these limits.

6° The moral ideal in its highest expression is God; human morality pushed to its ultimate end is necessarily religious. Now, it is to be expected that God actively watches over those acts which ultimately lead to the extension of His reign. Probable certainty in moral and religious matters marks a moment in our orientation towards God. From a purely philosophical perspective, we can therefore admit that God himself intervenes to ensure that our contingent certainties correspond to the moral and religious Ideal they are intended to serve. And when He does, the assurance of our opinions, without speculatively departing from the order of probable certainty, will become *practically* absolute. This is supernatural moral certainty. This is what led the author of the Eudemian Ethics to say the words so often quoted by Saint Thomas: *His qui moventur per instinctum divinum non expedit consiliari secundum rationem humanam, sed quod sequantur interiorem instinctum ; quia moventur a meliori principio quam sit ratio humana*. It is not expedient for those who are moved by divine instinct to follow human reasoning; rather, they should follow their inner instinct, for they are moved by a better principle than human reason.²⁰⁷

And now we can answer the question that prompted this study. No, certainty is not opposed to probability. On the contrary, any rigorous understanding of the certainty that is

²⁰⁶ See *La Crédibilité et l'Apologétique* (1st ed.), 102ff, especially p. 106.

²⁰⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 68, a. 1.

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nowadays accepted—by all philosophers worthy of the name and by theologians without exception—under the name of *moral certainty* is only possible if, having examined the two terms of the antithesis, *certainty* and *probability*, one knows how to balance them in a measured way and weld them together into Saint Thomas’s unique expression, which is paradoxical only in appearance: *Certitudo probabilis*.

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A Note on the Nature of Topicality

Very Brief Translator’s Note

Here, I am presenting a translation of Ambroise Gardeil, “La topicité,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 5 (1911): 750–757. To understand Gardeil’s way of proceeding here, the reader should recall that the *Topics* of Aristotle are organized around the “loci” of what would come to be called “the predicables,” namely genus, species, property, and accident. Hence, Gardeil focus upon those *loci* as the most general and common-sensical sorts of subject matters for considering the topicality of arguments. Given the great deal of work that needs to be done among Scholastics on this topic, I refer the reader to my brief opening remarks in the previous article related to “the probable.”²⁰⁸

Gardeil’s Article

In an earlier article, I mentioned *Topicality* as a property of probable propositions, by reason of their matter, *ratione materiae*. There, I mentioned that I would take up this question elsewhere. I am repaying that promise in this article. It naturally has two parts:

- 1° What is Topicality?
- 2° Topicality, property of the Probable.

1. What is Topicality?

In ordinary language—which is the obligatory starting point for any philosophical analysis of any subject—the topicality of an argument is synonymous with its actual adaptation to the requirements of a question or objection. In a discussion, a topical answer is one that, to the

²⁰⁸ I would like to thank Mr. Mitchell Kengor for his help preparing this text.

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eyes and minds of those considering the matter, provides an exact solution to the question and, if I may put it this way, “hits the mark.”

Like any common notion, this one certainly reveals an existing reality, an objective modality of certain arguments. But it does not explain the uniqueness of the expression, *topicality*, a denomination that is untranslatable into French or English, one whose origin is, quite clearly, the Greek word *τόπος*, meaning, *place*.

How can the idea of “place,” i.e. the determinate position of a thing in space, be used to characterize arguments appropriate to the requirements of certain questions, objections, and interrogations? How can it be transposed into logic?

If we look at things from the outside and on the surface, we can form a first idea. A material place[, or as we will prefer, *locus*,] is a specific location where we can be sure to encounter a determinate object, thanks to the positional relationships between different bodies. A logical *locus* will similarly be, so to speak, the position of the organized content of human reason where we are sure that we will encounter certain arguments in response to certain classes of questions, so that, when this or that question arises, the dialectician has only to resort to his *locus*, in order, so to speak, to launch the argument that is encountered there and to enable it to fall, at just the right moment, upon the question raised.—This explanation goes some way towards explaining the impression of spontaneous, shared adherence that manifests itself in response to a topical argument. This is only natural, for the argument had already been recognized and carefully adapted beforehand to the question at hand.

If we follow the logic of this perspective, we might be tempted to think that the best *loci* for arguments are the fully formed sciences (*les sciences faites*), that their proofs have a first claim to the appellation *topics*. Indeed, they alone develop that orderly and definitive

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systematization of necessary proofs that enables one, on the one hand, to encounter them upon completely stable ground, and, on the other, to adequately resolve questions that might arise about this position. Scientific theorems, however, are not numbered among *loci*; they are not *topical*. Why not?

This is because, if we may say so, they are more suited to the science to which they belong than to serve as a focal point for arguments. Each scientific conclusion, resulting from its own unique demonstration, forms a logical element in an individual sense, though one that is also integral to the whole in which it is itself contained. To grasp its value, you need to know the whole of the science in question; you need to be a specialist. Specialists, however, are the exception, not the rule. Scientific theorems, therefore, will never have that universally accessible meaning which, in a discussion, makes everyone immediately and unanimously say: that’s it; what a topical answer; here is a kind of *je ne sais quoi* clean-cut answer that obviously confounds the objector or dismisses the questioner. No doubt, they have something better since they have in hand the fundamental and decisive reason for what they say: It is proven!—But to how few! And after how much thought and toil? And henceforth, the questioner has the upper hand (*et dès lors, l’interrogateur a beau jeu*). In scientific matters, an apodictic proof is worth infinitely more than all probable arguments; but on the middle terrain of dialectical research and human discussion, it does not have the same effect. And it is on this terrain of common adherence that topicality has currency.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ As a side note, let us observe that this is a frequent cause of illusion among those who, needing to address popular audiences, imagine that the closer they get to the fundamental reasons for things, the more they will be able to demonstrate and the more the audience will be convinced of their arguments. Doubtlessly, one should never approach a subject without having delved deeply into it. The possession of the heart of the matter provides an incomparable and inimitable boldness and vigor. Nonetheless, one must furthermore transform the power of these analytical or abstract scientific evidences into images and give them a tangible relief that strikes the listeners. The loftiest reasons become accessible to most listeners in the form of axioms or common sense reasoning, immediately accepted by the multitude. In this way they acquire a topical value.

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And this why we need to return to the heretofore superficial notion of *locus* so that we might deepen its meaning. We must look for the common root upon which are grafted both the quality that makes place a center of appropriate arguments and that which that gives those arguments their immediate, irresistible, common efficacy.

When we peruse the *Topics* written by the ancient logicians, we see that for them, *loci* are propositions that are both general in content and generally accepted. Far from relating, like scientific theorems, to a restricted domain of being and relying on reasons that are proper to each thing, dialectical *loci* aim at common aspects of realities, aspects that, by their very generality, are incessantly offered to the perception and control of all men. Because of the constant use made of these aspects—and the propositions or simple reasonings in which they are formulated— along with the kind of primary grasp they exert on the intellect’s spontaneous activity, they are the sorts of things that garner mass assent. They are pre-philosophical and pre-scientific common-sense truths, identical in substance to the first truths of philosophy and science. This is what even a cursory reading of a treatise devoted to the *Topics* immediately suggests.

This indication will enable us to explain in a single stroke both the source-character of given arguments and that of the instant success that is characteristic of topical arguments.

And first of all, something that is general is naturally open to a host of determinations, which find therein their point of departure and continued support. Several questions, provided they have a certain affinity, sometimes can receive shared illumination in light of a single general axiom. This is not the definitive light, scientific evidence. Nonetheless, by taking this proposition as a major premise, subsuming to it appropriate and commonly accepted minor premises, we can construct arguments, which without being perfectly decisive, will circumscribe the question and

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provide an approximate solution. Now, let us be clear: these arguments will have a common center, namely the axiom that serves as their starting point and is, as it were, the source of their common probative value, the *locus* of these proofs. Thus, the generality of a proposition can make it the *locus* for other propositions, a very special *locus* of truth, a logical *locus* and not a material, quantitative locus.

Moreover, there’s nothing that receives the common approval of mankind like such generalities. Under the name of “common sense truths,” they constitute the intellectual heritage of humanity. And thus, it follows that simple arguments based on such propositions will meet with immediate, easy, and universal approval. These arguments will therefore be *topical* in the usual sense of the word.

But, as we just observed, they are already so, in the first sense, in the etymological sense, since every general major premise is a veritable *locus* of arguments. This is the justification for the twofold aspect of Topicality we have been considering, based on a single principle: the generality of propositions.

But although the generality of propositions may explain topicality, it nonetheless does not give the ultimate reason for it. That reason is as follows.

The first notion we form of things is that they are realities, that they are “of being.” *Primum quod cadit in apprehensione intellectus est ens.* Being is what first falls into the intellect’s apprehension. From the perspective of metaphysical reflection being is a very profound notion, for there is nothing more important than to have noticed that everything is “of being,” nothing but “of being,” down to its very depths. However, from the perspective of logic, it is the most superficial of notions, I mean, the one that first offers itself to our investigations. However, despite its generality, being has its own very precise determination, its own properties,

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its own laws—in other words, complex principles that explicate its notion and its intrinsic affiliations.

This quasi-essential nature, these properties, and these laws only remotely touch on the essences, properties, and laws of special, individualized beings, yet nonetheless, they profoundly are concerned with them, since every being, because it is “of being,” must realize these basic lineaments. Here, then, concretized in an example accessible to all, is the idea of these generalities, simultaneously able to circumscribe a question from afar and above and cause immediate and common agreement to a solution.

However, being is not the only notion accessible to common sense. The broad outlines of being—genus, properties, accidents—along with the laws that render them explicit are also the object of common knowledge. Languages are constituted by these relationships, and thus bear witness to their active and normal influence on the human outlook.

All these principles based on being are characterized by a twofold generality: logical generality as regards the principles proper to each specific form of knowledge; and subjective generality by virtue of the universal assent they meet with. And this dual property is what is encompassed by the term “common sense truths.” Common sense truths are at once principles common to a large number of truths, and commonly accepted principles.

Thus, we can see how much it is not in conformity to reality to set these two qualities in opposition and to say, with Rémi Hourcade: “These principles (dialectical principles) are *common*, not, however, as derived from a banal and vulgar cause of assent, namely common opinion, but because they immediately are concerned with the remote and common matter of all

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sciences, even the most specific—namely, genus, definition or species, property, and accident—and are susceptible to being applied to any of them.”²¹⁰

Our justification of Topicality rests on the very fundamental lineaments of Aristotelian noetics, on the first theorems concerning the knowledge of being. The two sides of topicality are explained *a radice*, from the root, once we understand everything contained in this little phrase: *primum quod cadit in intellectu est ens*.

To inventory the *loci*, all we will need to do is catalog the general statements, according to their subject matter and degree of generality, group them together, and organize them in relation to the questions. Thanks to the solidarities thus established between questions and answers, the dialectician will have an entire keyboard at his disposal. Once a question has been posed, all he needs to do is press the corresponding key, to set off a principle for resolving the matter, as is, i.e. in a non-scientific manner, though one that is nonetheless doubly valid: 1° in itself, because everything is “of being” to its core; 2° as regards common assent, because being is at home in every mind—in a word, it is a principle for a *topical* solution to questions that are raised.

2. Is Topicality a property of the probable?

1. At first glance, the attempt to connect the topicality of dialectical *loci* to probability seems to involve a particular difficulty.

Principles founded on being and what is immediately connected there to [*ses appartenances*] are immediate, analytical, necessary principles. Now, that which is analytic and necessary is something that is even more than the probable.

²¹⁰ Rémi Hourcade, “De Melchior Cano au P. Gardeil,” *Bulletin de Littérature ecclésiastique* (May 1910): 240.

To resolve this difficulty, we need only recall what we said about the admission of necessary propositions into the Ancients’ lists of probable propositions.²¹¹ Although necessary in themselves, such propositions can be entitled to be called contingent, either because we subjectively have only a confused, vague, unanalyzed knowledge of them, what Albert the Great calls *opinion of necessity*, or because they are only accessible with the help of more or less plausible (*vraisemblables*) objective signs, giving the *quia est* without revealing the *propter quid*.

Now, this is precisely the case for the common *loci* belonging to dialectics. The most rigorous principles are admitted only on the basis of common knowledge and common sense. Hence, the difficulty raised above is not really a difficulty at all. This is why the Topics are full of propositions *per se notae*, viewed, however, from the angle of probability.

2. But the *Topics* involves propositions that do not have this necessity. Such are, for example, propositions of fact, but which have sufficient evidence for themselves. For these propositions, topicality is only extrinsic and incomplete: extrinsic, because it derives solely from human approbation, and incomplete because it has only one of the two elements of a *locus*, namely its capacity to provoke adherence by virtue of the authorized testimony that approves it. It does not have the characteristic of serving as a center and point of attachment, a *locus*, for a certain number of arguments. Such are the commonplaces of history, which are of worth only through the unanimous approbation of historians. They are not *loci* in the full sense of the word.

This is why we said that topicality is a property of the probable *ratione materiae*, i.e. on account of the character of the propositions that by rights and more ordinarily are enumerated in the [*T*]opics, namely universal immediate propositions, concerning being and what is

²¹¹ **Translator’s note:** See the first article on probable certitude for more information regarding this point.

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immediately connected there to, property, species, genus, accident—matter that is remote from distinct and specific knowledge.

Only these propositions combine the two facets of topicality: to serve as a rallying point for a number of arguments, by virtue of their generality; to win common assent, by virtue of the common approval they give rise to.

But, note well that the ability to initiate several arguments is not accidental to the probable. To say *ratione materiae* is not the same as to say *per accidens*, for matter, though extrinsic to form, is connected to the essence: it is the *due* subject to this or that form, whereas accidents arise from extrinsic and adventitious causes.

Knowledge of being and of the generalities of being belongs by rights to the human mind. *Objectum intellectus est ens*. For this right to be effective, it is not necessary that knowledge be distinct and analyzed. Much to the contrary, such knowledge is the privilege of the few. The masses can only know these universal principles in a kind of state of indistinctness, which is sufficient for them—in other words, *through opinions*. And thus, the due matter of probable knowledge is naturally constituted by generalities about being and what is immediately connected there to. There is nothing adventitious in this attribution.

Therefore, it is not without a profound logical reason that Aristotle gathered together in a single treatise the consideration of probability and that of topicality, understood in the sense of the generality of propositions. And we can see the common root from which his entire treatise springs: being is that which is most general, most proper for serving as a common *locus* for all compartments of knowledge. And, being is, at the same time, that which is most generally known and accepted by the common man.

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