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## ***The Semiotic Animal***

### ***A postmodern definition of human being superseding the modern definition 'res cogitans'***

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A postmodern humanism consistent with the thought of Thomas Aquinas requires a new definition of human being, one which extends the classical understanding of «rational animal» on the basis of a study of what is distinctively human within the action of signs. Ancient and medieval philosophy was generally “realistic”, but failed to distinguish thematically between *objects* existing as such only in knowledge and *things* existing whether or not known. The understanding of the human being that accompanied this orientation was expressed in the formula “rational animal” (*animal rationale*). Modern philosophy came to an understanding of the difference between objects existing in knowledge and things existing independently of knowledge, but at the price of failing to show how things can themselves become objects. The understanding of human being that accompanied the modern divorce of objects from things was enshrined in the formula “thinking thing” (*res cogitans*). Philosophy became “postmodern” when, through work recovering and advancing the original semiotic consciousness of the Latin Age systematized in the 17<sup>th</sup> century work of John of St. Thomas, it became possible to understand how, through the action of signs, objects and things are interwoven in the fabric of human experience that transcends the modern opposition of realism to idealism. The understanding of human being that develops from and together with this postmodern perspective is precisely captured in the formula “semiotic animal” (*animal semeioticum*).

That humanism presupposes a focused definition of the human being is well understood. Humanism, like philosophy itself, has known several epochs and guises. A postmodern humanism, therefore, presupposes some distinctive focus in its understanding of humanity, and I have come to think that this requirement is best met, particularly in a Thomistic context, by the formula “semiotic animal”.

Semiotics is a word that is only beginning to be recognized in its theoretical importance among Thomistic thinkers. There are many reasons for this lag.

For one thing, the developing body of knowledge that semiotics names is one that began to be thematized and organized as a field of investigation only in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: semiotics is the knowledge that arises from the study of the action of signs, called “semiosis” (after the work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce). So “semiotics” names the

knowledge that corresponds to the awareness and study of semiosis. The basic ideas in this area were heavily influenced by late Latin thinkers, in particular Duns Scotus and the Conimbricenses. These last, in turn, were teachers of the last of the great Latin commentators on St. Thomas, John of St. Thomas (John Poinot), who, in his own turn, was the first systematically to demonstrate the unity of the subject matter of semiotics as an area of possible inquiry in his *Treatise on Signs* of 1632.<sup>1</sup>

For another thing, even though John of St. Thomas was the first systematically to establish the foundations of semiotics as a distinct subject matter, it remains that the role of the action of signs in the developing and sustaining of the fabric of human experience, both collective and individual, has only gradually made its way to the foreground of scientific and philosophical inquiry. Hence, not surprisingly, the seminal work of John of St. Thomas in demonstrating the importance for philosophy of a perspective which transcends the modern struggle between realism and idealism was lost to history, as it were, a vain anticipation of the further horizon of a postmodern intellectual culture and epoch that modernity, in philosophy's unfolding history, would, by its struggle with the opposition of "idealism" to "realism", define and show the need for.

We are, vis-à-vis the postmodern era, in modern thought roughly at the stage of Latin thought at the time of the publication of Galileo's *Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. At that time, the Latin Age of scholasticism seemed to be in full bloom and ascendancy; but in fact something radically new was aborning, and "modernity", with its establishment of science in the modern sense ("ideoscopic" as opposed to "cenoscopic" knowledge, as we would say<sup>2</sup>), was the light to the future. At this time, the modern age of science and idealistic philosophy seem to be in full bloom and ascendancy; but in fact something radically new is aborning, and "postmodernity", with its establishment of the major tradition of semiotics (as opposed to the latent idealism of "semiology", as we have elsewhere shown<sup>3</sup>) as the positive essence of postmodernity in philosophy, is the light to the future. Semiotics in its major tradition recovers the *ens reale* insisted upon as knowable by scholastic realism; yet at the same time semiotics demonstrates the objectivity of *ens rationis* in the social construction of species-specific realities among biological organisms. With this twofold accomplishment semiotics manifests the distinctiveness of

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<sup>1</sup> See, in the references at the end, the entries under Deely 1985 and Poinot 1632a for the status and provenance of this treatise with John of St. Thomas' *Cursus Philosophicus*.

<sup>2</sup> See the Index entries on this distinction in Deely 2001: 865 & 910.

<sup>3</sup> See the anthology *Frontiers in Semiotics* under Deely, Williams and Kruse 1986; see also Sebeok 2001 in the references at the end of this essay.

cultural reality in the human species as the *locus* where the differences between *ens reale* and *ens rationis* become knowable and distinguishable as such consequent upon the human grasp of *ens primum cognitum*.

That monads, our thinking selves, have no windows was not the hard saying for the early moderns that it came to seem in late modernity. Still less had this view the character of a sophism too clever by half, as it appears in a postmodern light. Leibniz, indeed, spoke for the mainstream modern development when he adopted this view as the essence of his monadology, that little work which was itself the quintessence and summary modern statement about the nature of reality. What we call the physical universe is simply the totality of windowless monads, each locked in the living theater of its own representations.

But the moment people began to thematize their experience of communication and to think of communication as such as something real, the moment they began to think of *that* experience as a proper starting point for philosophy, the days of modern philosophy were numbered. For with the substitution of the experience of communication for ideas as the point of departure for considering “the nature and extent of humane understanding”, with a belief in the occasional success of communication as the guiding notion for developing the consequences of that point of departure, postmodernism had begun.

The “way of signs” as alternative to modern philosophy’s “way of ideas” was a turn of events strangely presaged in the conclusion of John Locke’s *Essay* of 1690, better known commonly for the launching of empiricism as a counter to rationalist idealism, the two together to become the main sub-currents in the sea of modern idealism.<sup>4</sup> Yet we find in this anomaly a key to answering what the Holy Father<sup>5</sup> well-called “the delicate question of the demarcation of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Deely 1994 and 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Wojtyła 1998: ¶191: “A quibusdam subtilioribus auctoribus aetas nostra uti tempus ‘post-modernum’ est designata. Ita verbum idem ... in provinciam deinde philosophiae est translatum, at certa semper ambiguitate signatum, tum quia iudicium de iis quae uti ‘post-moderna’ appellantur nunc affirmans nunc negans esse potest, tum quia nulla est consensio in perdifficili quaestione de variarum aetatum historicarum terminis.” (“Our age has been termed by some thinkers the age of ‘postmodernity’. The term ... was finally transposed into the philosophical field, but has remained somewhat ambiguous, both because judgement on what is called ‘postmodern’ is sometimes positive and sometimes negative, and because there is as yet no consensus on the delicate question of the demarcation of the different historical periods.”) The point is

different historical periods” so far as this bears on how the designation “postmodern” ought to be received and established within “the philosophical field”.

For a postmodern future of intellectual culture is upon us, and has been for some time. Modernity reached its zenith, not its beginning,<sup>6</sup> as the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth; and by the time that century of full bloom and ascendancy drew to a close, again something radically new, all unnoticed, was aborning — to wit, a *postmodern* turn of intellectual culture restoring to the *res cogitans* not merely its lost animality, but also its uniqueness among the animals. For this postmodern turn, it was no longer a question of *reason* as the distinguishing mark, as it had been for the ancient *animal rationale* and the modern *res cogitans* alike, but something much broader, in which reason only participated in a distinctive way, something that linked the human self directly to the broader universe of nature not only animal but plant and purely physical as well. That something was the finally recognized *action of signs*, termed c.1883 “semiosis”.<sup>7</sup>

Now the most remarkable thing about this finally recognized distinctive action was the typical structure of being that it revealed. As biology is the science that arises from the study of the action of living things, so (gradually over the twentieth century, particularly in its final quarter) the knowledge that arises from the study of the action of signs (or semiosis) came to be called “semiotics”.<sup>8</sup> But the “being” revealed by the action of signs turned out to be something that could not exactly be pointed to, the way one can point to the heart or the lungs of a living organism. Worse than that, the being distinctive of sign as sign turned out to be something that could be neither seen nor heard nor touched, nor indeed perceived directly by any of the senses, external or internal. The being distinctive of sign and constitutive of it as sign turned out to be a singular exemplification of relation itself, “relation according to the way relation has its proper being as suprasubjective”, irreducible to inherent being (*esse in*), that most elusive of all the ways of being, often not recognized at all in earlier periods of philosophy as an element of *ens reale* in its own right, and

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precisely that raised by Schmitz (1990: 153—4): “in determining the meaning of post-modernity, when is modernity supposed to have ended? ... And in what is modernity supposed to have consisted? These questions are of decisive importance since the meaning given to the term ‘post-modernity’ is parasitic upon the meaning given to the term ‘modernity’.” Exactly this matter I have addressed in Deely 2001.

<sup>6</sup> See Santaella-Braga 1994.

<sup>7</sup> The coinage was by Charles Peirce, based on a reading and discussion of Philodemus i.54/40BC: see Fisch 1986.

<sup>8</sup> See Sebeok 1971: “Semiotics and Its Congers”

even considered by those who did recognize its proper reality<sup>9</sup> as “ens minimum” by comparison with substance and the inherent accidents of quantity, quality, action and passion.

Dependent upon individuals (the “fundamenta remota” or “subjects” of the relations) through their characteristics (the “fundamenta proxima”), the relations themselves linking individuals according to a certain order precisely *consist in* that order as irreducible to the subjectivity of the individuals ordered with all their inherent characteristics,<sup>10</sup> as an army on the march differs from that same army in disarray of flight signaling defeat of the soldiers – that same group of individuals with their inherent characteristics in both cases.

Now what is remarkable about relations in the behavior of animals is the very thing that made it possible for so many so long to deny their reality as irreducible constituents of *ens reale* — irreducible, that is, to the individuals and characteristics of individuals in which Ockham, for example, famously declared the whole of *ens reale* to consist. What is remarkable about relations, in fact, is actually twofold.

First of all<sup>11</sup> there is the *permeability* of relations to the otherwise distinct orders of what does and what does not exist independently of finite mind. One and the same relation, existing under changing circumstances, can be one time real (*ens reale*) and one time unreal (*ens rationis*), so subtly so that the creature anchoring the relations in any given case may be quite unaware of the difference — as, for example, the lover who continues on his way to meet his beloved blithely unaware that his love had been crushed by a meteor only minutes earlier en route to the same rendezvous.

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<sup>9</sup> Such as Thomas Aquinas, c.1254/6: *In I Sent.* d. 26 q. 2 art. 2c: “in relativis autem neutrum est sicut privatio alterius, vel defectum aliquem importans. cuius ratio est, quia in relativis non est oppositio secundum id quod relativum in aliquo est: sed secundum id quod ad aliud dicitur. unde quamvis una relatio habeat annexam negationem alterius relationis in eodem supposito, non tamen ista negatio importat aliquem defectum. quia defectus non est nisi secundum aliquid quod in aliquo natum est esse: unde cum id quod habet oppositionem relativam ad ipsum, secundum rationem oppositionis non ponat aliquid, sed ad aliquid, non sequitur imperfectio vel defectus; et ideo sola talis oppositio competit distinctioni personarum.” And *ibid.*, ad 2: “... minima distinctio realis quae possit esse ... tali distinctioni competit ens minimum, scilicet relatio.”

<sup>10</sup> See Poinset 1632a: Second Preamble “On Relation”, Article 2, 88ff.

<sup>11</sup> We will come to the second feature on p. below.

Poinsot was one of the first clearly to point out that “relations of reason”, *relationes rationis*, are actually extremely poorly named. What most fundamentally contrasts the order of *ens reale* to the order of *ens rationis* so-called is not the fact that *reason* forms the latter, but rather the fact that the order of *ens rationis* so-called has no existence without the activity of a finite mind intervening, *regardless of whether the “mind” in question is rational or not*. And the point goes yet deeper. The animal, rational or not, perforce constructs a plethora of *entia rationis* unwittingly, not as such, but as facilitating its function and orientation within the environment. In short, the function of *entia rationis* is not an optional but a necessary one in order for the bare physical surroundings to become a meaningful world, an Umwelt or objective world,<sup>12</sup> in which the organism has its central place. “Beings of reason”, formed and functioning wherever there are in nature cognitive organisms that need to orient themselves, are not only objective relations, they are *purely* objective relations. To call them “beings of reason” is simply the manifestation of an excess of anthropomorphism, according to which only beings *recognized* as mind-dependent are to be *called* mind-dependent.<sup>13</sup>

This conceit overlooks the fact that such beings exist normally before they are ever recognized for what they are. Were this not so, how much of human history would be different! The witches at Salem, to mention nothing of those in the European main lands of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, would hardly have been burned had the truth of their alleged witchcraft been properly perceived by the understanding of those who judged them. Go back as far as you like, as far as you can into the increasing darkness of human history: there are the gods, countless rivals making their demands if all is to be well in the particular world of some human group. “Beings of reason” exist and operate in the orientative behavior of all animals, including human animals, long before they are recognized as such, and even if they are never recognized

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<sup>12</sup> See the “Definition of Umwelt” in *What Distinguishes Human Understanding* (Deely 2002), pp. 126–143; also Kull 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Objectivity is precisely the existence of anything (real or unreal) *as known*. By contrast, subjectivity is the existence of anything as having an individual identity *separate* from other individuals and *independently* of being objectified or apprehended. Suprasubjectivity, or the being proper to relations, mind-dependent or mind-independent, is that *mode* of existence dependent upon subjectivity but contrasting to it as what *links* one thing to another contrasts with what *separates* one thing from another. This linkage may spring from psychological or from physical nature, or both; but only *reason* can recognize the difference between relation as such and the subjective fundament or ground of the relation, as also between relations provenating here from physical and there from psychological subjectivity. It is this last distinctiveness of reason that warrants the otherwise unwarrantable traditional designation of mind-dependent relations as “*entia rationis*”. See the full discussion in Deely 2001: 350–354.

as such (which is always the case, in fact, among the animals other than human). Yet relations which allow the animal to orientate itself have no reality outside its objective world, within which the system of orientation is precisely a network of real *and* unreal relations making the subjectivities of the physical environment *objectivities* organized along quite other lines than those that pertain to their subjectivity alone.<sup>14</sup>

Any such network of relations by which an animal finds its way is, precisely, a “semiotic web”, as Sebeok famously termed the phenomenon,<sup>15</sup> without which the animal could not survive. A physical stimulus, a sound, let us say: what is it? Heard, “what it is” depends in part on the one hearing. Let us say the sound in question is the howl of a wolf. To another wolf, the howl may become a sign of lust, while to a sheep that same howl is a signal of danger. What the other wolf cathects positively, the sheep cathects negatively. And note carefully: in neither case is the “interpretation” a pure matter of subjectivity. The sound originates outside the other wolf and the sheep. The hearing of the howl occurs outside the sound itself, as does the interpretation or cathecting of the sound which takes place, respectively, inside the other wolf and inside the sheep.

But what takes place “inside” the two animals does not end there. On the contrary, what takes place inside the respective animals serves to relate them respectively, the one positively, the other negatively, to the source of the sound which is emphatically external to and independent of them both. Inside and outside are correlated, so far as the animal’s orientation is involved. There is no “outside” without a correlated “inside” constituting objectivity, even though the subjectivities involved in objectivity exceed what is object both on the side of the cognizing and cathecting organism and on the side of the physical surroundings enabling that organism to survive (or imperiling it) here and now.

In other words, we confront here one of the irreducible situations of relation in its contrast to the *subjectivity* of all that separates a given individual organism from the rest of the environment, as well as the various components of the environment from one another in *their* individual physical being. We confront here relation in what is distinctive of it as it enters into and forms the fabric of experience, the fact that it *connects* invisibly two or more individuals to a common third, the distinctive permeability whereby *it makes no difference* to the being and function of the relation as such whether its suprasubjective being provenates from mind or from nature first of all, or even from both

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<sup>14</sup> See Cajetan 1507: in I p. q. 1 art. 3; Poincot 1632: 149/46, 179n13; 187/35, 188n33; 270/38.

<sup>15</sup> Sebeok 1975.

simultaneously. This feature of relations within experience stems directly from what is distinctive to the being of relations as such as elements partially constituting the order of *ens reale*, the order of subjective or physical individualities making up the environmental world in its being independent of cognitive activity at any given time and place.<sup>16</sup>

Thus we find that what makes the difference between objects and things — where, as we have seen, the former term designates anything cognized or known as such (anything apprehended in whatever way) while the latter term designates anything as existing whether or not any organism has an awareness of it — is again this peculiar being, this *ens minimum*, of relation as obtaining (whenever and wherever and to whatever extent it obtains) *suprasubjectively* or *over and above* whatever subjects it unites or fails to unite.

So we arrive at the second aspect of the twofold peculiarity of relation introduced above.<sup>17</sup> Not only is it peculiar to relation to be able to pass back and forth in its proper being between the physical and the objective orders.<sup>18</sup> It is further peculiar to relations to be the *only* mode of being that the finite mind can, by its properly cognitive activity, form under any circumstances.<sup>19</sup> Poinset goes on to point out the surprising consequent: if “fictional” beings — negations (imitations of subjectivity) no less than mind-dependent relations (imitating physical relations) — are in their proper being unexceptionally reducible to relations, then *whatever* exists purely objectively reduces as such to a network of relations; while whatever exists subjectively as well includes relations necessarily but does not reduce to those relations as to a network external to itself.

It then becomes evident that the priority of *ens reale* over *ens rationis* emphasized by Aquinas is more ontological than experiential. The fact that some among objects before us are also present-at-hand as things in their own right (indifferent to any relation to us in objectivity) is an awakening unique to the human animal, and the source of the experience which leads the human animal to recognize that there is a difference between being and non-being, where being means precisely *ens reale* and non-being means precisely *ens*

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<sup>16</sup> Finite cognitive activity, not to put too fine a point on it.

<sup>17</sup> On p. above.

<sup>18</sup> Individuals in their subjectivity cannot do this, but are confined *as subjective* to the determinately real order – the order of *ens reale* – even when in their very subjectivity – as sometimes happens – they are also objectified as the terminus of cognitive and cathectic relations.

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas c.1266, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 28, art. 1; commentary in Poinset 1632a: Second Preamble, esp. Art. 2, 93/16–98/40.



*rationis*. Being as first known by the human mind, *ens primum cognitum*, Aquinas tells us, transcends this distinction, and so cannot be identified with either term of it, even though *ens reale* maintains its ontological priority in the experiential discovery that there is more to the being of the objective world than can be reduced to our experience of or interests in it. The “external world” is not discovered as external; it is discovered as a dimension within objects irreducible to our experience of them. The “problem of the external world” such as we find it in Berkeley, Hume and the moderns after them, including Kant, is not really a critical problem so much as it is a quasi-error rooted in the failure to recognize the being proper and peculiar to relations.<sup>20</sup>

So we confront once again the difference between objects and things, but now further the difference between objects and signs. On the one hand, things *are* themselves, whereas objects *represent* themselves. On the other hand, signs represent always *something other than* themselves, something which they themselves are not; and they do so respecting some third element or factor with respect to which the representation takes place. It matters not whether the signs in question be based on the psychological states of the organism, cathectic and cognitive, or on aspects of objects founding interobjective relations. In every case, the elements comprising the sign are three, and the being of the sign as such transcends the three elements by uniting them according to three respective roles, namely, the role of sign-vehicle (the element of other-representation), the role of object signified (the other than the sign vehicle represented), and the role of interpretant, the term to or for which the representation is made.<sup>21</sup>

In this way it can be seen that objects, normally confused with things by human animals, are not only distinct in principle from, while yet always partially involving, things, but also (what is far from evident and indeed quite surprising) that objects actually presuppose signs *in order to be objects in the first place*, and presuppose signs no less in order subsequently to be distinguished from things in the course of experience.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This failure, philosophically at least, is the essence of nominalism, as it turns out. But that is another story: see Deely 2001: esp. Chaps. 8–10 & 15.

<sup>21</sup> The interpretant is distinct in principle from an *interpreter*, even though, like objects and things, the two may happen to coincide. Thus, in the more obvious cases, representation is mad to a person or cognizing organism, but not necessarily in cases we do not have the space here to discuss, exemplified in the contemporary debate (Nöth 2001) over the extent of the action of signs and the notion of physiosemosis in particular.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the experience of the difference between things and object provides from within the species-specifically human awareness of being what Aquinas calls its first

Of all living things we can say that they are semiosic creatures, creatures which grow and develop through the manipulation of sign-vehicles and the involvement in sign-processes, semiosis. What distinguishes the human being among the animals is quite simple, yet was never fully grasped before modern times had reached the state of Latin times in the age of Galileo. Every animal of necessity makes use of signs, yet signs themselves consist in relations, and every relation (real or unreal as such) is invisible to sense and can be understood in its difference from related objects or things but never perceived as such. What distinguishes the human being from the other animals is that only human animals come to realize that there are signs distinct from and superordinate to every particular thing that serves to constitute an individual in its distinctness from its surroundings.

Such an animal, capable of coming to know that there are signs as well as of using signs to hunt and fish and find its way through the surroundings, is generically semiosic but specifically semiotic, the only animal capable of knowing that there are signs to be studied as well as made use of to more “practical” ends. So a definition of the human being as “semiotic animal” is not modern. In the modern understanding of the philosophers, *ens reale* went under erasure and *ens rationis* came to be the whole of objectivity.

But the action of signs surpasses that frontier, and the study of signs is carried by that action precisely beyond that frontier deemed by modern philosophy to be unpassable. That is why the understanding and definition of the human being reached by the study of semiosis, the way of signs, fluoresces early into an understanding and definition of the human being that is as distinctively *postmodern* as the modern definition of the human being as a “thinking thing” was distinctively *postmedieval*. With the definition of the human being among the animals as the only *semiotic animal* we locate ourselves at the beginning of a way of signs which leads “everywhere in nature, including those domains where humans have never set foot”.<sup>23</sup>

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division, to wit, the contrast within the objective world between what does and what does not reduce to relations fashioned by the cognitive organism, the opposed orders of *ens reale* on the one hand and *ens rationis* on the other hand.

<sup>23</sup> Emmeche 1994: 126; staying silent for the moment on the question over which Sebeok turned conservative, the question of whether semiosis is co-terminus with the emergence of life, or whether there is not indeed a broader origin in which semiosis must be seen as coterminous with the physical universe *tout court*: see Nöth 2001.

We have opened a new era of intellectual culture,<sup>24</sup> for philosophy first of all, to be sure, but also for science and all the humanities, wherein the split between nature and culture, inner and outer, is no longer the last word, because the quasi-error of the external world has finally been laid to rest, and with it modern philosophy. We are, as it were, in a position to say to the epoch of modernity in philosophy what the early moderns said so emphatically to the epoch of medieval thought: *Requiescat in pace*. A postmodern humanism based on the notion of semiotic animal will be one deeply rooted in the Thomistic tradition.

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<sup>24</sup> Deely 2001, 2002; Sebeok 2001.

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*Note.* A complete table of all the editions, complete and partial, and in whatever language, of Poinso’s systematic works in philosophy and theology is provided in Deely 1985: 396–397. A complete breakdown of the contents of the original volumes of Poinso’s *Cursus Theologicus* and of the relation of that content to the volumes of the principal modern editions is provided in Deely 1994: 284. The principal modern edition referred to in this work is abbreviated as R followed by a volume number (I, II, or III) and pages, with column (a or b) and line indications as needed = the *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus*, ed. by B. Reiser in 3 volumes (Turin: Marietti, 1930, 1933, 1937).

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Powell (First Edition; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), as explained in Deely 1985, q.v. Pages in this volume are set up in matching columns of English and Latin, with intercolumnar numbers every fifth line. (Thus, references are by page number, followed by a slash and appropriate line number of the specific section of text referred to—e.g., 287/3–26.)

The work is also available as a text database, stand-alone on floppy disk or combined with an Aquinas database, as an Intelelex Electronic Edition (Charlottesville, VA: Intelelex Corp., 1992).

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