

THE NATURE
OF
THE EMOTIONS.
FROM THE VIEWPOINTS OF
ST. THOMAS AND WILLIAM JAMES

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I Introduction

II Background in St. Thomas

- A. Distinction between organic and inorganic powers of the soul
- B. Process of sensitive cognition
- C. Relation between the sensitive cognitive powers and the sensitive appetitive powers
- D. Sensitive appetitive powers
- E. Sensitive appetitive acts

III St. Thomas' Theory on the nature of passion

- A. Feelings and emotions
- B. Passions as organic activities
- C. Twofold change essential
- D. Genesis
- E. Definition

IV James' Theory on the nature of emotion

- A. Signification of the term "emotion"
- B. Genesis and nature
- C. Physiological explanation

V Conclusion

Introduction

In 1225 a son was born to a countess in the small Italian village of Roccaseca. Six centuries later, in the year 1842, the wife of a famous literary figure gave birth to a boy in the city of New York. The father of the first child was Landulph, Count of Aquino, and his son's name, Thomas. The second child's father was Henry James, who named his son William. Each of these children was to become a distinguished philosopher in his own age.

Of course their educational background differed as a result of the period in which each lived. In Thomas' lifetime Aristotle's works were the center of attraction. While on the other hand, William James lived at a time when men like Darwin were bringing about a scientific revolution. When Thomas traveled he either walked or rode on a four-legged creature of some sort; whereas the means of communication were vastly superior in James' age. Thomas was sent a few miles away from home to receive his primary education from the monks of the Abbey of Monte Cassino. When he was fourteen he traveled a little further to study humanities at the University of Naples, where at nineteen he joined the Friars Preachers. After having been received into the order as a novice, he set out for Paris. However, he did not remain long in Paris but left for Cologne, where the Dominicans had recently established a Studium Generale. In James' case it was an entirely different story. Little more than a year after his birth he was taken to Europe;

a year and a half later he was back in the United States. So it went for the remainder of his youth, one journey after another. Within twenty-five years he crossed the Atlantic Ocean eight times. He studied in approximately ten different cities before he completed his education, and within each city he often attended several schools. When it came to a decision as to what course in life he would pursue, he was torn between science and art. He tried art for a year but later entered Lawrence Scientific School, where he studied comparative anatomy and physiology. He finished up at Harvard Medical School.

Thomas began his teaching career at Paris in 1252. His early years of teaching were devoted to commenting on the Book of Sentences, which was at that time a widely-used theological manual. It was during this period that he wrote his first philosophical treatise, De Ente et Essentia. Four years after he began to teach, he received a chair of Theology by virtue of a special privilege from the pope. About 1276 he started to work on the Summa Theologica.

James' first teaching position was at Harvard as assistant professor in an undergraduate course of Physiology and Hygiene. However, in 1876 he was allowed to offer a course in Physiological Psychology and at the same time set up a psychological laboratory. One year later his course was absorbed into the Philosophy department.

In the year 1872, Darwin's book The Expression of the Emot-

tions in Man and Animals was published. It enjoyed wide circulation throughout the world. In the United States, James read it and was greatly impressed, as is evidenced by the use he later made of it. In 1884 James wrote an article for Mind which he entitled "What is an Emotion?" In this article he put forth, for the very first time, his seemingly-revolutionary theory on the nature of the emotions. A year later Carl Lange, a Danish psychologist, developed a theory that was surprisingly similar in many of its conclusions. Hence, the theory which these two men developed almost simultaneously, and yet independently, is commonly called the James-Lange Theory. The year 1893 saw the publication of James' Principles of Psychology, in which he set forth his theory once again; but at this time he had Lange's work at hand and was thereby able to strengthen his original position. The following year he answered many of the objections to his theory in an article entitled "The Physical Basis of Emotion".

It is not my purpose in writing this paper to prove the validity of either theory. I merely wish to give an objective presentation of each and then briefly compare them. I fear that I have already failed in my purpose by assigning a greater part of the paper to a consideration of St. Thomas' thought than to that of James but I have tried to be as objective as possible under the circumstances.

Background in St. Thomas

ST. Thomas, in speaking of the activities of the soul, draws this distinction:

...quaedam operationes sunt animae quae exercentur sine organo corporali, ut intelligere et velle.... Quaedam vero operationes sunt animae quae exercentur per organa corporalia, sicut visio per oculum, auditus per aurem: et simile est de omnibus aliis operationibus nutritivae, et sensitivae partis.¹

In drawing this distinction he has laid the groundwork for a separation between the two different classes of powers belonging to the soul, which are related to these activities as their principles. He goes on to point out that those activities which are performed without a corporeal organ belong to powers which are present in the soul as in their subject. Whereas the operations performed through a bodily organ belong to powers which are present in the composite of body and soul as in their subject.

It is important to note at this point that St. Thomas considered all the powers as being related to the soul, if not as to their subject, at least as to their principle. This is evident from the fact that it is through the soul that the composite receives its power to perform the activities requiring a corporeal organ.

From the above quotation, one can see that the Angelic Doctor thought of the intellectual powers, intellect and will, as those which have as their subject the soul and it alone. While on the other hand, he clearly intends that the vegetative and

sensitive powers be placed in the composite.

The terms which will be used to denote these different classes are organic and inorganic. Organic includes in its scope both vegetative and sensitive powers. Inorganic will be used in reference to the intellectual powers only. The organic are termed such because of their dependence upon a corporeal organ, or at least upon the body, for their existence and operation. On the other hand, we have the intellectual powers which do not depend on any part of the body and are therefore called inorganic.

Since the intellect and the will have as their subject the soul alone and consequently exist and operate apart from the body, they are said to be subjectively independent of the body. The very idea of the intellect understanding by means of a corporeal organ is unimaginable. For the intellect enables us to know all material things in an immaterial fashion. This would not be possible if it had to function through an organ, for certainly the determinate nature of the organ would stand in the way of such an universal knowledge. This, then, is the conclusion St. Thomas draws:

Ipsa igitur intellectuale principium, quod dicitur mens, vel intellectus, habet operationem per se, cui non communicat corpus. Nihil autem potest per se operari nisi quod per se subsistit; non enim est operari nisi entis in actu;... Relinquitur igitur animam humanam, quae dicitur intellectus, vel mens, esse aliquid incorporeum et subsistens.²

However, these powers are objectively dependent upon the

body and its sense organs, because they are basically indigent with respect to an object.

Thus without the body and its sense organs the soul would be cut off from all intelligible natures and could never formulate an idea. Hence, it has a body in order that through the sense organs of that body its intellective power may attain to its intelligible object. From the data supplied the soul by the senses, the intellect abstracts the intelligible nature of material substances.³

Among the organic powers we find the vegetative powers, which are truly dependent upon the body for their operation and their existence. The vegetative faculties are divided into three groups: augmentative, nutritive, and generative. The augmentative and nutritive powers are not limited to the use of any one organ but are spread throughout the whole body. On the other hand, the generative power is usually connected with a single organ through which it carries out its operation.

The sensitive faculties are divided into cognitive and appetitive. All of them, except touch, are dependent upon an organ, apart from which they can neither exist nor operate. The various external senses are connected with such organs as the eyes, ears, or nose. The sense of touch is an exception to the general rule, since it is evidently spread over the entire extent of the body. The organs of the internal sense powers and the sensitive appetites are placed by some psychologists in the cerebrum, because of the evidence gathered by leading physiologists.

The Thomistic division of the external sense powers is

fivefold: sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. Each of these faculties is passive, in so far as it relies upon a quality present in some external reality to bring about a change in it. Consequently, this division of the external senses is based upon the number of completely distinct sensible qualities which the extrinsic object presents to the sentient subject. From experience we can discover that there are five aspects of this sort: color, sound, odor, flavor, and tangible quality. Therefore, one may logically conclude that there are five corresponding powers, which are commonly called sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

The sensations of the external senses always involve two alterations, a physical one and a spiritual one. The physical mutation is a necessary condition for the psychological change.

All these sensations come to us through physical effects produced in our sense organs by the impact-----direct or indirect----- of external objects. Thus, we see an object only when the light from the object is thrown upon the retina of our eye, producing certain physiological movements in the retina; and we hear only when some vibrating substance sets the tympanum of our ear in vibration. These physical movements in the sense organs, and the subsequent movements which they cause in the nervous system and brain, are not sensations, but they are the necessary physiological conditions of sensation. We have sensation when physical causes in the world around us act upon our sense organs, and through the physical changes produced in them, somehow produce in us conscious sensory apprehension of the things in the world around us.

The physical change, then is not the sensation, but a sine qua non for the sensation.

The spiritual change occurs by virtue of an image or inten-

tion of the sensible quality's being received into the sense organ.

The second group of cognitive powers on the sense level are the internal senses. There are four: the sensus communis, the imagination, the memory, and the vis cogitativa. Each, of course, has its own particular function. The sensus communis distinguishes, correlates, and unifies the various impressions of the external senses. The imagination retains and preserves the impressed species of the external cognitive faculties, after the sensible object has left off affecting the sense organs. This is the power which makes it possible for man to form a image, or more properly, a phantasm of an object perceived in the past. It may conserve an exact replica of the original impression, and then again it may produce a combination of different impressions. The phantasm which it originally produces is the result of the activity of the sensus communis. These two powers are closely related; the sensus communis unifies the different impressions coming from the outer senses, and the phantasy forms an image of the extramental object, preserving it for later use.

On the intellectual level we see that man has a cognitive power, the intellect, an appetitive power, the will. Corresponding to these faculties on the sensitive level, we find the vis cogitativa and the sensitive appetite. Moreover, just as it is possible to use the name ratio particularis to denote

the cogitative power, so also the term voluntas sensualis can be used to signify the sensitive appetite. Besides, they have a relationship similar to that existing between the two higher powers; for, as St. Thomas says, "Loco autem aestimativae virtutis est in homine,....vis cogitativa,....Unde ab ea natus est moveri in homine appetitus sensitivus."⁹ In fact, the Angelic Doctor insists that the appetite is obedient to the cogitative power rather than the intellect, because the former power is the one that draws conclusions concerning singulars. However, it is indirectly obedient to the intellect, wherein are found the principles from which these particular conclusions are drawn.

On the other hand, St. Thomas also says, "Natus est enim moveri appetitus sensitivus non solum ab aestimativa in aliis animalibus, et cogitativa in homine, quam dirigit universalis ratio, sed etiam ab imaginatio et sensu."¹⁰ This is the basis for an explanation of the appetit's capacity to go against the bidding of the universal reason and tend toward a purely sensible good. The full explanation lies in the fact that, as a result of this role that the imagination and sense can play in moving the appetite, universal reason exercises only a political control over the sensitive appetite. Thus, the appetite possesses a certain degree of freedom under the reign of reason.

The sensitive appetite is a generic power and can be subdivided into two distinct specific powers, namely, the con-

cupiscible and irascible appetites. The concupiscible appetite is a tendency to obtain that which is advantageous and to shun that which is noxious; the irascible appetite moves the human soul to overcome difficulties in the acquirement of a good and in the avoidance of an evil.

St. Thomas, when speaking of the acts of either sensitive appetite uses the term "passion", and designates those acts which belong to the concupiscible appetite as concupiscible passions and those of the irascible appetite as irascible passions. Furthermore, he divides each of these general categories into a number of specific passions. The specific concupiscible passions are given as: love, hate, desire, aversion, pleasure, and sadness. And the specific irascible passions are: hope, bravery, despair, fear, and anger.

Now, we have seen how the Angelic Doctor separated the irascible and concupiscible passions into eleven species, but we have not considered his reason for doing so. What is the underlying foundation for this division of his? Father O'Brien gives us the answer in these words:

As it is related to our concupiscible or irascible appetite, good has the power to attract us and evil has the power to repel us. Good excites in us a tendency to push on to attain the good; evil excites in us a tendency to get away or to flee from the evil. This is the fundamental basis for distinguishing the various passions.¹¹

There is another factor which plays an important role in the division of the passions and this is the relationship which

good or evil has to either of the sensitive appetites, precisely insofar as it is near or distant, possessed or unpossessed.

Since the object of the concupiscible appetite is anything which seems pleasant or unpleasant to man's sensitive nature, man is normally drawn toward or repelled from such things when they are presented to him. The first reaction to a sensible good is love. St. Thomas describes love in this fashion: "Ipsa aptitudo sive proportio appetitus ad bonum est amor, qui nihil aliud est quam complacentia boni..."¹² Its degrees of intensity will vary with the capacity of the sensible good to draw forth a reaction from the appetite. It should also be noted that love can be awakened by a good which is not possessed as well as one that is possessed. Moreover, an initial reaction of this sort, which is directed to a good not yet possessed, normally excites the passion of desire. Desire is a tendency to make a certain good one's own. As a result of desire or concupiscence, it may happen that one begins to exert himself in order to take possession of the attractive object. If this proves impossible, his desire will lapse back into the initial stage of love or endure as an ineffective desire. But, if he does obtain the desired good, another passion results, namely, pleasure. Pleasure is that feeling of satisfaction which attends the realization of one's end, that is, the attainment of the good.

It is a different story when someone is presented with a

sensible evil. For this draws forth from his concupiscible appetite a primary reaction directly opposite that of love; and this response travels under the name of hate. Hate is that feeling of repulsion one experiences upon apprehending something unpleasant to his sensitive nature. Just as in the case of love, this passion is intensified in proportion to the evilness of the object and can be excited either by an evil which is possessed or one that is not. If the evil is something in the background which is not presently threatening the individual, the primary passion of hate will endure. But if the evil becomes more menacing, and there is a strong possibility that it will affect this person; the passion of aversion will be aroused in all probability. One can see a relation between the passion of desire and this passion; for the latter is a tendency towards an unpossessed good in order to make it one's own, and the former is an inclination to avoid possession of an evil. Aversion influences one to take definite measures in order to ward off the evil which no longer threatens from a distance. Sadness is that passion which an individual experiences when a particular evil overtakes him, and he is resigned to its presence. This passion is the correlate of pleasure, which results from the attainment of the desired good.

Because the object of the irascible appetite is the sensible good which is difficult to obtain and the sensible evil which is equally hard to avoid, one must presuppose the pres-

ence of a concupiscible passion in the agent prior to the awakening of an irascible passion. This becomes more evident with the realization that the irascible passions are the "bodyguards" as it were, of the concupiscible passions. If you start to give a lion a piece of meat, you awaken a desire in him for that meat; if you then attempt to put it back in the container, you will more than likely get a violent reaction of some sort, for you will have excited another passion in him, an irascible passion.

In seeking a good a person may feel that it is possible to gain possession of this particular object, but only after a good deal of effort. The reaction which these circumstances bring forth from the irascible appetite is the passion of hope. However, if the same person comes to the conclusion that the good he seeks is unattainable, he literally loses hope, and despair is the resultant passion. On the other hand, if it is not a question of difficultly pursuing a sensible good, but of shunning an evil, then another group of passions is involved. Provided that this evil has not yet overtaken the individual and is considered by him to be conquerable by an effort, the passion of bravery will probably be elicited. It could happen, however, that even though the evil has not befallen this person, still he sees no way of averting it; the passion which results from these circumstances is that of fear. After the evil has come upon him, the passion of anger may be excited if he be-

believes that he can rid himself of that which was formerly insurmountable.

St. Thomas' Theory on the nature of passion

As we have seen, the Thomistic term for an act of a sensitive appetite is passion. However, modern psychologists prefer not to use this term; instead they speak of feelings and emotions. That the term has fallen into disuse may not really constitute a loss, if one understands by feeling a mild passion and by emotion a stronger passion. In fact, the distinction might even prove helpful in discriminating between the degree of intensity present in a movement of a sensitive appetite. But on what basis can one make such a discrimination and separate a feeling from an emotion? Fr. Brennan answers this question in the following manner:

Thus, we might think of our emotions as having high intensities, and of our feelings as having low intensities. Because intensities are quantitative in character, they must proceed from the body in some manner. They are, in fact, the physiological changes that Aquinas regards as an essential part of every passion. So true is this that only creatures possessed of bodies can rightfully be said to elicit passions. The differences between feeling and emotion, are simply differences in amounts of organic disturbance that each act of the appetite provokes.¹³

In so far as Father Brennan has pointed out "that only certain creatures possessed of bodies can rightfully be said to elicit passions,"¹⁴ he has provided us with a basis for a reconsideration of the difference between organic and inorganic activities. Inorganic operations are those of a power whose sub-

ject is in the soul alone; whereas organic operations are those of a power whose subject is in the composite of body and soul. Moreover, passions are the acts of a sensitive appetite, and the sensitive appetite is a power which has its seat in the composite. Therefore, the passions are organic activities. In fact, St. Thomas uses two passions, anger and fear, to exemplify what he means by operations which are proper to the composite.

Quamvis autem animae sit aliqua operatio propria, in qua non communicat corpus, sicut intelligere; sicut tamen aliquae operationes communes sibi et corpori, ut timere, irasci, et sentire et huiusmodi. Haec enim accidunt secundum aliquam transmutationem alicuius determinatae partis corporis. Ex quo patet quod simul sunt animae et corporis operationes.¹⁵

Note that he gives as evidence, in establishing that these passions are the joint operations of soul and body, the fact that they "accidunt secundum aliquam transmutationem alicuius determinatae partis corporis".¹⁶ This is important to keep in mind; for, as it has already been seen, St. Thomas considers physiological changes "as an essential part of every passion"¹⁷

Both the physiological changes, which take place in the different parts of the body and the spiritual movement of the sensitive appetite are required to form the essence of passion. "...in passionibus animae est sicut formale ipse motus appetitivae potentiae, sicut autem materiale transmutatio corporalis, quorum unum alteri proportionatur."¹⁸ Consequently, the corporeal changes are not merely conditions to a passion, as is

the case with a sensation, but an essential part. However, just as a sensation does not consist in physiological changes alone; so also a passion does not involve physical changes alone, but a spiritual change as well.

Is this psychical change similar to that of sensation? This question requires a negative answer, since the spiritual change is of an entirely different nature in each case. In sensation, the sense power receives an image of a particular quality of the external object; and the act is completed when the extramental reality has an intentional existence in the sentient subject. Whereas, with passion, the appetitive power draws the soul to or away from the extrinsic object as it is in rerum natura; and the movement is only terminated when the one desiring is conveyed toward the object of his desire.

On the other hand, one can see a perfect symmetry in the relationship between sensation and passion. The external reality is given an intentional existence in the sentient subject by means of a physical change in the sense organ and a spiritual change in the sense power. Then, the internal senses work on the product of the various external senses and make it more appetible, as it were. Following upon the cognition of the internal sense, a psychical movement of the sensitive appetite may occur. And finally, as a result of this spiritual movement, physiological changes take place in the different parts of the body. "...anima naturaliter movet

corpus, spiritualis motus animae naturaliter est causa transmutationis corporalis."¹⁹

Now that the different parts of a passion have been gleaned, examined, and ordered; it is possible to give the Thomistic definition for passions: "Sic igitur actus appetitus sensitivi, in quantum habent transmutationem corporalem annexam, passiones dicuntur,...."²⁰ With this, we can continue on to a consideration of James' Theory.

James' Theory on the nature of emotion

William James divides emotions into two groups, the subtler and the coarser. The coarser emotions are those "in which one recognizes a strong organic reverberation".²¹ While on the other hand, he describes the subtler emotions as "those whose organic reverberation is less obvious and strong".²² He, himself, poses the question as to which of these groups the term "emotion" can more properly be applied:

For which sort of feeling is the word "emotion" the more proper name-- for the organic feeling which gives the rank character of commotion to the excitement, or for that more primary pleasure or displeasure in the object, or in the thought of it, to which commotion and excitement do not belong.²³

And he answers his own query in this manner:

I myself took for granted without discussion that the word "emotion" meant the rank feeling of excitement, and that the special emotions were names of special feelings of excitement, and not of mild feelings that might remain when the excitement was removed.²⁴

For this reason, in defining the nature of the emotion, he

makes it quite clear that he is restricting himself to the coarser emotions. He is only interested in those feelings wherein a tide of corporeal agitation attends some perception or exciting thought pattern. He is quick to recognize the fact that organic agitation has been traditionally thought of as the expression of the emotion, which is in turn usually considered to be an affective mental state. The order of sequence which has been commonly accepted is: perception, emotion, expression. In other words, given an exciting object or situation, there follows a mental cognitive state, which in turn brings about a mental affective state and finally an organic disturbance of some kind. However, the sequence James proposes is this: perception, organic mutation, emotion. Moreover, he places the emotion in the feeling of the organic changes as they occur.

My thesis on the contrary is that the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion. Common sense says we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, and the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike or tremble, because we are sorry angry, or fearful as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we could not actually feel afraid or angry.²⁵

Therefore, emotions are only the feelings of various changes taking place throughout the body as a result of something exciting being perceived. What exactly does this involve? First of all, something comes into contact with a sense-organ; an impulse is conveyed to the sensory center in the brain, where it is perceived. Immediately, motor impulses travel along their predestined course to different parts of the body, where they bring about changes in the skin, muscles or viscera. These changes are transmitted to the brain via sensory channels and are there perceived in the same manner as had been the case with the object-originally-sensed. "...and these alterations, perceived, like the original object in as many portions of the cortex, combine with it in consciousness and transform it from an object-simply-apprehended into an object-emotionally-felt."²⁶

Conclusion

How does this compare with what St. Thomas said on the nature of the passions? First of all, the formational sequence which James chooses to oppose, namely: perception, emotion, expression, is almost exactly what the Angelic Doctor would propose to defend, except for the fact that he would not term the second phase "emotion". For, St. Thomas would reserve this term for the combination of the second and third steps. On the other hand, William James would give the name "emotion" to the third step exclusively. However, both philosophers agree that

some organic change must occur before you can have an emotion. Still, there is no room for a psychical change in James' theory; whereas with St. Thomas this plays a dominant role in the formation of a passion. And yet, James says of his theory:

Let not this view be called materialistic.....and if anyone finds materialism in the thesis now defended, that must be because of the special processes invoked. They are sensational processes, processes due to inward currents set up by physical happenings. Such processes have, it is true, always been regarded by the platonizers in psychology as having something peculiarly base about them.²⁷

Supposing that St. Thomas agreed with James in his theory that the emotions were nothing more than "sensational processes" of organic reactions to exciting objects or thought patterns, he would still have to qualify his statement and include the more essential psychical change. Surely you would not find the Angelic Doctor among James' "platonizers, nor could he be labeled a materialist by any means. As Abbot Vonier puts it, "Evidently Catholic psychology has adopted a via media between rank materialism and idealism run wild."²⁸

FOOTNOTES

1 S.T. I, q. 77, a. 5, c.

2 S.T. I; q. 75, a. 2, c.

3 Benignus, F.S.C., Nature, Knowledge, and God (Milwaukee, 1947), p.208.

4 Ibid., pp. 211-212.

5 Rudolf Allers, "The Vis Cogitativa and Evaluation," New Scholasticum, XV (1941), 197.

6 S.T. I, q. 81, a. 3, c.

7 Patrick O'Brien, C.M., Emotions and Morals (New York, 1950), p. 44.

8 Ibid., p. 44.

9 S.T. I, q. 81, a. 3, c.

10 S.T. I, q. 81, a. 3, ad 2.

11 O'Brien, p. 37.

12 S.T. I-II, q. 25, a. 2, c.

13 Robert Brennan, O.P., Thomistic Psychology (New York, 1941), p. 152.

14 Ibid..

15 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles (Rome, 1878), p. 194.

16 Ibid., p. 194.

17 Brennan, p. 152.

18 S.T. I-II, q. 44, a. 1, c.

19 S.T. I-II, q. 37, a. 4, ad 1.

20 S.T. I, q. 20, a. 1, ad 1.

21 William James, Principles of Psychology (Chicago, 1955), p. 743.

22 Ibid., p. 743.

FOOTNOTES

23 William James, Collected Essays and Reviews (New York, 1920), p. 361.

24 Ibid., p. 362.

25 Willaim James and Carl Lange, The Emotions (Baltimore, 1922), p. 12.

26 William James, Principles of Psychology (Chicago, 1955), p. 758.

27 Ibid., p. 745.

28 Abbot Vonier, The Collected Works of Abbot Vonier (Westminster, 1952), p. 18, vol. III.

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