

THE ETHICS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

LEO J. ELDERS, SVD

A study of the most important aspects in the ethics of Thomas Aquinas, with special emphasis on its current relevance.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, Thomism, ethics.

It is the purpose of this congress to show the lasting value of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, the patron saint of academic institutions, where theology and philosophy are taught not only at the speculative level but also in their applications for practical life. In this conference, the importance of Thomas's moral thought should be brought out. Since the subject is immense and the time allotted is limited, I can only briefly touch on what I assume to be the most noteworthy themes, which, I hope, will show the unsurpassed depth and lasting truth of Thomas's moral thought.

1. DID ST. THOMAS DEVELOP A PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS?

A first question is whether we can speak of a Thomistic philosophical ethics. The Angelic Doctor was foremost a theologian, and never taught philosophy at the Faculty of Arts in Paris or in Naples. It is true that he wrote an in-depth commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, but some students of Thomas argue that his Aristotelian commentaries do not express

his own views but are just stating Aristotle's positions with great clarity. Others, however, say that he is not a reliable interpreter of the Stagirite: he corrects him and introduces Christian viewpoints into his explanation of the text.¹ Yet R. Gauthier, the editor of the remarkable Leonine edition of the *Sententia in libros Ethicorum*, has argued that Aquinas considered the *Nicomachean Ethics* not as a summary of Aristotle's views, but simply as *the* moral philosophy.² For St. Thomas, Aristotle's text was a valuable treatise of ethics, whose contents he himself accepted. I must say that I fully agree with Fr. Gauthier's appraisal.³ However, to perform an exposé of the science of morals *according to the correct order of themes*, as Thomas himself would write it, we must go beyond the Commentary and turn to the Second Part of the *Summae Theologiae*.⁴

It is true that the *Summa* is a theological treatise. Nevertheless, large sections of the text unfold at the level of natural reason (although they were elaborated in the light of the *sed contra* arguments, which are mostly taken from divine revelation or the doctrine of the Church, and are clearly subservient to the theology of faith). In the First Part, we find such texts in the articles on the Five Ways, the discussion of the attributes of God, and so forth. Similarly, in the Second Part we have a complete and well ordered exposition of ethics as elaborated by natural reason. When one carefully analyzes the relevant questions and articles this becomes obvious. This is the reason why in this conference I shall rely mainly on what Aquinas writes in the *Summa*.

However, I have no wish to downgrade the theological value of the work, or to create a rupture between philosophical ethics and

1. H. V. JAFFA, *Thomism and Aristotelianism: A Study of the Commentary by St. Thomas Aquinas on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Chicago, 1952.

2. S. THOMAE DE AQUINO, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, ed. Leonina, I, 267*.

3. See "St. Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics", in L.J. ELDERS SVD; K. HEDWICH, *The Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Città del Vaticano, 1984, pp. 9-49.

4. Cf. the preface to the *Summa Theologiae*: "secundum ordinem disciplinae" and not "secundum quod requirebat librorum expositio."

moral theology.⁵ Man's one and only ultimate end is the supernatural vision of God, and this dogma exercises its influence on the entire treatise. Thomas repeatedly stresses that the happiness which Aristotle's philosophical ethics speak about, is imperfect⁶ and that man's real happiness consists in the vision of God. When dealing with the natural law, Thomas continually stresses its dependence on the eternal law. Moreover, the natural law is completed by the *Lex Nova*, the grace of the Holy Spirit in Christians. But there is more: Thomas connects the intellectual virtues, which Aristotle had mentioned, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, indicating that the natural virtues find their fulfillment through divine grace. Aristotle's contemplation of the physical universe is to be replaced by a contemplation of the world of the world as God's creation, and an understanding and enjoyment of revealed truth, in the presence of God. Although it is possible to construct a philosophical ethics on the basis of the questions of the Second Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, the text remains a theological text because it is ordered to man's supernatural life.⁷

Some authors have argued that because of the single, supernatural end of man an authentic philosophical ethics is not possible.⁸ According to Maritain, philosophical ethics considers man as if he were living in the state of uncorrupted nature, whereas in reality he is a member of fallen mankind. The principles upon which ethics is based, he adds, depend on theological insights and for that reason ethics is a science subject to theology. However, Maritain's arguments were rejected by several leading

5. Perhaps A. D. SERTILLANGES, *La philosophie morale de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris, 1916, and M. WITTMANN, *Die Ethik des hl. Thomas von Aquin*, München, 1933, went into this direction.

6. *In I Ethic.*, lect. 9.

7. Cf. A. PATFOORT, "Morale et pneumatologie chez Saint Thomas. Une observation de la Ia-IIae", in *La teologia morale nella storia e nella problematica attuale*, Roma, 1960, 63-92. L. ELDERS, "La morale de saint Thomas, une éthique philosophique?", *Doctor Communis*, (1977), pp. 192-205.

8. J. MARITAIN, *De la philosophie chrétienne*, Paris, 1933, pp. 101 ff.; *Science et sagesse*, Paris, 1935, pp. 327 ff.; *Du savoir moral*, Paris, 1936. See also J. PIEPER, *Hinführung zu Thomas von Aquin*, p. 211.

Thomists.⁹ Moreover, it is obvious that there *does exist* an impressive philosophical ethics. One only has to read the *Nicomachean Ethics* to convince oneself. Where Aristotle's treatise was incomplete, St. Thomas has completed it; he presented its contents in a coherent form, in particular by introducing the natural law, the first principles of the practical intellect and by reordering the virtues.

2. THE SOURCES OF AQUINAS'S MORAL THOUGHT

With regard to the question of the sources of Aquinas's ethics one must mention in the first place Holy Scripture, the doctrine of the Church, the writing of the Church Fathers, especially St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostome, St. Gregory of Nyssa (Nemesius), St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, St. John Damascene, Ps.-Dionysius, et al. These thinkers exercised a direct influence on St. Thomas's moral theology and an indirect influence on his ethics. In regards to this question, we must point out that several of the Fathers, and indeed Aquinas himself, noted that that which the divine law demands from us in the field of ethics, is in agreement with what our human nature tells us to do.¹⁰ At the philosophical level the *Nicomachean Ethics* is of fundamental importance to Thomas. He is in agreement with Aristotle as to the nature of ethics, the role of contemplation, and the doctrine of the virtues. He takes over several definitions, but delves deeper into the intelligibility of human acts and uncovers fundamental

9. See J. M. RAMÍREZ, "Sur l'organisation du savoir moral", *Bulletin Thomiste*, 4 (1935), pp. 423 ff.; TH. DEMAN, "L'organisation du savoir moral", *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, (1934), pp. 258-280; R. MCINERNEY, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, Washington D.C., 1993. See also V. J. BOURKE, "Moral Philosophy Without Revelation", *The Thomist*, 40 (1976), pp. 555-570.

10. *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, c. 129: "Ea quae divina lege praecipuntur rectitudinem habent, non solum quia sunt lege posita, sed etiam secundum naturam."

structures. He transforms Aristotle's not always coherent survey of virtuous acts, and in particular of prudential activity, into a moral philosophy based on the first principles of the practical intellect.¹¹ In this connection one should also mention the doctrine of the Stoa, with which Thomas was acquainted through Ambrose, Augustine, Cicero and Seneca. In the last few years some have spoken of a far-reaching influence of the Stoa on Aquinas, in particular with regard to his doctrine on the natural law. However, if we leave aside the doctrine on natural law, a careful study of the passages where the Stoics are mentioned shows that in the great majority of cases Thomas rejects their views and prefers the position of the Peripatetics.¹²

3. THE NATURE OF ETHICS

A next point to be mentioned is the nature of ethics. Ethics is a practical science, concerned with human actions in so far as they are related to each other and ordered to the end. Aristotle stressed the practical nature of ethics: it does not tell us so much what virtue is, as much as it aims at making us good persons.¹³ St. Thomas, on the other hand, emphasizes the cognitive nature of ethics more than Aristotle. In order to lead our life as we ought, knowledge of the end is necessary;¹⁴ however, this knowledge should be the basis for right acts. But how one ought to act in concrete circumstances is determined by prudence, rather than by the inevitably general knowledge of moral

11. See our "St. Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics", in L. ELDERS; K. HEDWICH, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

12. Examples are the following dicta: "Omnia peccata esse paria"; "omnes passiones esse malas"; "omnem delectationem esse malam"; "bona temporalia non esse hominis bona"; "necessitate quadam fatali hominis vitam duci," etc. See also M. SPANNEUT, "Influences stoïciennes sur la pensée morale de saint Thomas d' Aquin", in L. ELDERS; K. HEDWICH, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-79.

13. *Ethic. Nich.* 1103b3.

14. *In I Ethic.*, lect. 2, p. 8, lin. 52-71 (Leonine edition).

philosophy.¹⁵ Ethics considers man's actions as directed to his ultimate end. Aristotle distinguishes between three branches of ethics: the study of human acts as directed to man's end, man's obligations in the context of family life, and man's task in political society. In his treatment of the main virtues Aquinas deals with these various tasks, obligations and rights of human beings.

The ethics of Aquinas is dominated by the fact that all beings strive for the good. All our choices and actions must be directed to what is really good for us. Metaphysics shows that the good, the object of our appetite, is being. It is our task to realize ourselves by uniting ourselves with the good. Ethics does not aim at perfecting us as individuals, so that we might stand in solitude amid a neutral environment. The end of man is to be united with the good, that is with reality as it is in itself.¹⁶ This means that ethics instructs us to direct our appetite to those things which really perfect us.¹⁷ Being perfects us,¹⁸ and God does so in a superlative way, since he is the cause of all good things.¹⁹

4. THE INTELLECTUAL CHARACTER OF ETHICS: RIGHT REASON AND THE FIRST PRINCIPLES OF THE PRACTICAL INTELLECT

As Aristotle had done, Aquinas stresses the role of reason in establishing the norms of conduct. On several occasions he quotes the saying of Dionysius: "*Bonum autem hominis est, secundum*

15. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 6, proem.: the science of morals is first elaborated in general, next it is applied to particular actions.

16. *Q. d. de veritate*, q. 1, a. 2: "motus appetitus terminatur ad res"; q. 8, a. 4, ad 5: "affectus terminatur ad res ipsas."

17. *S. c. G.* III, c. 109: "Quaelibet voluntas naturaliter vult illud quod est proprium volentis bonum, scilicet ipsum esse perfectum." Cf. M. C. DONADIO MAGGI DE GANDOLFI, *Amor y bien. Los problemas del amor en Santo Tomás de Aquino*, Buenos Aires 1999, p. 105-147.

18. *Q. d. de veritate*, q. 21, a. 1: "Ens est perfectivum alterius ..."

19. *In I Ethic.*, lect. 7.

rationem esse."²⁰ However, he notices a problem here. Reason does not become right reason just by itself. Reason considers something to be good when it agrees with our basic natural inclinations. At this particular point the intellect formulates the first principles of moral life. Subsequently reason judges our actions with the help of this set of first principles of the moral order. Nature places these principles in us, as it also does for the first principles of the speculative order. These principles come to man naturally on the basis of the most fundamental inclinations of the appetite, so that we can say that these principles are seeds of the virtues.²¹ A person makes himself virtuous by acting in conformity with these principles.²² When one acts repeatedly according to reason, the "form of reason" is impressed in the appetite and the virtues are formed.

There are a number of fundamental inclinations in us, such as keeping ourselves alive, seeking shelter, associating with others and forming communities, developing ourselves, respecting our parents and leaders, securing the survival of mankind by procreation, looking for the meaning of life and venerating the highest principle and origin of things.

In a luminous text, Thomas writes that we experience as good those things to which we have a natural inclination.²³ Our reason establishes that such objects are good. Now that which falls under the order of reason, also falls under the order established by God himself.²⁴ Reason is the measure of what is moral.²⁵ Although to a certain extent this doctrine had been prepared by Plato and

20. *De divinis nominibus*, c. 4 (the wording of the original text is negative: PG 3, 733).

21. *Q. d. de virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 10.

22. *In VII Ethic.*, lect. 8.

23. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 2: "Omnia illa ad quae homo habet naturalem inclinationem ratio naturaliter apprehendit ut bona, et per consequens ut opere prosequenda, et contraria eorum ut mala et vitanda."

24. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 72, a. 4: "Quaecumque continentur sub ordine rationis, continentur sub ordine ipsius Dei."

25. *S. c. G.* III, c. 3: "Moralium autem mensura est ratio."

Aristotle, Thomas developed it in a new way. However, reason, insofar as it determines the morality of our acts, must not be seen as a self-sufficient and arrogant power; it remains dependent on the order of nature.

The entire treatise of the moral virtues in the *Secunda Secundae* is dominated by two theses: First, that we ourselves must determine what, in the different fields of human activity, is according to right reason, and second, that actually practicing the virtues must also be accompanied by reason,²⁶ since reason must determine the mean of the virtues. In doing so it has a certain margin.²⁷

In the activity of reason one may distinguish between that of higher reason (*ratio superior*) and that of lower reason (*ratio inferior*). The former evaluates actions and situation in the light of God's plan, the latter considers them from a human point of view. Another distinction is that between universal and particular reason: the wife of a murderer on death row and a judge may have a different appraisal of what the man's punishment should be. When considering a particular good one must always take into account the common good.²⁸ It is obvious that the doctrine of reason as determining the morality of our actions is the very center of the ethics of Aquinas.²⁹ But this conclusion entails also the doctrine of the first principles.

26. *In VI Ethic.*, lect. 11: "Virtutes sunt secundum rationem et cum ratione." Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 58, a. 4, ad 3.

27. *Q. d. de virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 13, ad 18: "Medium virtutis secundum rationem aliquam latitudinem habet."

28. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 19, a. 10: "Non est autem recta voluntas alicuius hominis volentis aliquod bonum particulare nisi referat illud in bonum commune sicut in finem, cum etiam naturalis appetitus cuiuslibet partis ordinetur in bonum commune totius."

29. Cf. our essay "Bonum humanae animae est secundum rationem esse", *Lugano Theological Review*, (1999), pp. 75-90.

5. THE FIRST PRINCIPLES OF THE PRACTICAL INTELLECT: THE NATURAL LAW

All acts of the intellect and the will in us are derived from that which is according to our nature,³⁰ since any reasoning depends on the principles which are known to us by nature, while tending to good things depends on the natural inclination to the last end. The natural law consists in the first principles of the practical intellect, which the intellect apprehends immediately because of our fundamental inclinations. Thomas holds that the order man must follow is based on human nature, and therefore on ontological structures: the “ought” is derived from the “is”.³¹ However, differing from a widely held view in his time, Thomas stresses that the natural law as such is not inborn in man, although its principles are given with human nature. He is referring to the basic inclinations and their perception by the intellect, which by spontaneous acts formulates the contents of the natural law. Since it is rooted in human nature, the natural law is universal and permanent.³²

St. Thomas’s argument makes man’s natural inclinations the foundation of the natural law precepts, formulated by the intellect, and so connects them to the eternal law. On several occasions he quotes *Psalms* 4, 6: “The light of your face, Lord, shines upon my mind” to stress that the insights of our reason go back to God.³³ Certain authors, as G. Grisez, J. Finnis and J. Boyle, attempted to safeguard these precepts of the natural law while denying their basis in man’s natural inclinations. With regard to this point they subscribed to David Hume’s empiricist position, according to which it is illicit to attempt to derive the “ought” from

30. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

31. See U. KUHN, *Via caritatis. Theologie des Gesetzes bei Thomas von Aquin*, Göttingen, 1965, p. 106.

32. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 4 & 5

33. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 91, a. 3: “... quasi lumen rationis naturalis quo discernimus quid sit bonum et quid malum, quod pertinet ad naturalem legem, nihil aliud est quam participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura.”

the “is”,³⁴ while for Aquinas a human act is morally good when conform to man’s nature and ultimate end. However, for Finnis and his followers these inclinations are morally neutral. What really happens, Finnis says, is that man experiences certain objects as good, such as eating reasonably. Finnis enumerates several such basic goods which contribute to man’s human fulfillment. In directing oneself to these goods, one acts morally. On the other hand, Thomas explicitly states that the insights corresponding to these inclinations are the natural law.³⁵ Although Finnis appears to maintain the contents of the natural law, he separates himself from Thomas in denying their foundation in our natural inclinations, and so he undermines some of its precepts. For instance, it may happen that in certain fields, such as that of procreation, some people no longer experience certain goods as Basic.³⁶ Some philosophers have suspected that Finnis and the authors within his group have yielded ground to a widespread contemporary distrust of human nature as the foundation of morality, as well as to Kantian philosophy. Other critics argue that human nature is not immutable and, therefore, cannot be the foundation of a permanent natural law. However, despite any changes which may occur in man’s attitudes and ways of life, man’s nature as a rational animal remains the same.

St. Thomas’s doctrine of the natural law stands unshaken. As Cardinal Newman says in his *The Idea of a University*, the basic precepts of moral life are reflected in our conscience as the mountains surrounding a lake reflect upon the surface of the water. Storms may temporarily disturb this reflection, but when the weather, i.e. man’s inner life, becomes quiet again, they re-appear.

This doctrine of the natural law is the basis of man’s natural rights. In the early Middle Ages the relation between the spiritual order, as represented by the Church and man’s secular life was not

34. *Treatise of Human Understanding*, II, 1, 1.

35. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 2: “... et secundum hanc inclinationem pertinent ad legem naturalem ea per quae vita hominis conservatur.”

36. On Finnis’s theory see his *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford (several reprints).

always expressed correctly: on certain points the temporal order was absorbed by the authority of divine revelation or submitted to it. Here, as on so many other questions, Aquinas was the first to defend a new view: “The divine law based on God’s grace does not do away with the human law as formulated by our reason”.³⁷ This declaration of principle is of far reaching importance: in our world we cannot allow the violation of human rights as acknowledged by reason, under the pretext of what is claimed to be a revelation. We have all the more reason of being grateful to St. Thomas for his luminous doctrine, which is a God-sent present to the Church and all to people of good will.

6. ON THE MORAL QUALIFICATION OF OUR ACTIONS

Few questions have been so hotly debated by moral philosophers over the past 50 years as that concerning the criteria which determine the morality of our actions. According to a widespread trend among modern authors, our actions as such lie outside the moral order proper—they are pre-moral—and only our intentions and/or the resulting effects determine whether the actions must be considered good or bad. Thus the intention on the one hand, the weighing of the effects (proportionalism) and the evaluation of the consequences (consequentialism) on the other are claimed to determine the morality of our actions. It would seem that those who advance these positions are influenced by utilitarianism, a way of looking at things from the point of view of their usefulness. In our modern culture, in which people resort all the time to technological applications, a utilitarian approach is almost a matter of course. But technological applications are no

37. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 10, a. 10: “Ius autem divinum, quod est ex gratia, non tollit ius humanum quod est ex naturali ratione.”

more than means to an end, and man himself is the master who decides when and how to use them.³⁸

It would take us too far from our present subject to explain in greater detail the various opinions of the many schools of moral philosophy with regards to the criteria of the morality of human acts. In the Encyclical *Veritatis splendor* several of these opinions are analyzed and rejected.³⁹ The luminous doctrine of Aquinas on this point constitutes the center of the teaching of the encyclical, and I shall try to briefly represent it.

a) *The Object as Determining the Morality of Our Acts*

Thomas compares “good” and “bad” as said of actions with good and bad as said of things. We call “good” that which has what it should have, or which has that which things of its class normally have. A thing is bad when something is lacking. A first factor which determines the goodness of things is their essential form. Man is good because of being a rational animal. Now the nature of our acts depends on what they are about. When their object is defective, an act is no longer good. However, the object is more than just a material thing. When one steals a bicycle, the object of the act is the bicycle as belonging to someone else. When considered by itself, one might think that the material object (whether a thing or a bodily act) is neutral, but in reality such material objects are qualified by reason, and related to our obligations.⁴⁰ The real object of our acts is the object as seen by

38. See our “De l’*homo faber* à l’*homo sapiens*. Le système technicien et la morale”, *Sedes Sapientiae*, 56 (1966), pp. 18-26.

39. See our “The Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and Dissenting Moral Theologians”, in A. GRAF VON BRANDENSTEIN; ET ALII (eds.), *Im Dienste der inkarnierten Wahrheit. Festschrift zum 25jährigen Pontifikat Seiner Heiligkeit Papst Johannes Pauls II*, Weilheim, 2003, pp. 243-260.

40. *Q. d. de malo*, q. 2, a. 4, ad 5: “Actus autem moralis... recipit speciem ex obiecto secundum quod comparatur ad rationem.”

reason in the light of our natural ends. The same external act, e.g. firing a gun, can have different objects: criminal shooting, rightful self-defense, or shooting practice. Therefore Thomas, in speaking about the object, also calls it the *materia circa quam*.⁴¹

A second point stressed by Aquinas is that there are certain activities which because of their very nature agree with us, and are good as Duch.⁴² One may think here of eating, resting, learning, etc. Moreover, as *Veritatis splendor* reminds us, there are certain acts which by themselves are always wrong. They are signified by the negative precepts in the Bible.⁴³ This refutes the theory which declares that, except for the objects of the acts corresponding to the theological virtues, the matter of ordinary acts is pre-moral or morally neutral.⁴⁴

b) *The Circumstances*

In the question about the moral qualification of human acts, Thomas explains that in addition to the act's fundamental order to the object, there are factors which may have some influence on the moral goodness or badness of our acts. These factors are the circumstances. Since our actions always take place under determinate circumstances, such as the acting person, the manner of acting, the time and the place, etc., the consideration of these

41. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 18, a. 2 ad 2: "Obiectum non est materia ex qua, sed materia circa quam."

42. *S. c. G.* III, c. 129: "Sunt igitur aliquae operationes naturaliter homini convenientes, quae secundum se sunt rectae et non solum quasi lege positae."

43. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 64, a. 2, arg. 3: "Quod est secundum se malum nullo bono fine fieri licet"; q. 103, a. 3: "Quod est secundum se malum ex genere nullo modo potest esse bonum et licitum." Cf. S. PINCKAERS, *Ce qu'on ne peut jamais faire. Les actes intrinsèquement mauvais. Histoire et discussion*, Fribourg - Paris, 1986.

44. On the object as determining the goodness of the human acts see Th. G. BELMANS, *Le sens objectif de l'agir humain*, Città del Vaticano, 1980.

circumstances has its place in ethics.⁴⁵ An action which as such is good and which is performed in view of a good end, can nevertheless become defective because of wrong circumstances. Thomas quotes the *adagium* of Dionysius: “In order to be good, all the relevant factors of an act must be good, while any defect makes the action defective”.⁴⁶

c) *The End*

Finally, the end we seek to reach also influences the morality of our acts. The end or goal we pursue with a certain act must be distinguished from the act as such, as is obvious: a thief steals money to have a more comfortable life. Human acts are called good also because of the end to which they are ordered. The relation of the end to the object of acts is complex. Certain acts as such are ordered to a specific end, such as cooking a meal is for the purpose of having something to eat. In these cases, Thomas says, the object determines the nature of the act. But when the object and the end differ, e.g. stealing money to buy drugs, there are two acts in one and, in the example, one commits two sins in one act.⁴⁷

Related to the above is the theme of *conscience*. Aquinas has innovated on this particular point as well, and has developed an admirable doctrine. He places conscience not in the practical, but in the speculative intellect.⁴⁸ The judgment of conscience is the conclusion of a syllogism, consisting of a general principle (the precepts of the natural law), applied to a particular case. So

45. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 18, a. 3, ad 2.

46. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 18, a. 4: “Bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu.”

47. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 18, a. 7: “Actus qui secundum substantiam suam est in una specie naturae, secundum condiciones morales ad duas species referri potest.”

48. *Q. d. de veritate*, q. 17, a. 1, ad 4: “... in pura cognitione consistit”; *In II Sent.*, d. 24, q. 2, a. 4, ad 2: “conclusio cognitiva tantum.”

conscience is the judgment of reason about an act one has performed or is about to perform. As such this judgment is not part of the choice one has made or is going to make. The verdict of conscience has an obligatory character, but it does not force us. The will may refuse to follow it and distance itself from what the intellect proposes as objectively good. Each choice or decision which deviates from what the intellect proposes as right, is bad, for one must always follow what reason prescribes and so one must not act against the judgment of an erroneous conscience.⁴⁹ This conclusion of Aquinas was new in his time, and in a sense revolutionary.⁵⁰

The above explanations have made clear that not just the intention of the agent, that is the goal he has in mind, determines the morality of our actions, as some modern authors hold. An act of which the object is morally bad, can never become good because of a “good” intention. Some moral philosophers attempted to circumvent this by taking up a text of Aquinas where he says that an act may in some cases have a *double effect*. The example is self-defense, where one protects oneself by knocking out an aggressor.⁵¹ In Thomas’s mind both effects flow from the same act and are simultaneous, such that the good effect is not obtained by first performing the act with the bad effect. Some moral philosophers, such as P. Knauer, apply this to any act: all our actions would have good and bad effects, so that one could allow the bad result to happen in order to obtain the positive effect. This construction, however, is highly artificial. In reality it seldom happens that two effects follow simultaneously from one action. Knauer’s theory would mean that one may perform a bad action in order to obtain some good effect, something positively

49. *Q. d. de veritate*, q. 17, a. 5 ad 4: “Omnis enim homo debet secundum rationem agere.”

50. Cf. E. D’ARCY, *Conscience and the Right to Freedom*, London, 1961, pp. 113 ff.; O. LOTTIN, *Psychologie et morale aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles*, vol. 3, pp. 354-406; L. ELDERS, “La doctrine de la conscience de saint Thomas d’Aquin”, *Revue Thomiste*, (1983), pp. 533-557.

51. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 64, a. 7.

excluded by St. Paul.⁵² Moreover, as we have seen when speaking about the object, there are acts which are by themselves bad, and which one is never allowed to perform.

7. ST. THOMAS ON THE VIRTUES

In the ethics of Aquinas the virtues have a central place. Virtues are durable habits in our faculties which incline us to act in conformity with right reason and our ultimate end. The virtues give uniformity and coherence to our actions, facilitate prompt action and give us a certain satisfaction.⁵³ While for Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Aquinas the virtues were of central importance in man's moral life, in the modern age their study has been neglected. Moral philosophers have preferred to organize their treatises around the precepts and their relation to man's freedom. In recent years, however, the importance of the virtues has been acknowledged by many authors, who hold that moral life is centered around them, so that on this point they return to the doctrine of Aquinas.⁵⁴

St. Thomas stresses the connection between the virtues and the so-called positive precepts of moral law.⁵⁵ Those affirmative precepts oblige in most cases, but not always, since in order to be virtuous, acts must be performed under the proper circumstances, so that sometimes, when circumstances advise against acting, they must be omitted.

52. *Rom.* 3, 8; *In epist. ad Romanos*, c. 3, lect. 1: "Non est perveniendum ad bonum finem per mala."

53. *Q. d. de virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 1: "... ad tria indiget: primo ut sit uniformitas in sua operatione...; secundo ut operatio perfecta in promptu habeatur... Tertio ut delectabiliter perfecta operatio compleatur."

54. Cf. A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London, 1981, and the treatises of Joseph Pieper on the cardinal virtues.

55. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 32, a. 2: "Praecepta affirmativa legis inducunt ad actus virtutum."

Aquinas studies the main moral virtues in qq. 55 to 89 of the *Secunda Secundae*. The text concerns in the first place the acquired virtues, which are intimately joined to the infused virtues in persons living in grace, and provide an expression in space and time of man's supernatural life, which is developed by the practice of the virtues.

As Aristotle had done before him, Thomas stresses that acquiring the virtues is not just a private affair of the individual members of society. A right and livable moral order in a society is only possible when its citizens are, at least up to a point, virtuous people. Another topic dwelt upon by Thomas is the connection between the moral virtues. One need not be a philosopher or scientist to be virtuous, but without the virtue of prudence the other moral virtues are impossible. In order to act always in agreement with the virtue of justice one also needs the virtues of courage and of temperance. Thomas furthermore deals extensively with questions such as the seat of the virtues and the so-called mean of the virtues.

Aquinas first describes the virtues in general as intrinsic principles of good actions, in order to deal next with the external principles of our acts such as the law, in particular the natural law and divine grace. Finally, in the *Secunda Secundae* he presents a detailed study of virtuous acts and of the vices, reducing, as he states in the proem of the *Secunda Secundae*, the entire subject matter of the science of morals to the study of the virtues and the vices. The virtues, in their turn, are to be reduced to the three theological and the four moral virtues.⁵⁶ This division into a treatise of the virtues in general and an exposition of the individual virtues is meaningful, and not only because we must deal first with what is common and general, before turning to what is particular. The treatise of the particular virtues presupposes knowledge of the first principles of the practical intellect, that is to

56. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, proem: "Omnes virtutes sunt ulterius reducendae ad septem."

say of the natural law, which is studied by Aquinas prior to the study of the individual virtues.

8. MAN'S AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM

In his Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, § 84-87, Pope John Paul II mentions a feature of modern man, namely his desire of total freedom. But, as the text says, this freedom which is so ardently desired, is a freedom which has lost its connection with truth, that is, with the natural structure of things and man's own being. One of the objections nowadays advanced by some people against traditional moral theology is that it tends to make Christians *heteronomous*, that is, governed by commandments and rules imposed on them from the outside. Some existentialist authors thought that one becomes a free person only by throwing overboard all values and all final ends.

Let us see what Aquinas has to say on this point. A first statement is that by its very nature the human will tends to the good. Free choice is not a sort of meteorite appearing out of the blue without any connection with man's inner life. Rather, it grows out of a basic inclination of the will to all those things which agree with our nature. This inclination is the matrix in which the other natural inclinations take form, such as the striving to stay alive and to protect oneself, the desire to know the truth, etc. These inclinations constitute our spiritual spontaneity which we might also call, along with St. Thomas, *instinctus rationis*.⁵⁷

The basic inclination to the good should not be considered as "not free." True, at this level we do not find the freedom of choice, but this inclination means that one wills the good consciously and

57. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 68, a. 2.

because it is good, and that one is acting by oneself.⁵⁸ This willed and approved agreement with one's nature may also be called free. It is a form of freedom which surpasses the freedom of choice.

As we have seen, we must formulate for ourselves the basic principles of moral actions. In many circumstances of life we must determine, with the help of the virtue of prudence, what is for us the correct thing to do. We have, indeed, a very considerable amount of autonomy, besides the fact that we ourselves establish the precepts of natural law. The ten commandments are not forced upon us. Rather they express what we understand ourselves as being the right course of action.

If we deny this natural order of the will to the good in general and to certain goods of our human nature, human life will consist of a series of unrelated acts.⁵⁹ Indeed, those who insist on a man's total autonomy claim that everyone must always decide for himself, and that human life not aware of itself has no moral value.⁶⁰ A consequence of this view is that no constraint must ever be imposed on children. However, failing to submit the young to any discipline at all, is likely to prevent the formation of good habits and is tantamount to surrendering them to their more superficial tendencies and emotions.⁶¹

58. *S. c. G.* III, c. 138: "...necessitas ex interiori inclinatione proveniens... facit voluntatem magis intense tendere in actum virtutis"; *Q. d. de veritate*, q. 22, a. 6: "Inest voluntati libertas in quolibet statu naturae respectu cuiuslibet obiecti."

59. See S. PINCKAERS, *Les sources de la morale chrétienne*, Paris, 1990, p. 343.

60. P. SINGER, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Traditional Ethics*, New York, 1994.

61. See our "Contemporary Theories of Freedom and Christian Ethics," in *Freedom in Contemporary Culture. Acts of the V. World Congress of Christian Philosophy, Catholic University of Lublin, 20-25 August 1996*, Lublin, 1999, pp. 7-21; "La relación entre verdad y libertad en la vida", in *Teología moral. Actas del Congreso Internacional*, Murcia, 2004, pp. 147-158.

9. ABANDONING MAN'S NATURE CONFRONTED WITH ST. THOMAS'S REALISM

Some existentialist philosophies disrupt the unity of man. In their view, man is essentially a consciousness which happens to have a body. The body is opaque and must be considered a mere instrument. Man uses it to reach the goals he has set for himself in total freedom in order to satisfy his desires. As we said before, some moral philosophers tend to disregard the biological facts of the human body and to give man free use of his powers, in particular in matters related to sexuality.

There is a certain difficulty here, noticed by Thomas himself. When speaking about temperance he writes that one could think that such a virtue is out of place, and even against our nature, since it is man's nature that he seeks pleasure. The answer is that man is a complex being: certain desires of his sensual being may detract from his self-government through reason. But man's specific nature is the entire man in so far as he is governed by reason.⁶² Although certain inclinations of the sensuous appetite, and even sometimes of the will, may be opposed to the order of reason, man is nevertheless one being with one substantial form, viz. the rational soul. This means that his body and his bodily functions are human functions and that his sexuality is a human sexuality, which must remain under the control of reason and be respectful of the other person. It must observe the finality inscribed in man's being and faculties, such as securing the survival of mankind and the union, spiritual growth and happiness of the married couple.

For Aquinas man is a being, specified by one substantial form, the human soul, so that the body is the expression of the soul, and even, in a certain sense, is the soul.⁶³ It is one and the same soul by which man is a being, is alive, has sense functions and is

62. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 141, a. 1.

63. *S. c. G.* IV, c. 81: "Oportet igitur quod corporeitas prout est forma substantialis in homine non sit aliud quam anima rationalis."

rational.⁶⁴ Besides its identification with the body, the soul in its deeper nature transcends the body, and therefore can use the body, but not as a tool placed at its disposal: the body must serve the mind in union with the natural purpose of its organs.

By disrupting the unity of man, one throws overboard the basic inclinations of our being which are the basis of natural law and provide the principles of moral action. In this existentialist view the only valid precepts are those of charity and of man's relation to God. But for the rest of his actions man would be free to use his body any way he wants, provided he does not violate the rights of others. In this line of thinking people claim an unlimited right to dispose of their own body and the human body in general, a claim that ranges from genetic manipulations and homosexual unions, to free sex, suicide and euthanasia. The right to life of unborn human embryos as well as that of terminally-ill people, is subordinate to the well-being or convenience of those who engendered them or surround them.

The thesis that the dynamism of our nature cannot serve as a reference for our actions is wrong. There is no opposition between man's freedom and his bodily nature. The intellect knows that the end of man is his own good, and is able to discern that which agrees with it, and that which does not.⁶⁵ The body is not a piece of crude matter, it is a human body. Sexuality does not lie outside the order of reason.⁶⁶

64. *Q. d. de anima*, a. 1: "Una et eadem forma est per essentiam per quam homo est ens actu, et per quam est vivum et per quam est animal et per quam est homo."

65. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 19, a. 3.

66. See MSGR. C. CAFARRA, "L'importance pour l'éthique de l'unité substantielle de l'homme," in *L'humanisme chrétien au troisième millénaire. La perspective de Thomas d'Aquin*, Roma, 2003.

10. THE HUMANISM OF ST. THOMAS'S ETHICAL DOCTRINE

Thus far we have discussed the main characteristics of Aquinas's ethical doctrine and pointed out the unequaled accomplishment of his synthesis. However, our survey would not be complete without some examples of how profoundly humane this moral theory is in its applications, while it nevertheless upholds the highest ends for man, as well as the ideal of sanctity.

A first point is his appreciation of the passions and emotions. While an author such as Cicero considered the passions as weak spots or diseases of the human psyche,⁶⁷ Aquinas argues that nature has given them to us as a support and source of energy. As natural movements they possess an ontological goodness. They are morally neutral, as long as the will does not intervene and are good when reason controls them and associates them with the virtues.⁶⁸

Related to this position concerning passions and emotions is the appreciation of pleasure. Against the opinion of some authors who consider any form of pleasure to be bad, St. Thomas defends the goodness of certain forms of pleasure: when the appetite rests in a good, in conformance with reason, one experiences a pleasure which is morally good. If an act as such is good, resulting from a right choice of the will, the pleasure which accompanies it is also good.⁶⁹ This applies also to sexual intercourse between married persons. This doctrine witnesses to St. Thomas's positive vision of the human body and its natural functions

An interesting example of Thomas's broad vision and closeness to reality is his opinion about lending money or one's belongings to other persons. It is allowable to demand a compensation for services rendered and for not being able to dispose meanwhile oneself of what one has lent to others. This is not a question of

67. *Tusculanae disputationes*, II, c. 4

68. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 24, a. 2.

69. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 34, a. 1 & 2.

asking a compensation for the use of money as such, but of avoiding damage or loss to oneself. He who lends money to others so that they may conduct business is entitled to demand a share in the profit.⁷⁰

The pages on keeping measure in sport and play, as well as on taking care of one's outward appearance are also typical of Aquinas's humanism. The body and the soul need some rest, even after intellectual work. One finds relaxation in sport and in games, but these should be adapted to the person, age and occupation in question.⁷¹

Finally, Thomas's pages on friendship and love are one of the finest parts of his ethics. He describes the effects of love. The possibility of unselfish love, doubted by many, is vigorously defended as based on the fact that the will first moves to the good as such: it seeks the good before seeking its own pleasure.⁷² This argument also shows that it is possible to love God more than oneself, since God is the universal good and the source of all good things. In this way pure love concerns the good of a person who is deserving of being loved. Furthermore, Thomas laid down an *ordo amoris*, the order to be observed in our love of persons and things.⁷³ In his pages on friendship Thomas borrows from Aristotle the five properties of friendship, stressing the last of them, i.e. to agree with a friend in feelings and thought. Because of his social nature man must live together with others. The ideal is to be together with friends: therefore, people should treat each other kindly and be ready to help and should rejoice in the virtuous acts of others. A friend is an *alter ego*, and so we are happy for his accomplishments; in addition, by considering what our friend is,

70. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 78, a. 2.

71. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 168, a. 2.

72. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 4, a. 2, ad 2: "Intellectus apprehendit universalem rationem boni ad cuius consecutionem sequitur delectatio; unde principalius intendit bonum quam delectationem."

73. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 26, a. 1-12.

we increase our own happiness. Friendship is part of that happiness that can be attained in this life.⁷⁴

11. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ETHICS OF ST. THOMAS FOR OUR TIME

During the past fifty year there has been an enormous shift in people's views of what is moral or immoral. As to macro-morality, standards have become much stricter. People at large accept some responsibility for the preservation of rare species of plants and animals, as well as for the protection of our natural environment. Human rights are better acknowledged and respected than in the past.

However, in parallel with this progress there has been a considerable retrogression on the level of individual morality. A widespread subjectivism makes people forget the objective character of their moral obligations. Individual man with his desires and instincts makes himself the yardstick of what he can do. Objective durable bonds at the interpersonal level are avoided, in order to safeguard one's own freedom. Institutions such as the family and the state are in crisis. Man's personal conscience, cut loose from any connections with traditional morality or human nature, becomes the decisive authority for determining what is good and what is evil. The plurality of opinions and the respect due to all of them makes people uncertain as to what is true. It is very difficult, if not impossible, in our pluralistic societies to reach a consensus on questions about moral life.

This revolution in moral thinking is also an effect of the technological revolution, of intensive contact with other civilizations, of far reaching changes in our societies and the relative well being of large groups of the population which allows

⁷⁴. On the above see the *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, lect. 6-10.

THE ETHICS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

them to spend their wealth on purposes which are less than necessary. Further causes are industrialization and the emancipation of women. People are now living in a world dominated by technology. The result is that the language of nature, which is also that of morals, is no longer understood.

The ethics of Aquinas has as its foundation human nature, and has been built with irrefutable arguments into a coherent whole. It purports to make us live according to what is best in us. Precisely because of its superior reasonableness, which takes the entire human person into account as a human individual and a member of society, it will be a decisive factor in guiding the moral life of people in the future. It arises as a lighthouse above the fog of confused moral thinking of many of our contemporaries. For Catholic theologians, on the other hand, it is an unsurpassed instrument to understand and to explain the will of God as manifested in divine revelation. As Prof. Takeda, a Japanese convert, who spent many years translating parts of the *Summa Theologiae*, once told me, the admirable depth, truth and greatness of St. Thomas's doctrine can only be explained if we consider it a gift of God to the Church and to mankind.⁷⁵

L. J. Elders, SVD
Grootseminarie Rolduc
Heyendallaan 82
NL - 6464 EP Kerkrade, The Netherlands

75. For a more complete and up to date exposition of Aquinas's ethics see S. J. POPE (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas*, Washington D.C., 2002; L. J. ELDERS, *The Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005.