

Thomas Aquinas
on Virtue and
Human Flourishing

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INTRODUCTION: INCLINATIONS AND BEATITUDE

The crisis of ethics in our time calls for a synoptic view capable of kindling confident teleological motivation, in persons and societies. It is futile to search for the "clear and distinct idea" in a field of such universal importance as ethics, for which the ordinary discourse of humanity is well suited. Rather, our notions must be open, open to the analogies in things and situations, and open too to the real human situation in all its depth and breadth, such things as the desires of the human heart, the burdens of finitude, misfortune and death, the polarization of the sexes, the insights and traditions of religion, the exigencies of politics, the compelling witness of the arts and of literature.

The reason for this universal importance, such that a field of discourse considered especially intractable or even, recently, "queer" (J.L. Mackie), cannot be isolated as if somehow less scientific and hence inherently problematical or "emotive", was clearly stated by Aristotle when founding this science, this *theoria of praxis*. It is that ethics is concerned with the nature and end of man, with man, that is, in view of his characteristic action or praxis. That is to say, to take the short way for the present, it is the science of human happiness, of how to be happy. But this is the object of all human endeavour without exception. Hence, if its content be ever identified, e.g. as the vision of God, then it will follow that this content is the ultimate aim of all our civil and social arrangements, a conclusion that St. Thomas unhesitatingly draws.¹

Such an identification, however, before it would explain the hidden motor of society externally considered, would more proximately explain ourselves to ourselves. And so the young person reading for the first time the treatise on *beatitudo* in the *Summa Theologica* is led within himself to that state of mind so habitual to, say, St. Augustine, when he said "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

There are any number of phrases from the Psalms of David which say the same thing. For what is here logically and metaphysically grounded by St. Thomas is actually the most natural of our inclinations, whereby we are

¹ *Summa contra gentes* III 37.

not merely open to the transcendent but crying out for it, so that the eye looks on at the passing show of this world forever unsatisfied. The most natural of our inclinations is to the supernatural (perhaps to "knowing as we are known"), from the side of which we long for an initiative, if only we might hope for such a thing. There is no human beatitude short of that, and hence it is that when we read the touching pages of St. Thomas about the fate of infants who have died unbaptized, we find that the natural felicity which indeed he there attributes to them is ultimately a species of deprivation of the fundamental human hope.

Nonetheless, to speak of the most natural of our inclinations is to concede that we have a plurality of inclinations, among which, however, there has to be a certain order, both because order itself is something to which we are clearly inclined and because that inclination to universal good (*bonum in communi*) which we discuss in the text, identifying it as an end with that end which in fact specifies the human will in its being as a will and indeed with God, is already sufficient to order the rest.

We might ask how it is that we can have this plurality of inclinations if inclinations are to perceived goods and "good" has the meaning of "end", such that there is just one ultimate end not only of all human life but even, St. Thomas makes clear, of each and every human action. Here already, I believe, is the place to introduce the essential notion of participation. Human beings are so situated that there are a variety of ways of participating, of taking part in, the universal goodness of beings, whether in the order of learning or in the order of desire, use and enjoyment. The basic realities of birth and education to maturity are sufficient evidence of this. Before one even asks the question why do I live, how shall I be happy, not to speak of answering it, one has lived some years with one's energies bent upon nourishment, play, the search for love, or whatever it may be. Again, after those first, typically adolescent days of spiritual enlightenment in which, it may be, one discovers one's eternal destiny and the dignity of one's own soul as a necessary being, after those intense days of conversion the exhausted spirit will be forced to remember its continuing need for, and hence inclination, at least at some level of its nature, towards those finite goods which in its ardour it had forgotten, a recurring pattern to which we must not forget to add the need for healing and forgiveness of our own wounded being.

In all these ways we participate in the ultimate good which draws us to itself, and so it is only good for us to use these other goods when they do, in the particular circumstances as evaluated by the virtue of prudence, constitute such a participation. Hence we are advised never to seek

fulfilment in them on their own, and even that such a desire defiles the soul. It is possible, however, to abstract such goods in the mind for separate consideration as to what is or is not to be done with respect to each, assuming the circumstances are otherwise right, and hence we arrive at those formalities of justice which are enunciated as laws .

It is indeed characteristic of the legal mode that it be analytic, considering each element on its own. Nor is there anything wrong with such a mode. Hence if it be said that there is a law such that adultery is forbidden, then, as law, this holds without respect to circumstances of place or person. The example is Aristotle's, and we may say that the whole thrust of the Kantian ethic, for example, arises from Kant's insistence upon viewing matters of behaviour exclusively in the legal mode, this of course being in pronounced tension with his wish to deny any real role to an external legislator, so as to secure "autonomy".

The tension is pronounced because it is this external reference that specifies the legal mode itself, and which is the reason why, as we said, laws, whether moral or societal, do not in themselves reflect consideration of the total situation or intrinsic aims of those subject to these laws, this being the very ground, in fact, upon which Kant praised the dignity of duty.

It cannot be denied that this is the mode under which morality is presented to us in scripture, precisely in consideration of the infinite dignity of the law-giver. Even if we see the wisdom of a given commandment and how it will help us to attain our ultimate end, yet that is not the reason why we are to obey it, if we are religious. Justice though the heavens fall!

In this perspective the doctrine of natural law faces in both directions at once, preserving that complete reality which is deformed in one way or its opposite by the positivist theologian and philosopher of duty or by the consequentialist humanist respectively. There is no need to stress the doctrine's analogical character as a legal theory. For the claim is that our inclinations really promulgate to us laws, as arising from the reflected divine light in our immortal souls, it being through the weakness of our minds and not because of some positive open-ended quality (of the laws) that we for the most part do not, prior to metaphysical analysis, perceive them to be laws. "What is in fact law is only inferentially grasped by us as law " (L. Dewan). We simply grasp, straight off, the goodness of being, a seed in the mind which the mind, after some labour according to its own laws, will come to see as the law of loving God more than oneself, something which we in fact do without realising it in that initial grasping of the goodness of being. And so with the other laws in their proper order. An angel would know from the first that these are laws.

The strength of natural law doctrine, however, lies precisely in this internal derivation of law from inclination, since, as we have explained, law is superficially the opposite of inclination, as what comes from outside is opposed to what comes from inside. The claim is that in coming to know our own inclinations, and there is no human inclination that is not a known and indeed willed inclination, we are having the creator's law promulgated to us. We are not just using our inclinations as a way of working out what ought to be done.

In fact what Kant and St. Thomas have in common, as philosophers in the Christian tradition, is just this insight both that law must be preserved in all its dignity ("not one jot or one tittle shall pass away") and that it must and can be internalized ("I will plant my law within their hearts"). Now Kant's solution internalizes law by the simple expedient of transferring the alienation experienced by the subject of positive law into the depths of the human soul itself. So it seems, at any rate, to most interpreters, this being the effect of proposing a nobler end than human happiness to the point of an absolute altruism divorced from all inclination.

It is clear though that no other consistent outcome can be expected once one has accepted the Suarezian definition of law as something proceeding essentially from will, as a compulsion from outside (which can then only be quasi -internalized in all its externality, so that reason itself becomes the heteronomous enemy of any natural appetite). If, however, law be understood as a principle of rational order, intrinsic to reason in the first place, reason as in its own intellectual nature being the cause of the very faculty of will, then it becomes possible to understand the Thomistic and Augustinian view according to which the New Law of the Gospel is not written down but poured into the depths of our own hearts severally by the Holy Spirit. We can then understand, furthermore, in virtue of this superior vision which the Christian philosopher has at his disposal (though without needing to make formal appeal to it), how, in the very being of man himself prior to this infusion of divine law, there is implanted a law which is nothing other than a reflected divine light in our souls whereby we know good from evil just as participants in the eternal law which is God himself creating and governing his creation. It is the view of the nobility of intellect and of its potentially directive role which is paramount.

Nor is this in any sense part of a project of reducing the majesty, the uncompromising demand in particular of divine law, in general of any law. That is why we said that one should not feel bound to view natural law as an analogy, a mere way of speaking, so that we might describe natural law, with Vasquez, as *lex indicans* only. It is *lex praecipiens*; i.e. it consists of precepts and even, says St. Thomas, of enunciations, corresponding, for

example, to the Ten Commandments. He adds, however, that it belongs to the very ratio or essence of a precept that it be given for some end, and this, as much as anything else, is a doctrine of God, that God is wise, good and loving, and not evil, stupid and indifferent. Indeed one might say that this is the only intelligent doctrine of God and that any other view, as history has demonstrated, is simply a camouflage of the loss of God under a cloud of theological or even merely legal language. Thus, in his discussion of the nature of law, which includes the eternal law which is God himself, St. Thomas, clearly thinking of God himself as preceptor and law-giver, writes that "it is because someone wills the end that reason ordains those things needed for the end", adding to this that "otherwise the will of the prince would more be iniquity than law."²

The giving of law, then, is part of God's eternal willing of himself just as universal good, in virtue of his nature as universal being, *ipsum esse subsistens*. A God who does not will good, not as set above him but as grounded in his very nature as end of all things, is not even a possible being.

This, indeed, is the only possible solution. Kant would seem to have enthroned law to the exclusion of God and hence of that happiness which is ultimately founded in the divine being. He could see no other way to preserve its majesty, due to the voluntarist conception of law just referred to. But then law loses the very majesty which he is emphasising, being now immanent to a human reason which stands alone, no longer reflecting the divine, and which seeks to exalt itself as an absolute end in virtue of a purely negative freedom from even the first determinations of a thing's nature. St. Thomas had stressed that just because intellect is open to all being, able to have the form as the other as other, it needs, since it is a nature, and a very exalted nature, to have, like God himself, its own natural inclination, from which proceeds the faculty of will as such and, indeed, all the inclinations of our nature.³

Before we were to go on to examine more closely the nature and role of the inclinations, however, it would be desirable to remove a few remaining doubts and ambiguities. It was perhaps the fear of Kant and his predecessors that the law, in Aristotelian and Thomist perspective, had been made the servant of the inclinations and of happiness in utilitarian and consequentialist fashion. There is a certain imputation of guilt by association here but in fact, and whatever the tendencies of Aristotle in this regard, St. Thomas, guided, we may suppose, by the light of revelation, is perfectly free of them, as may be seen, for example, in the different emphases in the doctrine of *epieicheia*

² Ia-IIae 90, 1 ad 3um.

³ Cf. *QD de veritate* 22, 10 ad 4um; *Summa theol.* Ia-IIae 9, 1 ad 2um; 49, 4 ad 2um.

as presented by the two thinkers, or in the way that St. Thomas stresses, in contrast to Aristotle, that to live well it is necessary to know what it is in which man's ultimate end consists.⁴

St. Thomas, again, is more definite about man's natural inclinations and their role, thus resolving Aristotle's circular definitions of right reason and right appetite in terms of each other merely.⁵ These inclinations, consequently, are presented as a real, majestic and all-demanding law, to which, however, man is inclined in the depths of his own nature in its noblest aspect, viz. its aspect as a reflection and image of the eternal law, under which aspect, specifically, man is called upon to be a providence for himself in the freedom of individual personality.⁶

On this view of law as proceeding from the divine goodness happiness, in the sense of living well, flourishing, personal fulfilment, is in fact the highest development of life according to law and hence of morality; so it is the fulfilment of all the virtues. Hence St. Thomas will describe charity as the end of all precepts and moral life. It is a question not of being for or against the relevance of happiness in a moral context but of what view one holds of happiness, that is to say, of motivation, without which there can be no meaningful consideration of law in the first place, if law is given to agents and if indeed it is a physical truth that every agent acts for an end.

Now St. Thomas, inspired by the Gospels, holds the very highest view of happiness. To accuse him of an instrumentalist eudemonism is to miss all that he has to say about that *participatio* which we mentioned earlier. St. Thomas is quite uncompromising in saying that happiness is not to be had in its perfection in this life, not even in the practice of virtue. One of the virtues, in sign of this, and indeed it is a theological virtue of the highest dignity, is hope, hope indeed of a *praemium*, a reward. This reward, however, is intrinsic to virtue in so far as virtue, as we know it on earth, is already an initial participation in this reward which it thus genuinely merits, as a light growing ever stronger, or rather as a sick body recovering vigour in such a way that each new access of strength is itself used to develop more of the same, the compound interest principle so to say.

Such is St. Thomas's perspective on the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, which, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, hold a central place in the Second Part of the *Summa*, the book of man as on the way to that same beatitude. For St. Thomas, in fact, takes his conceptions of happiness from this most Christian source, the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. Once we have realised this then the strictures upon his teaching as unworthily

⁴ Cf. Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, Rome 1969, Bk. I, lesson 2, p.8, ll.52-71.

⁵ *Ibid.* Bk. VI, lesson 2, p.337, ll. 109-127.

⁶ See the Prologue to Pars IIa of the *Summa*, and the treatise on prudence in general.

eudemonistic appear misplaced and even uninformed.

For what we are presented with is an exact replica of the Gospel teaching upon human blessedness,⁷ that same Gospel which Kant (like J.S. Mill or R.M. Hare) had claimed to translate into philosophical terms, but with lamentable effect. St. Thomas claims, in sober truth, that they are happy who are poor, meek, merciful, pure in heart, who mourn over their sins and hunger and thirst for justice, who seek to make peace and who are persecuted and reviled by the generality of men. This last characteristic, in fact, shows that it is an aristocratic account of happiness. Each person must detach himself from the crowd and enter by the narrow gate. This move in itself, however, is natural to the dignity of personality and not peculiar to the Christian dispensation in any particularist sense.

If it seems paradoxical that these categories, in various ways categories of suffering or at least of painful effort, are the categories of happiness here on earth, then this is so in proportion as it is stressed that beatitude, in which they participate, lies outside the world, simply because it lies in God, whom no man may see and live, in the kingdom of heaven, to be peopled by those who shall inherit the earth, who shall be comforted, who shall obtain mercy, who shall be filled with justice, who shall see God and be called his children and who now rejoice in being persecuted like the prophets before them as a sign, they may hope, of their predestination. In St. Thomas's conception this Christian vision follows as it were naturally upon consideration of the greatness of God in comparison to the creature, of eternity in comparison to time, considerations which of course this teaching in turn fortifies and confirms.

The idea that the purity of virtue is somehow compromised by its association with these hopes springs from that same failure to see that they are internal to virtuous living, as good and the end are internal to law. Hence indifference to hope, like despair, is a sin, a vice, sloth perhaps. Indeed, if the patristic doctrine common to St. Augustine, St. Gregory and St. Anselm, that to live according to the rule of *rectitudo voluntatis propter se servata*⁸ is just to live "according to God" (*secundum Deum*), a doctrine which St. Thomas's endorsement of the eternal law shows that he too teaches, besides his explicit affirmations of it, then indeed the blessedness of divinity cannot be other than intrinsic to the moral effort, to the arrow aimed at the unseen

⁷ Ia-IIae 69, 2.

⁸ This is St. Anselm's definition of justice. St. Thomas corrects it at Ia-IIae 58, 1 ad 2um: *rectitudo* is what the habit of justice, the will to give each his own, attains, as giving a straight course (*recte*) to the ultimate end, the common good (*bonum in communi* possessed as *bonum commune*), for which justice, as an initial participation in it, is required.

glory above the clouds not merely at the same time but inasmuch as it is aimed at that visible point which is purity of heart. For this aim of its nature participates in the other, as was the doctrine of Cassian and St. Benedict and indeed of St. John the Apostle when he said that a man who loves God cannot be other than a man who loves his brother, whom he has seen, as well. Since he cites love of the brethren as proof of love of God⁹ he cannot mean, as is sometimes supposed, that the latter could be the foundation. That desire for God is intrinsic to moral rectitude means that the latter must be understood as religious, as participating in the transcendent, or else become a form of spiritual vice. This vice indeed is present where one seeks to misrepresent these texts as primitive foreshadowings of secularist altruism in the manner of Feuerbach.

Thus St. Gregory the Great explicitly denies that there can be a rule of right which abstracts from the law, cult and love of the true God¹⁰ while, conversely, St. Augustine states, in tune with St. Thomas's endorsement of the beatitudes, that those are happy who have wished, not merely to be happy, as do all men, but to live "rightly, i.e. according to God, as evil people do not wish to do."¹¹

This is why St. Thomas says, as we noted, in correction of Aristotle, that to live well it is necessary to know in what our ultimate end consists. And this, incidentally, explains those Gospel paradoxes about losing one's life as a condition for finding it; not, be it noted, as a means to finding it since that would be the seeking to find or save it which we are told will fail, but as a participation in the new life by losing the old, something only to be explained by what God is, the total good to which one can only give oneself totally, as being the secret of one's own being ("closer to me than I am to myself"), and what we are, viz. images, reflections, of that supreme good, who find our fulfilment in the return to our common exemplar.

The Gospel, that is, never fails to promise a reward to those who live in this way and it is indeed this reward, like Christ's own resurrection, which is the essential justification of virtue, the proof that the wicked were mistaken in despising it. This reward, however, is itself, in the divine wisdom, the

⁹ I *John* 3, 14.

¹⁰ *Moralia* 5, 37.

¹¹ St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will* I 14, *The City of God* XIV 9; cf. St. Anselm, Letter 156: "the things that are done in God are done according to God, that is, they are done *recte*". To translate by rightly would be misleading, as if Anselm were a moralist of the order of Kant or Sir David Ross. "*Recte*" has ultimately to do with the divine government of the world and the ordering of things to their final end, which those pursue *recte*, on a straight course, who live *secundum Deum*, being already, by participation, *in Deo*.

intrinsic flowering of the virtues, a doctrine which in some form the virtuous man is required to believe, at least through some commitment to the beauty of virtue, beauty of life being unintelligible except as some form of participation in blessedness, in that which pleases. But any such concession to the theory of *fides implicita* should in no way be confused with making of the religious dimension of ethics an optional superstructure. "This is perverse and repugnant to charity."¹²

¹² IIa-IIae 25, 8.

1. ETHICS

This term is derived from Greek *ethos*, custom, corresponding to Latin *mos* (gen. *moris*), hence morals, moral philosophy.

As founded by Aristotle ethics is the science of action, of human acts (*actus humani*, see Chapter Two), already extensively considered in the dialogues of Plato, building upon the life and work of Socrates.

Ethics is a practical science in the sense that it aims to achieve something, viz. man's good. It does not, however, aim at secondary goods (as does, say, the science of medicine, as aiming at health), but at man's absolute good, the *finis ultimus* or ultimate purpose (meaning) of life. For this reason it is a part of philosophy, given that philosophy studies the first causes or highest principles of things (in so far as these belong to the natural order alone, i.e. apart from revelation).

As science ethics is a theory of practical living, however, and hence it is not essentially practical, like an art or a moral virtue. There are degrees of practicality, in other words. Ethics is imperfectly practical. It does not, for example, apply rules to practical cases; it merely supplies or provides such rules.

Hence ethics is distinct from (the virtue of) prudence. This is more clear in St. Thomas than in Aristotle (See his Commentary to *Nicomachaeae Ethics*, Bk. 1).¹ St. Thomas agrees that ethics aims at making men good², but in several places in the Commentary he stresses, as Aristotle had not done, the difference between ethics as a science and practical prudence, which he says uses ethical knowledge.

Again, where Aristotle supplies a somewhat circular dialectic between right reason and right desire (each, to be right, must accord with the other), St. Thomas stresses the existence of a hierarchy of natural inclinations in human nature³ as supplying the order of the precepts of morality, which are thus established as the natural law, a doctrine in some continuity with early Stoic doctrine, but fundamentally a development of the thought of St. Augustine, employing his doctrine of the eternal law, *lex aeterna*, which

¹ Cf. Leo Elders: "St. Thomas Aquinas' Commentary on the Nicomachaeae Ethics", *Autour de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* I, Bruges 1987.

² NE 1103b 27.

³ Cf. *Summa Theologica* Ia-IIae 94, 2.

natural law as enunciated by human reason reflects. It is only as being this reflection that natural law can exert any authority or obligation upon us.⁴

Later moral philosophy often focussed upon this element of obligation while at the same time attempting to divorce it from its roots in the eternal law, making it a purely formal quality of reason (Kant and the rationalists; cf. the later philosophy of value). Existentialism was the reaction to this rationalist moral theory.⁵

That the material object of ethics is human actions, considered as free and deliberate, entails that ethics is in some respects subalternated to anthropology or rational (philosophical) psychology, since this studies human actions in relation to the faculties of intellect and will, viz. as part of the philosophy of nature. Ethics adds to this object the accidental difference of morality, i.e. it considers actions in relation to an actual or possible rule of behaviour, of customs.⁶ The ethical thought of St. Thomas includes and is indeed indissolubly united to a considerable work of metaphysical reflection upon this, the specifically ethical situation. In this respect it is ideally suited to our times, when all foundations have been shaken, as having sought to address the most fundamental questions.

This book is principally concerned with what the scholastics call general ethics, i.e. human action as generally and directly ordained to the end or purpose of life. However it will also touch upon special ethics, which considers human acts as ordained mediately to other human beings (*ius naturae*).⁷

⁴ Cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy* (London), 1958; S. Theron, *Morals as Founded on Natural Law*, Frankfurt 1987-8, ch. V.

⁵ For the history of this development away from Aristotelian Thomist teleology one may profitably consult A.C. MacIntyre's writings, principally *After Virtue*, London 1981, *Whose Justice, which Rationality?* Notre Dame 1988.

⁶ So one can also say that ethics treats of virtues and vices, as habits (rules?) of action, the matter of which, in turn, are the passions.

⁷ Cf. J. Gredt, *Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae*, Freiburg 1929, Vol. II, p. 297, paragraph 880.

2. HUMAN ACTS

Human acts (*actus humani*) are those of our acts which are voluntary and deliberate or conscious. These are the acts which are proper to man (*proprii hominis*). They are distinguished from mere *actus hominis*, where we act at least to some extent involuntarily (e.g. in scratching one's chin); but the passions, which form the material of many virtues and vices, are also treated by St. Thomas under this head, viz. as *actus hominis*, acts common to men and other animals (*qui sunt homini aliisque animalibus communes, qui dicuntur animae passiones*).¹

Such properly human acts (*actus humani*) proceed from intellect and will, which are powers of the rational soul proper to man, according to Aristotelian and Thomist psychology. It is because the soul is immaterial or spiritual that it is able to know and hence to love (*immaterialitas est radix cognitionis*²). It is able to have the form or nature of the other as other, so as to identify with it. These two powers, then, are said to "flow" (*fluunt*) from the soul's essence.³

Every agent acts for an end. *Omnis agens agit propter finem*.⁴ This is a fundamental principle, for, says St. Thomas (*art. 3*), it is the end (*finis*) which specifies the act as what it is morally, *finis* here being understood as end of the (human) will, which as coming to the action from outside is contrasted with the act's own proximate or natural end, also called its object.

This *objectum* is intrinsic to the act, and so acts which have bad or forbidden objects, e.g. the death of an innocent, cannot be justified by any good intention or end in the will whatever. Such acts are intrinsically bad. An act is an act of a certain kind before anyone's intention is brought to bear upon it. *Prima bonitas actus moralis attenditur ex obiecto... primum malum in actionibus moralibus est quod est ex obiecto... Et dicitur malum ex genere*, i.e. it is intrinsically or unalterably bad.⁵

¹ *Summa Theologica* Ia-IIae, VI (Prologue).

² *Ibid.* Ia 14, 1 et al. One should not underestimate the role played by a positive doctrine of the spiritual soul in St. Thomas's ethics.

³ *Ibid.* Ia 77, 6. Cf. Lawrence Dewan, "The Real Distinction between Intellect and Will", *Angelicum* LVII (1980), pp. 557-593.

⁴ *Ibid.* Ia-IIae, 1, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* Ia-IIae 18, 2. "The primary goodness of the moral act derives from its

At the same time St. Thomas distinguishes a twofold act in voluntary action, viz. the individual interior act of the will, of which the end (*finis*) is in fact also the object, and the exterior act, which, as being of a certain kind, has its own (natural) object, which the acting person's end may not contradict.⁶ Parallel to this is his distinction between the *finis operantis* (end of the agent) and the *finis operis* (end of the work or thing done), or again between the remote and the proximate end. Hence the first and specific moral quality of the human act derives from the moral object; only secondarily does it derive from the circumstances and from the end intended by the agent.

As we say, stealing is stealing, and Aristotle too speaks of acts which are wicked no matter where or by whom or for what reason they are performed. If there were no such acts it would, it can be argued, prove impossible to have any ethical theory whatever.⁷

Finis and *bonum* are in many ways equivalent (*bonum habet rationem finis*, good has the meaning of end). Hence *bonum* is characterized by Aristotle as what all desire (sc. as end). The good of a being is explained by St. Thomas as the perfecting of a being, as what perfects it. Hence the ultimate good of any rational being, i.e. of any person, is that person's happiness, when he is all that he could wish to be.⁸

Bonum, good, is one of the transcendental predicates, *ens, unum, verum, bonum*, etc. Hence it is really identical with *ens*, being. *Bonum* as such is a mere *ens rationis* or being of reason, naming *ens* as considered in relation to the human will (the faculty of desire), since this takes the whole of being (as *bonum in communi*) for its province. Similarly, *verum*, true (or the true), names an *ens rationis* which is being as considered in relation to intellect. There is only being, but *omne ens est verum*.⁹ This is the ultimate reason for

object... the primary evil in moral actions from their object. When this is evil the actions are called generically or intrinsically evil." Cp. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, Rome 1993: "The reason why a good intention is not itself sufficient, but a correct choice of actions is also needed, is that the human act depends on its object, whether that object is capable or not of being ordered to God... and thus brings about the perfection of the person... Christian ethics, which pays particular attention to the moral object, does not refuse to consider the inner "teleology" of acting, inasmuch as it is directed to promoting the true good of the person; but it recognizes that it is really pursued only when the essential elements of human nature are respected."

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18, 6.

⁷ Cf. John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła), *Veritatis Splendor*, especially Chapter Two, section IV, "The Moral Act".

⁸ Cf. *Summa Theol.* Ia, Q5, *De bono in communi*.

⁹ Cp. St. Thomas, *QD de Potentia* IX, 7 ad 6um; Theron, *The Recovery of Purpose*, Frankfurt 1993, pp. 108-109; J. Pieper, *Die Wirklichkeit und das Gute*, Munich

criticizing the separation of ethics from metaphysics pretended by I. Kant.¹⁰ The moral order is distinct from the ontological order in general but it depends upon it for its own being.¹¹

It is only in the specifically moral order that anything actually existing, e.g. an action, can be characterized as totally bad. Ontologically, since being and goodness are identical, any action, insofar as it is real or occurs, is good, and what might make it bad is precisely something (especially something due) that it would lack (as a *privatio boni*), e.g. mercy, or justice. Hence St. Thomas says of evil in general, *malum est semper in subjecto*, evil is always in a subject, i.e. a good subject, as corrupting it.

In the moral order, however, the absence of one due circumstance, and still more the badness of the object (of the act), makes the act totally bad morally. All the same, moral good and evil are a species of good and evil generally, and neither radically different from nor merely analogous to other types of good and evil. For example, it is not, as Kant taught, that only the will in man can be "good without qualification". Rather, moral goodness or badness (i.e. the goodness of human acts qua human) resides in the will because of the physical (natural) circumstance that will determine the use to which everything else, e.g. every other faculty, is put. Hence St. Thomas can distinguish the proper object of the rational will, *bonum in communi* (sc. *finis ultimus*), from the proper object of each of the other faculties:

For it is not only things pertaining to the will that the will desires, but also that which pertains to each power, and to the entire man. Wherefore man wills naturally not only the object of the will, but also other things that are appropriate to the other powers; such as the knowledge of truth, which befits the intellect; and to be and to live and other like things which regard natural well-being; all of which are included in the object of the will, as so many particular goods.¹²

At the level of meaning the moral good is a good like all the other goods and vice versa. It is not *sui generis* as belonging to some separate realm of value, even if it is (much) more important than other goods, as D. von Hildebrand¹³ rightly stresses. This is why Maritain says that

1963, or other (translated) texts of this author.

¹⁰ Cf. G.M. Manser O.P., *Das Naturrecht in thomistischer Beleuchtung*, Freiburg in der Schweiz, 1944; Theron, *op. cit.*, pp. 31, 91 *et passim*.

¹¹ Cf. J. Maritain, *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Albany NY, 1990 (Magi Books), chapter 2.

¹² St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* Ia-IIae, 10, 1.

¹³ *Christian Ethics*, London 1953.

The desire to see God, for the pure philosopher, and on the pure plane of nature, is simply one of the desires which exist in us, and which can remain unsatisfied without destroying the happiness to which human life is naturally directed, since this happiness is an imperfect felicity.¹⁴

a remark which can also be applied to the Kantian motive of pure duty. *Plikten framför allt*, duty before everything, as was in living memory inscribed on the coins of the erstwhile Lutheran kingdom of Sweden, but that *allt* (Sw. everything) still exists at the natural level and includes many natural goods. In fact St. Thomas can say, indeed he insists, that two things at least stand above the moral good and virtue, viz. God and man's ultimate happiness (as ends of virtue).

This point is essential for the setting up of an order or hierarchy of moral precepts in parallel with and as based upon the order of the natural inclinations (see below).¹⁵ Otherwise nothing would be wrong which was willed as a good, even though everything, even the most evil act, is, when committed, willed as a good (since *finis habet rationem boni and omnis agens agit propter finem*).

Although then the agent's end is secondary to the role played by the act's object (if this is bad the act is *malum ex genere*; the end, by contrast, is not of the substance of the act¹⁶), yet the end is important enough to specify the act morally within this genus of good or bad acts. Thus Aristotle says that "he who steals that he may commit adultery is, strictly speaking, more adulterer than thief",¹⁷ this being a specification between two bad acts. One reason for this importance of the agent's end is that the act's being desired, as good or end, is the main cause of the act's coming to be (performed) at all.

¹⁴ Maritain, *op. cit.* p.111.

¹⁵ St. Thomas, *ibid.* Ia-IIae 94, 2.

¹⁶ *de substantia actus*: Ia-IIae 7, 1 ad 2um.

¹⁷ Aristotle *NE* V, 2.

3. *FINIS ULTIMUS*

Granted the general truth that all action, and hence all laws and even divine commands, are for some purpose¹, it then appears that there must be some one supreme end to human living and activity.

If then there is some final purpose of the various forms of activity, which we seek for its own sake, while the others are sought only for the sake of this purpose, and if we do not make every choice with reference to a further goal (for this would be a step towards infinity, and hence an empty and meaningless striving), then it is clear that this final purpose is the Good, and indeed the highest good.²

A contemporary critique of the argument for this one "dominant" end³, is that it commits the "quantifier shift fallacy", viz. that it argues as follows:

all chains of means and ends have an ultimate purpose, therefore there is some one ultimate purpose to life (cp. all roads lead somewhere, therefore there is somewhere that all roads lead to).

But this does not appear to be the way that either Aristotle or St. Thomas argues. Rather, they begin by treating life as one connected whole and then argue that it cannot have more than one ultimate purpose.⁴ They (but especially St. Thomas) go on to argue that this end must be the ultimate purpose of any action whatever, i.e. not just of my activity as a whole but of each and every thing that I choose to do. This final end is identified as *beatitudo* or happiness (*eudaimonia*). St. Thomas, accepting the definition of Boethius that happiness is *status omnium bonorum aggregatione perfectus*⁵, argues in great detail that, negatively, it cannot be had in this life

¹ Such laws would be part of some purpose that God has given to us, since he himself, as omnipotent, needs no means to his end.

² Aristotle *NE* I,1; cp. St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* Ia-IIae I, 4.

³ G.E.M. Anscombe, "Aristotle", in *Three Philosophers*, Oxford 1967.

⁴ Cf. S. Theron, "Happiness and Transcendent Happiness", *Religious Studies* 21 (1985), pp.349-367.

⁵ Boethius, *On the Consolations of Philosophy* III, cf. St. Thomas *op. cit.* Ia-IIae 2, 1, obj.2.

or in the enjoyment of any created thing⁶ and, positively, that it consists in the intellectual vision of God⁷, no other good whatever being necessary to it.

This is St. Thomas's theory of what happiness consists in. All men seek happiness as such, i.e. it is the natural end of the rational will, as *bonum in communi*, but not all men agree as to whether or where it is realised.

We can speak of the last end in two ways: first, considering only the aspect (ratio) of last end; secondly, considering the thing in which the aspect of last end is realised.⁸

St. Thomas concludes his argument here with a comparison with the aesthetic sphere, with taste. All find what is sweet pleasant (*sic*), but some prefer sweet wine, others honey etc. But the best sweet will be preferred by the man or woman with the best taste. Similarly, the most perfect good is desired (as last end) only by the man with well-disposed affections. This argument echoes the Aristotelian circle of right reason and right desire. Elsewhere St. Thomas overcomes this circularity by an appeal to our natural inclinations.

For St. Thomas, as for St. Augustine (and of course Aristotle) happiness is a natural end of the will (*bonum in communi*) and of man as such. This means that he is not free to choose or reject it. Many later thinkers, beginning with Duns Scotus, would deny that the will is naturally bound to anything, even to happiness. But whereas for Kant happiness has nothing whatever to do with the strictly moral motive or categorical imperative, for St. Thomas it is the highest development of morality (*höchste Entfaltung der Sittlichkeit*).⁹ It is thus internal to morality, which is therefore not a pure means to happiness, as in that utilitarianism which Kant sought to avoid. Virtuous living somehow participates in the end; it is *vivere secundum Deum*, living according to God, in St. Augustine's words.

It seems mistaken to prefer a philosophy of value to this ultimately eudemonistic vision. "He's a hedonist at heart," says C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape* of God, quoting the psalm, "At thy right hand are pleasures for evermore". Value in such systems (D. von Hildebrand's *Christian Ethics*, J. Seifert's writings *et al.*) seems to be somehow conceived of as apart from the natural universe, and as von Hildebrand himself says, St. Thomas "does not use this

⁶ St. Thomas, *ibid.* Q2.

⁷ *Ibid.* QQ 3-5.

⁸ The whole of this question 1, article 7, should be studied and reflected upon.

⁹ M. Grabmann S.J., *Thomas von Aquin*, Munich 1959.

concept". As Etienne Gilson explains it¹⁰ the Christians stood the old pagan philosophy of virtue (and hence of value, the *bonum honestum*¹¹) on its head, by making union with and enjoyment of God the end of all things (see next section). "Only this is desirable for itself, and all else for the sake of it" (St. Augustine). To this corresponds the primacy of being over the good argued for by the Christians, following Exodus, as opposed to the Neoplatonic primacy of the Form of the Good (and ultimately of the One) over being; they stressed this especially in the disputes with the Manichaeans and Albigensians. Modern thought often slips back into this worship of pure morality, altruism and so forth. But "this moral theory does not correspond to the truth about man and his freedom."¹² Here we can understand G. Marcel's remark:

I would accordingly be inclined to make the following undoubtedly paradoxical affirmation that the introduction of the idea of value into philosophy, an idea virtually unknown to the great metaphysicians of the past, is as it were the sign of a fundamental devaluation of reality itself... It is true that we may think here of a certain compensation which, incidentally, remains imaginary which seeks in an ideal manner, i.e. basically in the imagination, to find again that which on the level of reality one has a tendency to do away with.¹³

The Thomistic philosophy is personalistic as giving to each man an eternal destiny, in contrast to any political arrangement. So for the Christians ethics could not merely form part of politics, as seems the case with Aristotle. Thus St. Thomas states that all social and political arrangements are for the sake of the eternal fulfilment of the person, at the same time as he agrees with Aristotle that it is natural to man to be born into a political state, something Augustine had seen, on a par with slavery, as a mere necessity attributable to the effects of sin.

And so, if things are considered aright, it will be seen that all human states and occupations serve as means to the contemplation of truth.¹⁴

The virtues are thus habits which man needs to acquire so as to attain his end. In his theology St. Thomas develops further this philosophical doctrine

¹⁰ E. Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, New York 1940, pp. 325, 473.

¹¹ But see in this connection the final chapter of this present work, on temperance.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, Rome 1993, 48.

¹³ G. Marcel, *Les hommes contre l'humain*, Paris 1951, p.127. Cf. Leo Elders, *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Leyden (Brill), 1993, p.76f.

¹⁴ St. Thomas, *Summa contra Gentes* III 37.

into a general teaching concerning supernatural wisdom (theological virtues, beatitudes, gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit). This Personalist doctrine, however, is wholly distinct from individualism, which has no doctrine of the common good (*bonum commune*). It is precisely because certain actions, e.g. offences against justice committed for utilitarian motives, harm the common good which justice enshrines that the person responsible of necessity turns away from his own ultimate and personal good in so acting.

This philosophical doctrine of the ultimate end is not the same as the "one thing needful" as interpreted in the mystical tradition, for example. *Bonum in communi* is the good of the will, and hence of the man. Yet the various faculties have each their own particular goods which it is natural for man to desire as well as the *bonum in communi* as such. As Maritain says, again, the natural desire for God is just one of man's desires. There is a hierarchy of the natural inclinations, from which indeed the order of the precepts of the natural law is derived (Ia-IIae 94, 2). Man has, for example, a natural desire to marry, to live in political society and so on. On the other hand, the (supernatural) doctrine of "using the world as though one used it not" seems prefigured in statements by Plato and Aristotle such as when the latter says that just a little of the contemplation of divine truth is worth more than all the other goods together and that the wise person should practise death (*athanatizein*) in relation to these things for the sake of gaining wisdom.

This Aristotelian ideal of scientific study, knowledge in this world, as being the *finis ultimus*, is knowingly transposed by St. Thomas into a doctrine of divine vision only to be realised in eternity. Yet, and again in contrast to Aristotle, he states that it is necessary to know what the end is in order to live well.

4. TELEOLOGY

*De ratione praecepti est quod importet ordinem ad finem, inquantum scilicet illud praecipitur quod est necessarium vel expediens ad finem.*¹

I.e. it is of the very meaning of a precept that it involves an ordering to an end, inasmuch, namely, as those things are made obligatory or commanded which are necessary or expedient for a given end.

This is a basic principle for St. Thomas. He argues like this: the precept of the law, since it is obligatory, concerns something which ought to be done. But that something ought to be done arises from the necessity of some end. In other words, he has absolutely nothing to do with any theory of pure duty or obligation, duty, that is, as divorced from any good to be sought. This is not to deny that duty can indeed receive a sacred character, as being divinely commanded, but one must consider that in the divine wisdom it is given to us as essentially a means to an end, at least in the general sense of *propter finem*.

For this is so even if the behaviour commanded (e.g. love) is already some kind of participation in the end. In that case it is a necessary condition for the end, i.e. for *beatitudo*, happiness. Love one another. Why? Because then you will be children of God, like him, and so all will be well (cp. the beatitudes: happy are the pure of heart etc.). So to give oneself up to love is to understand that this is the way to life and joy. If one did not believe this, then to proclaim that one "lives for others" would seem merely perverse. Why do it, if no good comes of it (cp. *bonum habet rationem finis*)? It is only the good coming from it that makes love itself intrinsically good, i.e. the end is internal to the act (in this case, love) as specifying it as what it is.

The whole philosophy of pure duty as found in Kant and some other writers might thus seem to be a mistake. Its roots can be traced back to those fourteenth century theologians who argued that the divine commands had to be arbitrary in order to safeguard the freedom and absolute power of God (*potentia absoluta Dei*). One must only obey, and not pretend to understand what has no foundation other than the infinite divine liberty. But this seems to destroy any definite idea of God. One should rather see the divine commands and teaching as expressing how God is (cp. St. John: "God is

¹ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia-IIae 99, 1.

love"). That, after all, is why they are put forward as a divine pedagogy, teaching man the way to God.

Thus ethics is explained as essentially teleological, related to the ends and purposes of life, to the element of purpose in natural reality. Aristotelian ethics is built up by analogy (or even in univocal conformity) with the rest of nature, which is seen as ordered to an end, ultimately to God. Hence, for example, St. Thomas's fifth argument (*via quinta*) for God's existence argues from the element of order, and hence of order to an end, in nature to the existence of an ordering intelligence as cause of that order.

Thus Aristotle argues that men, too, like everything else, must be ordered to an end, for the sake of which the various moral precepts, and the corresponding need to develop virtues, impose themselves. Around the seventeenth century, however, this teleological view of nature became obscured, being replaced by a mechanist view which explained things in terms of efficient causality only. Final causality was denied, or at least regarded as unknowable. The bird flies because it has wings (efficient causality); it does not have wings in order to fly (finality).

This development could only weaken the traditional explanation of moral reality as needed for the good life², leading either to empiricist utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill) or to rationalist formalism (Kant), both of which agree in denying the existence of real or natural ethical laws. Thus Kant's categorical imperative tells us to adopt principles which we could wish were universal laws. The imperative is itself a merely formal, a priori requirement of reasoning, but why such consistency should be preferred above the other goods of life is not made clear.

For in this rationalist philosophy (of the time of the Enlightenment) no reason is given for human dignity sufficient for making obligatory any duty of acting according to reason, while the Kantian notion of freedom consists in a purely negative freedom of constraint from any kind of determinate human nature. That this negativity does not itself imply any kind of dignity is clearly brought out by Sartre, who uses the same negative concept of freedom and whose book, *Being and Nothingness*, ends with the statement that "man is a useless passion", since, he claims, "man is what he makes himself and nothing else."³ For St. Thomas and the tradition it is necessary to show the spirituality of reason, and even that it is a reflection of the divine reality (this is how St. Thomas defines natural law, which is only law on this supposition), if one is metaphysically to guarantee the possibility of any truth at all (*veritas est in mente*) and hence establish the dignity of the

² Cf. A.C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, London 1981.

³ From Sartre's essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism".

human soul or mind.⁴

Today, in any case, there is a move to reinstate teleology in nature, as would implicitly be required by a natural law or teleological ethics. Meanwhile the name of teleology has been misappropriated by theologians calling themselves "consequentialists" or "proportionalists" who teach what is really a variety of utilitarianism in the sense of a refusal to admit moral absolutes referred to external human acts (cf. John Paul II's *Veritatis splendor*, 74-83, for a discerning critique of these theories).

True teleology, on the other hand, does not require us to deny that there are intrinsically evil acts. For these are acts which will never lead to the end, which of themselves avert us from the end, from God, on account of their objects. In traditional theological terminology, they are materially sinful, whatever is to be added concerning the degree of culpability of the agent.⁵

Hence a justification of moral principles in terms of man's ultimate end is compatible with the defence of the existence of intrinsically evil acts and of absolute (deontological) moral principles.⁶ One recognizes the traditional Christian scheme.

(T)he Christian moralists sought first to attach all moral worth to the voluntary act as its root; ... at the same time they gathered up the concepts of the beauty and honour of human acts into a concept still more comprehensive, that, namely, of the good; then referred the good to a transcendent principle worthy of all honour in itself and absolutely, more truly even than virtue, which is only honourable on account of this. They regarded the soul of a just man as beautiful and worthy of honour because virtuous, but virtue itself as honourable only because it leads man to God. It is therefore not the supreme good, the *nec plus ultra* that it was to the Greeks, the all-sufficient unconditioned condition of all morality.⁷

⁴ This is a profound question. Cf. the argument of C.S. Lewis in his book *Miracles* (1947) against materialist "naturalism" (what is at stake is the question of truth, sabotaged in much of contemporary philosophy). But if there is no argument for human dignity then there is no binding argument against the absolute wrongness of murder, as Robert Spaemann has well shown (e.g. in "*Über den Begriff der Menschenwürde*", *Scheidewege* 15, 1985/86, p.25ff.). One is thrown back upon ethical intuitionism.

⁵ Cf. S. Theron, "Consequentialism and Natural Law", in *Persona, Verità e Morale, Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Teologia Morale*, Rome, 7-12 April 1986, pp. 177-195.

⁶ Cf. Theron, *Morals as Founded on Natural Law*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt 1987.

⁷ E. Gilson, *op. cit.* p.325. Cf. p. 473, note 4.

This might seem to contradict, at least in emphasis, Maritain's notion⁸ of moral value. A careful reading of Maritain, however, shows underlying agreement with Gilson (cp. Maritain pp.28-43, esp. 42-43; also pp. 20-24).

⁸ J. Maritain, *op. cit.*