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Does Natural Philosophy Prove the Immaterial?: A Rejoinder

Mark Johnson

It is paramount when someone intends to understand the teaching of a thinker that he read that thinker's texts in their doctrinal context, and carefully. That is what I did in an article with which John F. X. Knasas has recently taken exception in this journal.¹ Knasas has read St. Thomas Aquinas's *Expositio in librum Boethii De Trinitate*, question 5, article 2 ad 3 in a way that supports his own conviction that Thomas denies that natural philosophy can attain to a knowledge of an immaterial reality in the course of its properly demonstrative activity. Such a conviction runs counter, of course, to a traditional understanding of Thomas's natural philosophy, according to which the natural philosopher discovers, in the course of seeking the first cause of the proper passion of his subject matter, that there is a reality that is the prime mover of all material, mobile things, but discovers as well in studying the nature of this prime mover's motion that it cannot itself be a material reality—hence Aristotle closes his *Physics*, the general treatment of the principles and proper passions of mobile being (*ens mobile*), with the claim that the prime mover is "indivisible and without parts and has no magnitude at all."²

My immediate intention in my article was to examine the entirety of this disputed text with due sensitivity to its pedagogical and expositorial setting, an examination that in turn called into question

the reliability of Knasas's reading of this text and perhaps, by implication, his reading of the other texts he cites on behalf of his attack upon the demonstrative integrity of Thomas's natural philosophy. In responding to my misgivings Knasas gave consideration to one-fourteenth of the text in question, and gave no consideration to Thomas's teaching method, or to the literary context in which that method makes its home. He instead refers the reader to two other texts, neither of which concerns Thomas's explication of natural philosophy, but which nonetheless are to reign supreme over all other of the texts where he is, in fact, discussing the nature and scope of natural philosophy.³ Knasas chides me for improperly reading Thomas's texts, challenges the proponent of the integrity of Thomas's natural philosophy to get by his own, preferred texts, and suggests that someone like me will not find a text in which Thomas says "natural philosophy proves God and/or angels" (269). Phrasing it in this way, Knasas is correct, and in reading Thomas's many texts on natural philosophy I have never read the very words "the natural philosopher proves the existence of God, or the angel." But Knasas's sort of prooftexting is a sword that cuts both ways, since neither have I read the very words "natural philosophy does not attain to the immaterial," or "only metaphysics proves the immaterial," which is Knasas's interpretation of Thomas, although he does not bring forth texts that state the matter with the clarity he insists from the textual citation of the proponent of Thomas's natural philosophy. We are left, then, with interpreting the texts of Thomas where he broaches natural philosophy's concern with the immaterial, and in doing so we must of course avail ourselves of all the various techniques of textual interpretation, principal among which are the examination of Thomas's pedagogical intent, as well as his sources, examples, and so on. With all this in mind I can agree with Knasas that "the third reply is an ambiguous text" (265), only if it is added that the one reading the text does so without care for its purpose and argumentative structure.

Thomas introduces the objection as a teaching-tool in a general presentation of the subject matter of natural philosophy, trying to show his reader how it is possible for that science, whose subject matter is material and mobile being, legitimately to concern itself with a wholly immaterial reality in the course of its proper investigation. The difficulty, and his reply to it, form a natural, teaching unity for Thomas, and they must be read both in light of one another, and in light of Thomas's quasi-expositorial duties in a work that arises, after all, from the text of Boethius, whose description of natural philosophy's subject matter as "in motion and not abstractable from matter" is the occasion for Thomas's treatment in question 5, article 2.4 It is his difficulty's claim that natural philosophy considers an entirely immaterial reality, the prime mover of Book 8 of the *Physics*, that allows Thomas in his response to illustrate how the direct relationship the subject matter of natural philosophy has to the prime mover allows the physicist to concern himself with some treatment of a reality that is not the very subject matter of his science (ens mobile), or a part of the subject matter of his science (pars subjecti), this being matter and form as nature, or perhaps "natural body." In this way, Thomas suggests, natural philosophy is similar to the geometry, whose subject is extended quantity, but whose consideration extends to points, which have no extension whatsoever. And while the prime mover is similar to a point in that it is of another nature than the subject matter of the science that is here considering it, it nonetheless falls under the consideration of natural philosophy because of its being a mover, and hence related to the subject matter of natural philosophy, regardless of whatever other characteristics in may have in and of itself.⁷

Knasas holds that Thomas is deliberately ambiguous in his reply to the third difficulty, since the claim of Thomas's response that the prime mover is "of another nature than material things" could be an oblique reference to the celestial spheres (265-66). He does not remind his reader, however, that if his suggestion is true, then Thomas would not be answering the difficulty at all, or worse, that he would be contradicting himself in the very response that is not, it turns out, addressing the concern of the difficulty. If the prime mover of the difficulty is a celestial sphere, and is not free from all matter, as the difficulty claims, then a counter-claim to that effect on Thomas's part at the outset of the reply would immediately end the proceedings, since a material prime mover such as a celestial sphere would be falls directly within the subject matter of mobile being. Thomas says just that. 8 But Thomas spends the entirety of the response explaining how the natural philosopher considers the prime mover in a way that differs from its own treatment of anything that falls under its subject, or part of its subject, of mobile being. How odd it would be of Thomas the teacher to suggest in a treatment of the nature and scope of natural philosophy that that science legitimately considers a material, mobile celestial sphere in a way different from the way it considers a material, mobile being. This would be to consider a natural body "other than it is" in a way that bears no resemblance to Thomas's usual answer to the problem of abstraction.

The objection and Thomas's response simply make no sense unless they are read within a context that accepts the immateriality of the prime mover of Book 8 of Aristotle's general treatment of the philosophy of nature, the Physics. The Latin edition of Thomas's text does not allow us to re-construe the wording. And given that the whole reason for the posing the objection is Thomas's intention to teach the role of relationship in natural science, it is difficult to think that even in this early work Thomas would stand for the pedagogical disarray such as would issue from Knasas's suggestion of willing ambiguity of his part.

Knasas's contention of ambiguity understandably leads him to seek clarification elsewhere in Thomas's writings, but in seizing upon his own texts of choice he lets go unmentioned a number of other texts in which Thomas broaches natural philosophy's concern with the immaterial, texts that should give pause to any programatic denial of natural philosophy's concern with the immaterial. Given Thomas's debt to Aristotle as concerns the nature and scope of natural philosophy—even Boethius's treatment in his *De Trinitate* derives from Book 6 of the *Metaphysics*—one could expect to find, as one does find, telling comments in his various expositions on the writings of Aristotle that touch upon the speculative sciences, and particularly, natural philosophy and its subordinated parts. I shall briefly mention these telling comments in order to suggest that Knasas's contention of willing ambiguity on Thomas's part would have to be repeated elsewhere.¹⁰

In Thomas's exposition on Book 6 of the *Metaphysics*, which dates from the late 1260's,¹¹ Thomas addresses himself to Aristotle's initial division of the sciences, and, in the course of Aristotle's discussion of natural philosophy as theoretical, he encounters Aristotle's claim that natural philosophy concerns that "which according to formula [is] for the most part nonseparable only." Thomas explains this "for the most part" by calling to mind the natural philosopher's concern with the intellect, which in some way falls under his consideration, even though the intellect is separable. And one finds as well in Thomas's exposition on the *Metaphysics* numerous references to the entirely unmoved

mover proved to exist in Book 8 of the Physics, which he considers to be both immaterial and immobile.¹⁴

One finds a similar situation in Thomas's exposition on Book 1 of the *Posterior Analytics*, when Aristotle is comparing science to other things that pertain to the realm of knowledge, and, more specifically, to those habits that concern knowledge of truth. Science does differ from other habits that concern truth, but explaining how those habits differ from one another pertains partly to first philosophy, partly to natural philosophy, and partly to moral philosophy. The discussion of what wisdom, science, understanding and art, are pertains in some way to the metaphysician. That of prudence pertains to the moral philosopher. And the treatment of the intellect and of reason, to the extent that these terms stand for powers of the soul, pertains to the natural philosopher, as is clear, Thomas says, from the *De Anima*.¹⁵

The single, largest work that contains claims regarding natural philosophy's concern with immaterial things, and one replete with care regarding the nature and demonstrative scope of natural philosophy, is Thomas's exposition on the *Physics*, written around 1271.¹⁶ Here again Thomas claims that the natural philosopher concerns himself with the rational soul, precisely on the basis that, while separable, the soul is nonetheless in matter, and is the form of a living body.¹⁷ And in his account of the different causes through which the various speculative sciences demonstrate, he claims that physics demonstrates through all four causes, while metaphysics does not demonstrate through material causality.¹⁸ This is important because two chief demonstrations in the *Physics*, the one of "everything moved is moved by another," and the other of the immateriality of the prime mover, both proceed through material causality, since both demonstrations proceed through parts.¹⁹ In short, both arguments proceed through a cause whose demonstrative use is restricted by Thomas to natural philosophy.

And finally, Thomas in his exposition on the *De Caelo* confronts Aristotle's claim that natural philosophy "mostly" (*plurimam*) concerns bodies. He explains the claim by saying that Aristotle means "all," but is understating it. Or, Thomas continues, Aristotle could be saying "mostly" because of the fact that in natural philosophy some treatment is given even to the prime mover and the intellective soul. The prime mover, and the soul, would presumably have to be incorporeal in order for Thomas's interpretation to make sense.²⁰

These texts from Thomas's expositions on Aristotle have the merit of being located in intended discussions of the sciences, and of the science of nature. I have brought them into the picture here not to suggest that with them one could build an entire philosophy of nature, but rather to suggest that, when seen within the context of an understanding of natural philosophy as the science that concerns the realm of material, mobile things, its causes and immediate effects, they are merely textual manifestations of Thomas's conviction of the usefulness of direct relationship in studying the subject matter of mobile being. Thomas's claim in a straight-forward reading of *In Boethii De Trinitate* 5, 2 ad 3 that natural science considers a wholly immaterial prime mover to the extent that it is a mover is simply an application of the same notion of relationship that is operative in metaphysics and, to ascend to what is for Thomas a much nobler realm, sacred theology.

Knasas's refusal to read Thomas's objection and its response in its entirety, and with due consideration to its teaching purpose and intellectual context, and his corresponding silence regarding even the few other texts cited above, arises from his concern that relegating any discussion whatsoever of immaterial realities to natural philosophy would be to usurp the duties of the wisdom of metaphysics. Such a usurpation has neve been the intention of proponents of Thomas's natural philosophy, River Forest Thomists and Laval Thomists, nor has it ever been the question. The question has been how the per se immaterial—which, for some unexplained reason, we assume to exist all along—could fall within the domain of natural philosophy, whose chief characterizing factor is that it concerns itself with what is material, and mobile on that account. Thomas's answer in his exposition on Boethius's *De Trinitate* is that natural philosophy concerns itself with an immaterial, immobile prime mover under its aspect of a mover, and nothing else. That is all the proponents of Thomas's natural philosophy ask, and that is all *In Boethii De Trinitate*, 5, 2, ad 3 says.

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Notes

- 1 See John F. X. Knasas, "Does Natural Philosophy Prove the Immaterial?: An Answer to Mark Johnson," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1990) 265–269, who is responding to my article that appeared in this journal's forebearer, "St Thomas's *De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 2, ad 3: A Reply to John Knasas," *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 58–65. For the sake of convenience, all references will be given first in full, and there after in abbreviation, according to standard form. Subsequent reference to Knasas's article will be made by citing the appropriate page number in the body of the text.
- 2 Aristotle, *Physics* 8.10 (267b26) in *Aristotle's Physics*, trans. H. G. Apostle, (Grinnell: The Peripatetic Press, 1980), 182.
- 3 Knasas, 266–67. The first text is *In Boethii De Trinitate*, 5, 4, where Thomas discusses how it is possible that metaphysics give a treatment of divine realities that are otherwise the subject of revealed theology, and the second is Thomas's theological account of creation in his *Summa Theologiae* I, 44, 2.
- 4 See St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Boethii De Trinitate* 5, *in capite*, as found in *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate*, 2nd ed., ed. B. Decker, (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 161: "...Secundo. Utrum naturalis philosophia sit de his quae sunt in motu et materia." The text of Boethius that gives rise to the discussion is found on p. 157, and Thomas's exposition of Boethius's characterization is found on p. 159.
- 5 In Boethii De Trinitate 5, 2 ad 3, p. 177: "Ad tertium dicendum quod de primo motore non agitur in scientia naturali tamquam de subiecto vel de parte subiecti, sed tamquam de termino ad quem scientia naturalis perducit." On matter and form as the principles of nature, and hence of the science of nature, see Physics 2.2 (193b23–194b17), and Thomas's exposition of that chapter. Thomas will later succinctly echo Aristotle on this point in his exposition of the Posterior Analytics. See In I Post. Anal., lect. 41, ad 87a39, in Expositio libri posteriorum 'analyticorum', 2nd ed., ed. Leonine, (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1989), 154: "In qualibet enim sciencia sunt quedam principia subiecti de quibus est prima consideratio, sicut in sciencia naturali de materia

- et forma...." The only other passage in the exposition on Boethius's *De Trinitate* in which Thomas directly mentions the "part of the subject" (*pars subiecti*) is q. 5, a. 1 ad 5, where he mentions that the science about plants is part of natural science because a plant falls under the notion of "natural body," with the latter being a part of the subject of mobile being. See *In Boethii De Trinitate* 5, 1 ad 5, pp. 170–71: "Ad quintum dicendum quod aliqua scientia continetur sub alia dupliciter, uno modo ut pars ipsius, quia scilicet subiectum eius est pars aliqua subiecti illius, sicut planta est quaedam pars corporis naturalis; unde et scientia de plantis continetur sub scientia naturali ut pars..." See also ibid., q. 5, a. 4, discussed below in note 8. Note in any case that Thomas's claim that the prime mover does not fall under the consideration of natural philosophy even as a part of the subject—matter and form, or as a natural body—casts serious doubt upon Knasas's claim that in Thomas's mind the primer mover could be a celestial body (pp. 265–66), or a world soul (p. 267), since the former is a natural, material body, and the latter a substantial form of a material, albeit incorruptible body.
- 6 Ibid., 177–78: "Terminus autem non est de natura rei, cuius est terminus, sed habet aliquam habitudinem ad rem illam, sicut terminus lineae non est linea, sed habet ad eam aliquam habitudinem..." Note in addition that, as part of his pedagogy here, Thomas provides a similar query regarding the possibility of natural philosophy's giving consideration to realities that are not *mobile*, thus filling out the topic of the article, which asks whether natural philosophy is about things that are in motion and matter. See ibid., arg. 6, p. 174: "Praeterea, in scientia naturali determinatur de quibusdam quae non moventur, sicut est anima, ut probatur in I *De anima*, et terra, ut probatur in II *Caeli et mundi*...ergo non omnia, de quibus est physica, sunt in motu." And in his reply to this sixth difficulty, ibid., 178, Thomas explains that the earth, while putatively immobile, falls under the consideration of the natural philosopher precisely because of the motion of things other than itself to it—the very notion of relationship operative in the third difficulty and its reply.
- 7 Ibid., q. 5, a. 2 ad 3, p. 178: "...ita etiam [et] primus motor est alterius naturae a rebus naturalibus, habet tamen ad eas aliquam habitudinem, in quantum influit eis motum, et sic cadit in consideratione naturalis, scilicet non secundum ipsum, sed in quantum est motor."
- 8 At the beginning of the lengthy response of *In Boethii De Trinitate* 5, 4, from which Knasas takes the first of his preferred texts, Thomas sets the stage for his discussion of the relation between the subject matter of metaphysics and revealed theology by addressing the way in which a science considers the principles of its subject matter. The principles of a science are sometimes complete realities and, at the same time, principles of other things. Thomas exemplifies this by calling to mind the celestial bodies, which are complete realities in themselves, but are principles of lower bodies as well, thus leading Thomas to claim that they are considered not only by that part of natural philosophy that considers the lower bodies, but also in a separate part of natural science. See *In Boethii De Trinitate* 5, 4, pp. 192–93: "Quaedam enim [principia] sunt quae et sunt in se ipsis quaedam naturae completae et sunt nihilominus principia aliorum, sicut corpora caelestia sunt quaedam principia inferiorum corporum et corpora simplicia corporum mixtorum. Et ideo ista non solum considerantur in scientiis ut principia sunt, sed etiam ut sunt in se ipsis res quaedam; et propter hoc de eis non solum tractatur in scientia quae considerat ipsa principiata, sed etiam habent per se scientiam separatam, sicut *de corporibus caelestibus est quaedam pars scientiae naturalis praeter illam, in qua determinatur de*

- corporibus inferioribus, et de elementis praeter illam, in qua tractatur de corporibus mixtis" (my emphasis).
- 9 Thomas's autograph of the difficulty and his response are extant, and are found in Vat. Lat. 9850, fol. 104vb and 96rb respectively. The two are out of proper sequence because what is now folio 104 was once separated from the manuscript and re-inserted at a later time at the end of the work. See Decker's "Prolegomena," p. 1. A plate containing Thomas's autograph of the difficulty is found in Thomas Kaeppeli, O.P., "Zerstruete Autographblätter der Hl. Thomas von Aquin," Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 2 (1932): 382–402. My examination of the microfilm indicates that Decker has correctly transcribed the autograph for these two texts, but see pp. 244–45 for addenda and corrigenda to the first edition.
- 10 I am aware of the difficulties involved in using Thomas's expositions on Aristotle's works as sources for his own thought. On this see Mark D. Jordan, *The Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas*, in press as *The Etienne Gilson Series 13* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991)—Jordan has kindly given me the typescript of this lecture. He thinks that Thomas's expositions on Aristotle are exercises in determining what Aristotle thought, and so he puts them aside as sources for Thomas's own thinking. It does not seem to me illegitimate, however, to use Thomas's commentaries as sources for what he thinks natural philosophy is, since Aristotle's *Physics* and its related works form what was the natural philosophy Thomas knew.
- 11 This will be the judgement of the Leonine editors, as James P. Reilly of the Leonine Commission has informed me. The usual dating is during Thomas's second regency at Paris (1269–1272), and perhaps into has last years in Naples (1272–1274). See J. A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Work*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 379.
- 12 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1 (1025b27), in *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. H. G. Apostle, (Grinnell: The Peripatetic Press, 1979), 103. The Latin text of Aristotle in the Marietti edition was translated by Cardinal Bessarion (c. 1400–1472) but is based upon the translation of William of Moerbeke. See *Textus Aristotelis*, 1. 6, c. 1, in *Sancti Thomas Aquinatis in duodecim libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, 3rd ed., ed. M.-R. Cathala (Turin: Marietti, 1977), n. 534, p. 294: "Sed theorica [physica] circa tale ens, quod est possibile moveri; et circa substantiam, quae est secundum rationem, ut secundum magis non separabile solum."
- 13 *In VI Met.*, lect. 1, 1155, p. 296: "Et est [physica] solum circa "talem substantiam", idest quidditatem et essentiam rei, quae secundum rationem non est separabilis a materia, ut in pluribus; et hoc dicit propter intellectum, qui aliquo modo cadit sub consideratione naturalis philosophiae, et tamen substantia eius est separabilis."
- 14 See *In IV Met.*, lect. 5, n. 593, p. 164: "Antiqui enim non opinabantur aliquam substantiam esse praeter substantiam corpoream mobilem, de qua physicus tractat...Non enim omne ens est huiusmodi: cum probatum sit in octavo *Physicorum* esse aliquod ens immobile"; *In XII Met.*, lect. 6, n. 2517, p. 588: "Probatum est in octavo *Physicorum*, quod cum non sit abire in infinitum in moventibus et motis, oportet devenire in aliquod primum movens immobile: quia et si deveniatur in aliquod movens seipsum, iterum ex hoc oportet devenire in aliquod movens immobile, ut ibi probatum est." See also *In IV Met.*, lect. 13, n. 690, p. 191; lect. 17, n. 748, p. 205.

- 15 In I Post. Anal., lect. 44, ad 89b7, p. 170: "Determinare [autem] de sapiencia quid sit et quomodo se habeat, et de sciencia et intellectu et arte, pertinet aliqualiter ad philosophiam primam; prudencia uero pertinet ad considerationem moralem; intellectus et ratio, secundum quod significant potencias quasdam, pertinent ad considerationem naturalis, ut patet in libro De anima." The editor Fr Gauthier takes the reference to be to the beginning of Book 3, 429a10–432a14, where Aristotle begins his treatment of the intellective part of the soul. In the proemium to his exposition on the De Sensu et Sensato Thomas also makes it clear that he thinks that the De Anima is natural philosophy. See Sentencia libri de sensu et sensato, ed. Leonine (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1985), 4–5.
- 16 See Weisheipl, Friar Thomas, 482.
- 17 In explaining Aristotle's query as to the extent to which the natural philosopher considers the reality of form, Thomas claims that the natural philosopher considers form to the extent that it exists in matter. See *In II Phys.*, lect. 2, in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis in octo libros physicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. P. M. Maggiòlo (Turin: Marietti, 1965), n. 175, p. 88: "...naturalis in tantum considerat de forma in quantum habet esse in materia. Et ideo terminus considerationis scientiae naturalis est circa formas quae quidem sunt aliquo modo separatae, sed tamen esse habent in materia. Et huiusmodi formae sunt animae rationales...."
- 18 See ibid., lect. 1, n. 5, p. 4: "Nam mathematica non demonstrat nisi per causam formalem; metaphysica demonstrat per causam formalem et finalem praecipue, et etiam agentem; naturalis autem per omnes causes." In his exposition on the *Metaphysics* Thomas says the same thing in his treatment of the various causes through which metaphysics demonstrates. After explaining the metaphysician's concern with formal, efficient, and even final causality, Thomas claims that the metaphysician does not concern himself with the material cause, since matter is a cause in the genus of mobile being, which is a particular genus of being. See *In III Met.*, lect. 4, n. 384, p. 108: "Causam autem materialem secundum seipsam nullo modo [considerat], quia materia non convenienter causa est entis, sed alicuius determinati generis, scilicet substantiae mobilis." It goes without saying that mobile substance is the concern of the natural philosopher.
- 19 See *In VII Phys.*, lect. 1, nn. 889–890, p. 451; *In VIII Phys.*, lect. 23, n. 1172, p. 628. On this see Melvin A. Glutz, *The Manner of Demonstrating in Natural Philosophy*, (River Forest, Illinois: Studium Generale of St. Thomas Aquinas, 1956), 139–52; William A. Wallace, *From A Realist Point of View*, 2nd ed., (New York: University Press of America, 1983), Essay 15: "Cosmological Arguments and Scientific Concepts," pp. 309–23. Note that in his exposition on the *Physics*, immediately after the demonstration that the prime mover is outside the genus of magnitude, Thomas interestingly identifies the prime mover with God. See *In VIII Phys.*, lect. 23, n. 1172, p. 628: "Manifestum est itaque quod primum movens est indivisibile: et quia nullam partem habet, sicut etiam est indivisibile punctum; et etiam sicut omnino nullam habens magnitudinem, quasi extra genus magnitudinis existens. Et sic terminat Philosophus considerationem communem de rebus naturalibus, in primo principio totius naturae, qui est super omnia Deus benedictus in saecula. Amen."
- 20See In *III De Caelo*, lect. 1, in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis in Aristotelis libros* de caelo et mundo, de generatione et corruptione, meteoroligicorum expositio, ed. R. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1952), n. 547, p. 279: "Per hoc autem quod dicit *plurimam*, intelligit omnem; sed utitur hoc modo

- loquendi propter philosophicum temperamentum. Vel dicit *plurimam*, propter hoc quod in scientia naturali aliquid etiam traditur de primo motore et de anima intellectiva."
- 21 For a description of the central tenets of River Forest Thomism, see Benedict M. Ashley, "The River Forest School and the Philosophy of Nature Today," in *Philosophy and the God of Abraham:*Essays in Memory of James A. Weisheipl OP (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991), pp. 1–15."