
The Postmodern Aquinas: A Fresh Start

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The recent resurgence of interest in the practical philosophy of Aquinas is highly motivated. The basic reason for this is that Aquinas's philosophy has not been at issue in most of the modern philosophical discussion: his thoughts, even if ancient, appear fresh and new when brought to bear on the philosophy of today that does not know not how it relates to its classical ancestors.

Modern practical philosophy, with its roots in the Renaissance, its birth in the Enlightenment, and its heyday in the scientific positivism of yesterday, was in the beginning an answer to problems of classical philosophy raised by the new scientific knowledge. But soon enough, as modernity became the paradigm, the continuity with classical thought was lost.¹ The result is that classical philosophy at large, and *Thomasian* philosophy in specific, has for a span of centuries been marginalized and reduced to stereotypes that have little to do with what the perennial philosophy really stood and stands for.²

St. Thomas has been a legitimate project of research merely for historians; for others, his philosophy has only been visible as a muddled and distorted second-hand stereotype whose only role in their theorizing is to provide an example of how the Middle Ages were less enlightened than the modern times, and an easy justification for the infinite superiority of the project of modernity to the superstitions of the past.³

1. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 209ff., where the process of alienation from Aristotelian background is outlined in the development of the Scottish Enlightenment. For a specific example, see p. 269ff. where the author describes how Hutcheson's work was affected by his blindness for Shaftesbury's differences with Aristotle.

2. Not only Maritain is an example of a modern philosopher who found inspiration in a discovery of Aquinas; also MacIntyre's writings show a sharp shift in tone between *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 178ff., where Aquinas is treated rather stereotypically, and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, where MacIntyre sees an "emerging Thomistic conclusion" (p. 403).

3. Let me only mention my compatriot Aulis Aarnio as an example. He, in his latest book *Laintulkinnan teoria* (A Theory of Legal Interpretation), lumps Aquinas together

It follows that Aquinas has for a long time been the exclusive property of the official Catholic church and those of its servants who call themselves Thomists. At the same time the mainstream of modern philosophy has journeyed on farther and farther away till it reached a point where, for all practical purposes, Aquinas was reduced to just a name in history, and his philosophy to a mere curiosity about which everybody knew that it was nonsense but nobody knew what it was all about.

But today it is the day after for modernity: the legitimacy of the modern project is questioned from various directions. The most visible critique has come from the so-called postmodern angle of deconstructivism: it is held that the modern project of constructing systematic structures of understanding and knowledge is mistaken, wherefore all structures ought to be torn down to their parts. If we take Aquinas seriously, he can offer us an alternative to the total demolition of structures by helping us understand why the structures edified by modernity are misconstrued. Then, instead of pulling down everything, we may be able to keep the viable structures while discarding the rotten ones. In this way we can turn his premodern thought into a postmodern critique of modernity, and make a fresh start with better insight.

Theory and Practice

Aquinas offers us several important viewpoints that open “postmodern” possibilities for understanding problems left unsolved and unexplained by the modern political philosophy. Here I shall concentrate on a few points I consider most central: his notion of practical reason, his ontological and moral holism, and his account of virtue.

Aquinas’s distinction between theoretical and practical reason is a distinction largely blurred and lost in modern thought: practical philosophy has become a theoretical discipline. With the rise of the natural sciences, their positive method and scientific ideal have been transferred to most other disciplines. On one level, this means that the scientific standards of verifiability and truth have been received in much of the modern ethics, with the well-known results that question

with the deductive school of philosophy, and with the degenerated *modern jusnaturalists* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and thereby opposes Aquinas to what he calls the practical school of philosophy which he takes to consist in the modern *nouvelle rhétorique* and its successor the discourse theory of practical reason. One need not be an accomplished Thomist to see that to claim that Aquinas’s thought is nothing but deduction, and that it is alien to practical reasoning, is about as misleading a characterization as can be.

the knowability of morals and make ethics appear as something less than a full-fledged science, or somewhat irrational or even senseless, because it cannot meet the scientific criteria of truth. This has made practical philosophers nervous, and they have begun to conceive of their major task as to construct theories of the good or of the right that would come as close to the scientific standards as possible. As a consequence, modern ethics, aside from a disproportionate preoccupation with epistemology, has a predilection for general theories, more often than not based on some notion of universalizability as the ultimate criterion of rightness.⁴ In short, the universal tenability and validity of theory has become more important in practical philosophy than the evaluation of individual actions.

Now I propose that the unhappy consequence of all that is that it leads modern practical philosophy into a situation where it undermines its own position by its own progress. The more sophisticated theories it is able to produce, the clearer it becomes that there is no handy criterion by which we could judge by which theory we ought to act. This is, I propose, because on the level of theory, ethical knowledge is merely knowledge of what is the right kind of thing to do in a right kind of situation, in abstraction from all and any actual situations of individual moral choice.⁵ As this is the case, we can make up all sorts of theories

4. This tendency is shared by utilitarians as well as Kantian philosophies of today. Where utilitarians hope to reduce ethics to a more-or-less rational calculus with universally valid units, Kantians wish to make everything turn on a notion of rational universalizability. We have naturalistic theories like Richard B. Brandt's "Theory of the Good and the Right" that try to transform ethics into psychoanalysis, or biology, or whatnot. We have theories like Lawrence Kohlberg's that try to formulate an ethic on the basis of universal structures of human cognitive development. And we have discursive theories like Jürgen Habermas's which discard the scientific criteria of truth and try to substitute for them a method of rational discourse which would guarantee as universal a validity as possible for practical arguments and conclusions. Rather characteristic for the modern preoccupation with general theory is, I think, the scientifically inspired desire to make moral choices easy and matter-of-course with a theory that gives an appropriate answer to all moral problems. An explicit example of this is Alan Gewirth's programme on his *Reason and Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 21.

5. At stake here is not only the idea that the moral tradition has been fragmented into different lines of argument that have no common code of discussion, as MacIntyre has suggested, but also—and more importantly—the modern tendency to moral legalism, to reducing ethics into a set of general rules; cf., e.g., Germain Grisez, "Against Consequentialism," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 23 (1978): 58. But knowledge of what rules require is theoretical knowledge of abstractions rather than practical knowledge of what is to be done, as Ralph McInerny, "The Basis and Purpose of Positive Law," *Studi Tomistici* 30 (1987): 137-46, points out.

according to how we define the kinds of situations in which they are intended to apply, without ever confronting an actual moral problem. But in a real situation of moral choice, it does not matter much if one acts according to a universally valid theory; what is important is that one do the thing that is right there and then. And the criteria for that particular rightness are curiously un-universalizable, as they are largely drawn from the particular context of the individual choice. Strictly speaking, a general theory of practical reason does not address a genuine practical problem at all.

Aquinas, in the Aristotelian tradition, defines practical reason as that activity of intellect whose object is that particular thing which is to be done, as opposed to theoretical, or speculative reason, whose object is the universal intelligibility of what is being known. Where theoretical reasoning concludes in a statement, practical reasoning concludes in an action. Hence the two kinds of reasoning, even if not entirely different facilities, are different enough to make it clear that the standards of success in practical reasoning must be different from those in theoretical reasoning. If we, moreover, appreciate Aquinas's point according to which it is precisely because practical reason deals with particular *operabilia*, that is, things pertaining to human action, that practical reason by its very definition is less certain than theoretical reason,⁶ we can see how unreasonable it is to demand from practical reason that it meet the scientific criteria of certainty and verifiability if it is to be considered a respectable discipline at all: to demand that which is by definition impossible is not a demand to be taken seriously. If we appreciate the *different* character of practical reason, modern ethics can perhaps be cured from the self-imposed inferiority complex from which it suffers in its relationship to the "real" science.

Ontology and Truth

If practical reasoning is different from theoretical reasoning, practical truth is also different from theoretical truth. Both are adequations,⁷ but different kinds of adequations. To understand the way they are different, we must place them in context with the Thomasian ontology.

The ontology of Aquinas gives being a threefold structure: there is the actuality of things, that is, the particular things that are in actual

6. See, e.g., *ST* I-II 94, 4. The reason for the greater indeterminacy in practical reasoning is of course to be found in the freedom of human will, which makes it impossible to make certain predictions in matters pertaining to human action.

7. For the general definition of truth as "a certain adequation of intellect to thing," see *ST* Ia 6, 1.

existence; there is the potentiality of things, that is, the formal possibility of the plenitude of being characteristic for each kind of thing; and there is the movement that connects actuality with potentiality by turning possibilities into act, that is, the way of movement characteristic for each kind of thing in existence and on its way to whatever possibilities it has ahead. The characteristic possibilities of a thing are its natural good, and when a thing moves it seeks its natural good as the end of its activity.

The human mode of movement is action; a human being seeks its end by doing things by its own choice. Hence the object of human actions is to bring into actuality whatever unfulfilled possibilities one has. Thus the point of practical reasoning is to make a possibility become an actuality by a given action. It follows that the central criterion of success for practical reason is whatever the action which is its conclusion actually changes the intended possibility into actuality; it is the *action* that must be adequate to its end, whereas in theoretical reason it is the *statement* that must be adequate to corresponding reality. Practical truth is a property of actions rather than statements. If we appreciate this insight, we can confidently give up the vain search for universally valid statements and theories of what is right and wrong, and concentrate again on the real task of practical reason, namely, doing the right thing here and now.

A further difference between theoretical and practical truth is that where truth in matters theoretical is an adequation of a statement to a reality that is in actuality prior to the statement, truth in matters practical is an adequation of an action to a possibility that can only become an actuality as a result of the action. This highlights the difference in certainty between practical and theoretical reason: practical reason cannot simply look behind and check whether it was right, it must look ahead and make an attempt at making its intention come true. But it also highlights a more fundamental characteristic of practical truth: if we phrase it in Aquinas's own terms according to which practical truth consists in conformity with right appetite,⁸ we can see that it is not enough that an action is effective to whatever its end is, but it is also required that the end it seeks is a real human good, a good to which one's will rightly inclines. This insight brings to the fore a consideration modernly marginalized, namely, the equal importance of right will to right reason. Where modern ethics is most often an ethic of reason over irrational passions, Thomasian ethics is an ethic of will and reason brought into harmony. The most important consequence of this is the central role that must be reserved for virtue in a successful ethic. This question we shall return to below.

8. ST I-II 57, 5; ad 3.

Wholes Not Parts

That reason and will are not a dichotomy at potential opposition but an integrated whole is an expression for the holistic nature of Thomasian ethics. As opposed to the modern predilection for analysis and fragmentation of reality, Aquinas seeks to synthesize and integrate the seeming divisions into one reality. This is perhaps his most significant challenge to modernity. If ethics can begin to see the whole again for its parts, perhaps it can find its way back to the essential questions instead of losing itself in a dispute over various misleading dichotomies.

The roots of Thomasian holism are to be found in its ontology. That being is conceived of as a movement in which potentiality becomes actuality entails the view that the characteristic end of any being is growth in one's capacities, fulfillment of one's potential, plenitude of one's being. In short, each being seeks its wholeness. It follows that seeking one's integral plenitude, the fullness of one's whole being, has an intrinsic moral quality: that is one's ultimate good, and the ultimate end to which one's seeking of any particular ends ought to be integrated. So there is, for one thing, no significant hurdle between is and ought, or between being and value, as the two are parts of one integral reality where that which is is in movement toward that which is in its nature to seek.⁹

That there is such a hurdle is one of the fundamental tenets of modern ethics. Now it is quite correct that merely from what is in act cannot *logically* be derived what ought to be in act. But it is an overstatement to make this insight a central tenet of practical philosophy, for what is important is not the logical relationship between is and ought but their ontological rapport. The modern stress on Hume's hurdle has led ethics to overlook the point that maybe is and ought are part of one reality after all, even if they do not logically entail each other. If we can accept this insight, we can free a lot of our energy from the recurrent attempts at showing how an ought can, after all, be derived from is, and from their equally recurrent refutations, and tackle more important questions.

9. I do not wish to say that there is no hurdle between is and ought at all, but that if there is a hurdle, it is not a problem of ethics. Undeniably there is no logical entailment between *theoretical* is and *practical* is-to-be, and between *merely practical* directiveness and *moral* ought, as Germain Grisez, Joseph M. Boyle and John Finnis, "Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987): 127, suggest. But entailment or not is not a central consideration at all. For, as the aforementioned authors also point out, the "is-to-be of the first principles of practical knowledge is itself an aspect of human nature," and the "moral ought is nothing but the integral directiveness of the is-to-be of practical

Another misleading dichotomy of modern practical philosophy, as well as of social theory at large, is the one between individual will and reason, which allows us to think that human beings are like machines driven to action by the reactions of a fundamentally amoral will to external stimuli, while the universal reason acts as if it were an external and apparently *objective* restraint on it. When we combine this with the modern notion of freedom as being at liberty to do whatever an individual wants to do, rather than as freedom to the right thing,¹⁰ we land with a further modern dichotomy, namely, that supposed to obtain between individual and community.

When modernity made the individual the central theme of social thought,¹¹ it made the society appear as a battle-ground of different individuals against each other, and even of individuals against the community. The result is that modern societies are commonly considered not quite unlike zero-sum games where the individual preferences of individuals are at stake. I find very illuminating MacIntyre's account where he shows how the desire for finding a scientifically objective ground for political considerations, combined with modern individualism and the dualistic self-conception of modern personality, has led to the modern amoral image of the political community as an impersonal mechanism for making trade-offs between conflicting individual interests;¹² what seems important for modern citizens is that the society satisfy as many of their wants as can be, rather than help them in integrating their personal pursuits and interests into a more comprehensive scheme of common good. Therefore citizens are no longer conceived of as autonomous members of the political community, they rather appear individual subjects of egotistic pursuits, reduced into political objects that can be manipulated by a political management of the market of individual preferences, and lured to act in the desired manner by providing incentives. The unhappy result of all this is that citizens tend to lose sight of their shared responsibilities, and learn to consider it their vested right to defend their individual interests *against* those of others, and take pride in doing so. The foreseeable outcome is a moral deterioration of the political community and a dissolution of every significant notion of the common good.

From the Thomasian view, there is no incompatibility between the individual and the community, for the good of a part is the good of the

knowledge" (*ibid.*).

10. A good example of an argument for a liberty-freedom, and explicitly against the traditional kind of freedom-freedom, is Carol C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy, Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 31ff.

11. As MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 209ff., points out.

whole, and *vice versa*. The political community is a whole, and citizens are its parts.¹³ It follows that it is not right for a citizen to seek his individual good, a merely partial good, at the cost of the common good, the good that in this context represents the notion of *whole* good. But it is not so that the citizen ought to seek the common good over and above his individual good. For the common good is no different from his real personal good: the common good is not other people's good, it is one's own true good, wherefore it is also the proper end of one's actions.¹⁴ Appreciating this insight will open for us the possibility of looking at the human polity anew as a shared enterprise for the common good rather than a mere conglomerate of conflicting interests seeking short-term bargaining equilibria. With a view to the new kinds of common problems not only single societies but the whole human community is facing and will face in an ever-accelerating pace, the need for such a new direction is evident.

Virtue and Responsibility

A central component of the Thomasian holism is its view of the human being; man is an integral being, a whole where all the parts are integrated to the same end, namely, human good, and its transcendence in divinity. Most importantly, on this view is no opposition between reason and will, or between soul and body, but all are parts of one man equally directed to good. A man's life is a whole, rather than a series of disconnected accidents. A man's life has a single end in view, happiness, or beatitude as Aquinas has it, and all one's actions are to be integrated to that end. It follows that, from the Thomasian point of view, the focus of morality is on the quality of a man's life as a whole, rather than on his single actions. Therefore, morality cannot merely be about maximizing one's interests, or about abiding by a set of deontological rules: it must give adequate attention to the moral growth of a man's personality. This attention can only be provided by a theory of virtue.

Virtue, from the Thomasian view, is not just a matter for private individual morality; it is the thematic centerpiece of the moral responsibility of free man—with regard to the responsibility of the individual for his personal moral growth, as well as to that of the citizen for the moral growth of the political community. The moral freedom of man consists in his being determined to good at large, but undetermined to

12. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

13. *ST II-II* 58, 7; ad 2.

14. *ST II-II* 58, 9; ad 3.

any particular good:¹⁵ in order to act, one not only can but must choose between alternatives. No one else can make one's choices for one, one is always responsible for making one's own. Whether an individual person will actually move toward his natural end in fullness of being, depends on his own choices. Whether he will actually become a good person, that is, actualize his full potential of moral goodness, depends on his own autonomous action. In this way man is unlike all other corporeal creatures: where these are moved, he moves himself. Where they have only one common nature, *natura speciei*, he has two: the common nature of the human species, and his personal *natura individui*, or second nature. This second nature, unlike the first, he acquires by his own actions.

In this context, the notion of virtue has three roles. For one thing, the second nature, one's *hexis* as opposed to one's *physis*, is one's personal habit, or habitual disposition. This habitual disposition is what we have made out of ourselves, our acquired personality, as it were. Due to the freedom of choice we enjoy, it can be either virtuous or vicious, depending on whether our choices have been good or evil, right or wrong. In this sense, virtue is the result of morally right choices: it is the virtuous disposition in which an individual person actualizes his natural potential of moral goodness. From this viewpoint, virtue appears as the end of human growth. Hence Thomasian morality, unlike most of modern ethics, is primarily about the growth of personal virtue, rather than about conflicts between one's own nonmoral good and that of others.

For another thing, no one but oneself can make one morally good: moral goodness cannot be distributed by an authority, or given to a student by a teacher, it must be acquired by one's own choices. For this purpose, our first and foremost help is our conscience. But conscience can be misled and mistaken in particular matters. Consequently it is the responsibility of every individual to practice good choices with his conscience, so that it might habituate to them and become more reliable. From this viewpoint, virtue is the appropriate method of moral growth: a virtuous second nature can only be acquired by a conscious exercise of virtue.

But the way in which one can exercise virtue depends on one's circumstances, as well as on one's personal aptitudes and inclinations: different people are apt to be good at different aspects of human excellence. Hence not only the method but also its result, the individual second nature, is different for each person. Hence each person quite legitimately conceives of human excellence in his own unique manner. It follows that, on this view, even the criteria of moral rightness are in a

15. See, e.g., *ST I-II* 1, 7.

way fundamentally personal; the inevitable ultimate standard of choice, in this life of imperfect knowledge, is for each human being a standard he has himself participated in making up by his own previous choices, and with a view to his further personal prospects.

If we take all this seriously, modern practical philosophy is in deep trouble. If morality is about personal growth, then all other-directed utilitarian, deontological, and distributive theories of ethics miss the very point of morality. If the standards of right moral choice are inevitably personal, then all and any attempts at creating an ethic on the basis of universalization are misdirected.

And what is more, from the viewpoint of virtue, the key concepts of modern political philosophy acquire an unconventional shade that offers prospects for unconventional insight in the *raison d'être* and functioning of the political community. The political community is about fostering shared civic virtue, rather than about distributing nonmoral goods. Freedom consists in being free to act virtuously, rather than in being at liberty to act as one's passions may prompt one to act. Equality cannot be a fundamental value of society, unless it is defined as the equality of virtue shared by the citizens in a true perfect community. Democracy is not an end in itself but only one of various ways in which civic virtue can be fostered. Rights lose their status as grounds for political or moral action, as it is not one's rights against others but rather one's responsibility for oneself that is the constituent consideration of ethics. Dethroning such deified concepts is the first price modernity is to pay, if it is to yield a new self-understanding of man as a reasonable creature. But a renewed Thomasian outlook to practical philosophy promises an ample reward that will no doubt more than compensate for that superficial loss.