

# ***Aquinas, Maritain, and the Metaphysical Foundation of Practical Reason***

**Matthew S. Pugh**

For the past thirty-five years or so, much of the debate in Thomistic ethics has concerned the following question: Can Thomas's moral philosophy be separated from Thomas's metaphysics? Stated more specifically, must the first principle of practical reason be grounded in a metaphysical apprehension of being, or is the first principle of practical reason simply the a priori starting point for an autonomous ethics? Certainly this is a most important debate, for if Thomas's moral philosophy can be separated from his metaphysics, that separation will have significant consequences not only for Thomistic ethics, but for the whole of Thomas's philosophy of the person and the common good as well. Specifically, Thomas's philosophy of the human person, which informs his understanding of the common good, presupposes a conception of practical reason grounded in a metaphysics of *esse* and participation. Thus, any separation of Aquinas's ethics from his metaphysics, by cutting the link between practical reason and the apprehension of being, would necessarily undermine, and consequently distort, Aquinas's notions of the person and the common good.

No neo-Thomist saw this more clearly than Jacques Maritain. According to Maritain, the notions of the person and the common good lie at the very heart of Aquinas's moral philosophy. And there can be no doubt that for Maritain, Thomas's moral philosophy is grounded in a metaphysics of *esse* and participation. Indeed, one could even claim

that such works as *A Preface to Metaphysics*,<sup>1</sup> and *Existence and the Existent*,<sup>2</sup> which so forcefully emphasize the existential dimension of Thomas's metaphysics, lay the foundation for *The Person and the Common Good*.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, many Thomists who wish to defend the traditional view that Thomas's ethics is necessarily grounded in Thomas's metaphysics of being seem to have forgotten what Maritain knew and so effectively demonstrated—the metaphysics in question is first and foremost a metaphysics of being understood primarily as *esse*, not essence. And it is precisely this understanding that is most needed if the challenge posed by those who would remake his ethics, and thereby destroy it, is to be overcome. Of course some reformulators, such as John Finnis and Germaine Grisez, have well established and in a certain respect compelling reasons for rejecting the link that Aquinas makes between metaphysics and ethics. For example, they accept the fact/value distinction, which holds that moral norms (“oughts”) cannot be derived from nature (“is”), that one cannot draw evaluative conclusions from non-evaluative premises; to do so is to commit the naturalistic fallacy, which confuses an evaluative property, such as being good, with a natural property, such as being pleasant. As Grisez says, “If one supposes that principles of natural law are formed by examining kinds of action in comparison with human nature and noting their agreement, or disagreement, then one must respond to the objection that it is impossible to derive normative judgments from metaphysical speculations.”<sup>4</sup> For Finnis, the only sense in which principles of right and wrong can be called “derived” is in the sense that they are derived from the pre-moral, but non-natural principles of practical reason. Since principles of right and wrong are not in that case derived from nature or facts, their derivation from the first principle of practical reason does not entail the naturalistic fallacy. For Finnis and Grisez, then, the first principle of practical reason is simply a pre-moral given, which is revealed whenever practical reason, through an act of non-inferential

1. Jacques Maritain, *Preface to Metaphysics* (New York, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948).

2. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan (Landham, Maryland: University of America Press, 1987, reprint).

3. Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

4. Germaine Grisez, “The First Principle of Practical Reason,” in *Aquinas, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. Kenney, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 382.

understanding, "grasps that the object of the inclination that one experiences is an instance of the general form of good."<sup>5</sup>

These are undoubtedly serious objections. Unfortunately, what has come to be understood as the standard neo-Thomist interpretation of Aquinas's moral philosophy does not provide an adequate response. In that interpretation, practical reason seems to be a combination of theoretical-metaphysical apprehension plus will. There, natural law is identified with an order that lies deep within the being of things. Beneath the ought lies the is—the natural order. Practical reason simply sees what is, and then prescribes what ought to be. In this essentialist reading of Aquinas, one derives moral norms from a knowledge of natural kinds. Here the moral order is reduced to the order of nature, for the moral order arises from the very nature of things.

It is my contention, however, that this fundamentally essentialist interpretation of Aquinas, which the reformulators like Finnis and Grisez have uncritically accepted, misrepresents Thomas. Only an existentialist interpretation of Aquinas's metaphysics, like Maritain's, can avoid the problems that so concern Finnis and Grisez. For once the existential dimension of Thomas's metaphysics and its implications for ethics are truly understood, we see that there is in Thomas's moral philosophy no basis for a reduction of moral norms to nature, and therefore no possibility of committing the naturalistic fallacy. There is certainly, then, no need to separate ethics from metaphysics, or to undermine Thomas's notions of the person and the common good.

## I

Specifically, Maritain's existential interpretation of Aquinas recognizes the importance that the real distinction between a being's essence and its act of being, or degree of perfection, has in linking speculative and practical reason. As all students of St. Thomas know, Thomas maintains that every being is made up of two metaphysical co-principles, namely, essence, which determines what a being is essentially, and *esse*, the act of being which makes a being actually what it is. Every being, in effect, forms a unity of essence and act of being. But in their interpretation of Aquinas's moral philosophy, many neo-Thomists have invariably given priority to essence rather than *esse*, for proponents of traditional Thomism have come to generally accept the idea that the morally good is derived from the specific nature of man. This essence, or nature, is thought to provide a goal

5. John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 34.

and therefore a measure of man's perfection. It is precisely this essentialism, however, that lays Thomas's moral philosophy open to the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy.<sup>6</sup>

Yet many of the texts of St. Thomas, surprisingly, indicate that goodness, and consequently the whole moral order, is not grounded in being in this way. Indeed, these texts demonstrate that in Aquinas's view, the good is grounded in being principally by way of *esse*. Thomas makes this very clear, for example, in *De Veritate*, XXI, 1 and 2,<sup>7</sup> when he addresses, respectively, the questions, "Does Good Add Something to Being?" and "Are Being and Goodness Really the Same?" In response to the first question, Thomas avers that though the good does add something to being, it does not add anything real to being; the good adds to being a relation of reason only. But it is in his attempt to justify this position that Thomas's understanding of how the good is grounded in being truly comes to light. He begins by saying that something can add to another in three ways. In the first way, something adds to another a reality which is outside the essence of that other thing. This is how, for example, an accidental property like whiteness, which is extrinsic to the essence of body, adds to body. In the second way, something adds to another by limiting and determining the other, though in this case what limits and determines the other does not lie outside the essence of the other. Here Thomas uses the example of how man adds to animal in the sense that rational soul is contained actually in the essence of man, but only implicitly or potentially in the essence of animal. In the third way, something adds to another according to reason alone. Thomas says, "This is the case when something is of the essence of one thing which is not of the essence of the other, and this 'something' has no being in the nature of things but only in reason."<sup>8</sup> What Thomas has in mind here is what he calls a being of reason, such as blindness, which though a privation and not a being existing in nature, nevertheless adds something (blindness) to man. And, since not every man is blind, the privation in this case involves a restriction.

Of course, the good does not add to being in the first way, that is, by addition of something real, for no nature lying outside universal being could add to being something that was not already in being. But neither does good add to being in the second way, for though something can be added to

6. Anthony Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytical Reconstruction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

7. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, XXI, 1 and 2, trans. Robert W. Schmidt, S. J., as *Truth*, vol. 3 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), pp. 3-13.

8. *Ibid.*

being in a certain sense in this way (since the ten categories do add to being a determinate mode of existing rooted in the very essence of the thing), the good does not add to being in this way, precisely because the good, like being, is also divided into the ten categories. Thomas is here referring to the convertibility of being and goodness. Consequently, if the good does not add anything real to being, the good either adds nothing to being, or it adds to being according to reason alone. But the good must add something to being, for as Aquinas says, it is not nugatory to predicate good of being. Therefore, the good adds to being something pertaining to reason alone. Now something pertaining to reason is added to being either in the form of a negation, or in the form of an affirmative relation. The term "one," for example, adds to being a negation, for one means undivided being. The good (as well as the true) are said affirmatively of being, however, so they add a relation of reason to being. But a relation of reason exists when, of two *relata*, what does not depend is referred to its correlative. On the other hand, a real relation exists when, of two *relata*, there is a dependency of one *relata* on the other. Thus, in the relation obtaining between the knowable and knowledge, the relation of the knowable to knowledge is one of reason alone, since the knowable does not depend on knowledge. But the relation of knowledge to the knowable is a real relation, since there is a real dependency of knowledge on the knowable. To this observation, Thomas adds, "the knowable is said to be relative (or better, referable) not because it is itself referred to something else, but because something else is referred to it, and so it is with all other things that are related to each other as measure and measured, or as perfective and perfectible."<sup>9</sup> This is certainly a most significant observation, for it shows that for Aquinas the good, the perfective, signifies a real dependency of that which is perfected on that which perfects, though not of that which perfects on that which is perfected. In fact Aquinas goes on to say in the same article that it necessarily follows, then, given the nature of the relation according to reason alone, that the good (as well as the true) add "perfectiveness" to being. He then makes a very important distinction, for a being can be perfective of another being, either as regards the perfecting thing's specific intelligible nature, form, or essence, or as regards the perfecting thing's *esse*, its act of being. Insofar as a being perfects the intellect according to the perfecting being's form, it adds the true to being. However, because the being of the form is not present in the intellect according to its natural existence, the truth that is added to being is in the mind only. But insofar as a being perfects another

9. Ibid., p. 6.

according to the perfecting thing's *esse*, it adds the good to being. The very *esse* of the perfecting thing, then, is perfective of another's being. He is quick to add to this that that which perfects another by its very *esse* necessarily has the nature of an end. Thus the good adds to being final causality. He concludes with the following definition of goodness: "Goodness, then, is primarily and principally predicated of being as perfective of another in the manner of an end."<sup>10</sup>

For Thomas, then, goodness, like causality, is a relational term, and so only exists as such in reason, that is, as a non-real relation of reason, when considering how one thing is perfective of another's being.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted at this point that Aquinas makes a further claim in *De Veritate*, XXI, 1, ad. 1, that though a thing's essence, absolutely considered, suffices for predicating being of it through that essence, *essence does not suffice as a ground for predicating goodness of a thing*, precisely because goodness adds to being a relation of final causality. *Considered from the standpoint of final causality*, beings are not good essentially, but participatively. This means that a being takes on the aspect of final causality, and hence is good, insofar as it is ordered as a secondary end to some ultimate, final end. As Thomas says, "But in the case of the creature's essence, a thing is said to be good only in relation to God, from which relation it acquires the aspect of a final cause. And thus in one sense it is said that the creature is not good essentially, but participatively."<sup>12</sup> In other words, a being's final causality, its goodness, is only made possible by its containment in a series or hierarchy of secondary final causes that is itself ordered to one, ultimate, final cause.

There can thus be no doubt that for Thomas goodness, which has the nature of an end, is grounded in being understood from the standpoint of *esse*, for though the good adds perfectiveness to being, it does so via the perfecting being's act of being, or *esse*, as final end, or cause.

10. *Ibid.*, p.7.

11. Scott MacDonald makes a most interesting analysis of real and conceptual relations in his "The Metaphysics of Goodness and the Doctrine of the Transcendentals," in *Being and Goodness*, ed. Scott MacDonald, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 31-56. Though his purpose in that article is primarily to defend the Interchangeability Thesis for being and goodness, and in particular to clarify St. Albert the Great's understanding of that thesis, his analysis is actually quite relevant to this study, since Thomas's way of stating the distinction appears to be quite similar to the way St. Albert states it in *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, IV. Yet as MacDonald asserts, Aquinas's views on the distinction between real and conceptual relations differ considerably from Albert's. By showing how Thomas's views differ from St. Albert's, MacDonald greatly clarifies Thomas's understanding of the difference between real and conceptual relations.

12. Aquinas, *De Veritate*.

However, in order to further clarify how goodness is grounded in being understood as *esse*, it is necessary to make another very important but subtle distinction that is central in Thomas's metaphysics. This distinction has to do with the difference between a being's act of existing (its brute existence), and a being's act of being (its degree of perfection, or actualization). *Esse*, in other words, must be distinguished from *existere*.

For example, in *De Veritate*, XXI, 1, Thomas says, following Aristotle, that "those defining the good in the most correct way declare it to be that which all things desire (or aim at)."<sup>13</sup> But we must ask how, given that Aquinas identifies goodness with final causality, and final causality with *esse*, *esse* can be that which all things desire if *esse* simply means existence, for any existing thing already exists. Any being might, however, desire its own actualization, which in turn would determine its degree of perfection. Furthermore, Thomas's comments about the nature of perfection in *De Veritate*, XXI, 2, no doubt presuppose the *esse-existere* distinction. In the body of that article, Aquinas claims that everything having the nature of an end has also the nature of goodness, since the essence of goodness is that something be perfective of another in the manner of an end. He goes on to say, however, that there are two things which characterize an end: 1) the end is what is sought after or desired by those who have not yet attained it, and 2) the end is desired, or is desirable to, those things which share in its possession. The first signifies a being's tendency to realize or possess its end, the second signifies a being's resting in its end. But these two things characterize *esse*. As Thomas says, "These two things belong to the very act of being."<sup>14</sup> And he adds to this, "The very act of being (*ipsum esse*) thus has the character of goodness."<sup>15</sup> *Esse*, then, has the nature of an end, but it cannot simply be identified with a thing's brute existence, for to say of an existing thing that its very act of existing (which it already has by virtue of the fact that it is), is that toward which it tends as something which it has not yet attained, is to say that it both does and does not exist—though we might well be able to say of a thing that it both does and does not have being, if *esse* is understood as a being's degree of perfection. A thing's *existence*, of course, does not admit of degrees—a being either exists or it does not exist. That Thomas is here making a distinction between being and existence is further indicated by this statement, "For those things which do not yet have this act (of being), tend toward it by a natural appetite."<sup>16</sup>

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 11.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

Obviously, a being cannot tend toward anything unless it already exists. Consequently what such a being tends toward cannot be being meant as *existere*, but rather being meant as actualization, or degree of perfection.

Needless to say, this distinction has profound implications for the whole of Thomas's thought, for if the essence of goodness lies in final causality (a being is good insofar as it is perfective of another in the manner of an end), and if "end" is marked by tendency and rest, and these characterize the very nature of *esse*, then a being's *esse* is perfective not only of another, but also of itself. Yet because a being's *esse* must ultimately be viewed relationally, that is, in reference to the whole hierarchy of extrinsic ends through which it has received being, that being's *esse* must be understood participatively. The *esse* which perfects a being intrinsically cannot be disconnected from that which perfects the being extrinsically.

Now the consequence of viewing *esse*, and hence goodness, participatively, is to understand that goodness is at once perfective both extrinsically and intrinsically. Goodness/*esse* perfects extrinsically insofar as a contingent being is caused by another, that is, insofar as the former stands in a real relation to the latter as that which is perfective of the first in the manner of a final cause, and it perfects intrinsically insofar as a being's *esse* is perfective of it as an end, that is, insofar as there is an inner tendency in every being to actualize, perfect, fulfill, or realize its hidden potency.<sup>17</sup> Yet the *esse* that perfects intrinsically is *esse* received from something else, and ultimately from God Himself.<sup>18</sup> For Thomas, then, goodness is indeed grounded in being, though understood as *esse*, as a being's degree of

17. How, one might ask, can goodness be both extrinsic and intrinsic to a being, if Thomas's claims in *De Veritate*, XXI.1, are true? If goodness adds no reality to being, that is, if goodness is related to being only conceptually, rather than really, and if this relation is an extrinsic relation, how can goodness be intrinsic to any being? Doesn't this change the relation not only into an intrinsic relation, but a real relation as well? In fact it doesn't, as long as we keep two things in mind: (a) the intrinsic relation is nothing more than the re-statement, so to speak, of the extrinsic relation within the being in question, which means that the end (*esse*) intrinsic to a thing is the relation given to the thing by that which perfects it as an end, (b) The relation can only be understood from the standpoint of participation, namely, the participation of *esse* in *esse*. In effect, the notion of the extrinsic end as *esse* cannot be separated in reality from the notion of the extrinsic end (the *esse* of the other, and indeed of all the others to which the *esse* of the being in question is linked) which perfects the being of the first.

18. We must emphasize, however, that this perfecting is not a coming-into-being of essence or substantial form (which, like a thing's existence, also already is), much less a coming-into-being of a thing's existence. *De Veritate*, XXI, 1, ad. 1 and 4; *Summa Theologiae*, Ia., 5, 1, and Jan Aersten, "Good as Transcendental and the Transcendence of the Good," in *Being and Goodness*, ed. MacDonald, pp. 56-73.

perfection, or realization. And since this means the *esse* of any contingent being is necessarily participated *esse*,<sup>19</sup> and since a thing perfects another in regard to the perfecting being's *esse*, then this also means that the goodness of a contingent creature is participated goodness. One thing's *esse* is perfective of another being, but some other *esse* is perfective of the first. All of these, though, are ordered to some final, or ultimate end, which is not itself ordered to any other being. And the importance of this cannot be overstated, for as we shall see, it has very significant implications for understanding the role of practical reason in Thomas's ethics. Here it is worth quoting Thomas in full.

The influence of an efficient cause is to act; that of a final cause is to be sought, or desired. A secondary agent acts only by the efficacy of the first agent existing in it; similarly, a secondary end is sought only by reason of the worth of the principle end existing in it inasmuch as it is ordained to the principle end, or has its likeness.

Accordingly, because God is the last end, He is sought in every end, just as, because He is the first efficient cause, He acts in every agent. But this is what tendency to God implicitly means. For the efficacy of the first cause is in the second as the principles of reasoning are in the conclusions. But to reduce conclusions to their principles or secondary causes to their cause belongs only to the *power of reasoning*. Hence, only a rational nature can trace secondary ends back to God by a sort of analytic procedure so as to seek God Himself explicitly. In demonstrative sciences a conclusion is *correctly* drawn only by a reduction to first principles. In the same way the appetite of a rational creature is *correctly* directed only by an explicit appetitive tendency to God, either actual or habitual.<sup>20</sup>

Now as we have seen, for Aquinas a thing is good insofar as it has being, for the essence of goodness is that it be perfective of another in the manner of an end. To be an end, however, is to have the characteristics of tendency and rest. Since tendency and rest belong to the very act of being, to *esse*, any being, insofar as it has being, has the nature of an end, and hence is good. And this means, as we have also seen, that good-

19. As noted above, participation is the key to understanding how goodness is both extrinsic and intrinsic to any created being. But this requires that we specify exactly how Aquinas uses this term. A most insightful study of this problem is given in John Wippel's "Participation and the Problem of the One and the Many," in *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), pp. 94-132. In that article, Wippel attempts to address three questions concerning participation, all of which are relevant to our study. 1) What does Thomas mean by participation, specifically of beings in *esse*? 2) If beings participate in *esse*, is this meant primarily as *esse commune*, or subsisting *esse* (God)? 3) Does participation primarily mean composition or similitude? The important point to note is that the answers to all three questions are unified by a notion of participation primarily understood as the participation of an effect in its cause.

20. Aquinas, *De Veritate*, XXII, 2, pp. 41-2.

ness is both extrinsic and intrinsic to a being; extrinsic insofar as a being is perfected by another, and intrinsic, insofar as every being has *esse*. But if this is true, then a being is good not fundamentally by essence, but by participated *esse*. And this in turn means that the first end is in the secondary ends, both in the end extrinsic to a being and perfective of it as final cause, and in the end intrinsic to a being and perfective of it also as final cause, as its own act of being. What this implies, of course, is that the end is not only in the being that perfects another being extrinsically, but more importantly, is in the very *esse* of the perfected being. A being's *esse* thus participates not only the secondary *esse* or end which perfects it extrinsically, but also the first end which is in every end. Since a thing's being is both intrinsically perfecting and extrinsically perfected, every creature, in seeking its own being (*esse*, not *existere*) as an end, also, and necessarily seeks—given that all contingent *esse* is participated *esse*—what extrinsically perfects it as its end. In other words, in seeking its own being, every creature, in order to realize itself, also and necessarily seeks the highest end, or ultimate *esse*.

## II

The foregoing considerations lay the groundwork for Thomas's moral philosophy as well as his conception of practical reason, and shows at once how the challenge posed by reformulators like Finnis and Grisez can be met. For as all students of St. Thomas know, though there is in every contingent being a real distinction of essence and act of being, every being nevertheless constitutes a unity. This unity, furthermore, is reflected in the intellect's act of knowing being. In other words, the intellect's act of knowing being reflects the unity of being itself. That is, corresponding to the unity of essence and *esse* in every being is a unity of speculative and practical reason in the one power of the knower. Thus, just as the true and the good are unified in being as two modes of perfection rather than distinct orders of being, so speculative and practical reason are unified as two *modes* of knowing, rather than distinct powers of knowing.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Thomas even goes so far as to say that practical reason is simply an extension of speculative reason. Of course Thomas recognizes that speculative and practical reason differ in their objects, and refers speculative reason to its proper object which is truth, and

21. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 79, art. 11.

practical reason to its proper object, which is the good. But he is quick to add that these objects are really one and the same, given their convertibility with being.<sup>22</sup>

The point is that the intellect, under its dual modes of knowing, knows being simultaneously as both true and good. Both speculative and practical reason know being. It's just that speculative reason knows being under the aspect of truth, while practical reason knows being under the aspect of goodness, and then directs what it knows to some operation. In effect, practical reason knows being from the standpoint of *esse*, that is, as perfective. And this means, of course, that practical reason also knows it as participated, and participating.

We see that here, then, there is no reduction of the order of the good to the order of being, for the good and being are one and the same. Being is good, and the good has being. Neither is the practical reduced to, nor derived from, the speculative. Speculative knowing is not prior to practical knowing, for both are simply two modes of one act of knowing. Thus there is for Aquinas no real separation of the evaluative and non-evaluative, for both spring from a basic unity, or source. It is only when the intellect reflects upon its own act of knowing that it sees that the unity of being reflected in that act simultaneously reveals a real distinction of essence and *esse* in being. This becomes clearer if we keep in mind the fundamental difference between the act by which the intellect knows extra-mental being (the real order of knowing), and the act by which the intellect knows itself (the order of self-awareness). In the act by which extra-mental being is known, the intellect first knows the essences of things through simple apprehension, a process combining sense perception, abstraction, and adaequation. However, since essence is not *esse*, *esse* cannot be known in this way. *Esse*, rather, must be known through the judgment, or what Thomas calls composition and division, a process determining a whole hierarchy of judgment forms ultimately grounded in basic judgments of existence. The

22. Thus for example, were we to replace "truth" and "good" with "being" in the following passage from the same article, we would not at all alter the meaning of the passage. The terms in the original passage here appear in parentheses. "Being (true) and good include one another, for being (true) is something good, otherwise it would not be desirable; and being (good) is something true, other wise it would not be intelligible. Therefore, as the object of the appetite may be being (something true) as having the aspect of good, for example, when someone desires to know being (truth), so the object of the practical intellect is being (good) directed to operation, and under the aspect of truth. For the practical intellect knows being (truth), just as the speculative, but directs being (the known truth) to operation" (reply to obj. 2).

process, then, by which *esse* is known must be distinguished from the process by which essence is known—though it must be understood that the former cannot be separated from the latter, at least insofar as simple apprehension is the pre-condition, or occasion, for judgment. Hence simple apprehension and judgment together constitute the intellect's act of knowing material being. And insofar as material being is a unity, not only of form and matter, but of essence and *esse*, both speculative and practical reason are actuated, or perfected, in that act. Yet it is precisely through this actuation that the intellect is also brought to a knowledge of itself.

Consequently, though things are known primarily via their essences in the real order of knowing, in the order of self-awareness, however—that is, in the order by which the intellect knows itself—this priority is reversed. As Aquinas avers in his *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 87, art. 1, the intellect knows itself not by its essence, but by its own act. This is because the human intellect is, essentially speaking, only a capacity or potency in the genus of intelligible beings. It is not actually intelligible until it is actuated by some intelligible form. It has, in effect, essentially the power or capacity to understand, but not to be understood until actuated by an intelligible form other than itself. This means that in the order of self-awareness, the first thing that the intellect knows is its own act of understanding. In the order of awareness, that is, of the reflexive turn of the mind upon itself, the first thing that the intellect understands is its own being, for the intellect only actually (as opposed to potentially) has being when it is actuated, or informed, through some intelligible nature. It is only later, through a second critical reflection that the intellect begins to work out an epistemology. The intellect *initially* understands itself through its own actuation—that is, the intellect initially understands that it has been actuated or perfected, that it has being, and that its being (actually speaking) is its awareness. Only later does it ask *how* it knows its own being.

Now in knowing its own act, its own being, the intellect immediately understands that its being is contingent, that it is a participation of that which perfects it. The intellect knows this implicitly; that its being is contingent is only made explicit through secondary reflection. But the intellect also immediately and implicitly understands that there is a real relation of dependency not only on secondary causes extrinsically perfecting it as final ends, but also on a secondary final cause ultimately perfecting it as an intrinsic end, namely, as its own being. As we know, because God is the last end, He is in every other end. Therefore, insofar as any being knows its own act of being, that being implicitly seeks the last end, or implicitly desires to possess the last end, since it implicitly understands the relation of

its own being to that of the First Being. Given that it is *esse* that primarily perfects as end or good, and the good is what is apprehended by practical reason, practical reason implicitly and at least indirectly directs every action to that end. In seeking actualization, we necessarily seek God.

Interestingly enough, Thomas likens the process of becoming explicitly aware of our desire for God to a reduction of conclusions to first principles. In *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 94, art. 2, for example, Aquinas says that the precepts of natural law are to practical reason what the first principles of demonstration are to speculative reason, and that both are self-evident principles. Of course, the first of these indemonstrable principles is based on an apprehension of being—a notion included in all that we apprehend, and first revealed to speculative reason. Yet here Aquinas is referring to being apprehended under the aspect of truth, or intelligibility. Being as good, however, is apprehended by practical reason. In other words, in the real order of knowing, an understanding of being as truth (known via speculative reason) takes priority, while in the order of awareness, an understanding of being as good (known via practical reason) takes priority. In the order of awareness, we first understand *esse* through our own *esse*, our own actuation, which is to say that we first understand the good (or the desirability of being) by understanding the desirability of our own being.

But as we may now safely assert, this priority is merely relative, and involves no derivation of the practical from the speculative, or of the speculative from the practical, for being and good form a unity that is reflected in the very unity of the intellect's act. It is not that the intellect first knows being and the indemonstrable first principles of being obtained through the power of speculative reason, and *then* knows the good and the self-evident precepts of natural law in a second but separate apprehension obtained through the power of practical reason. Rather, the apprehension of being as this takes place simultaneously in the real order of knowing and the order of awareness is the immediate foundation for both.

The implication, then, is that for Thomas there is no problem of deriving evaluative conclusions from non-evaluative premises, of deriving "ought" from "is," given that for Aquinas the good is implicitly contained in being. Being, in other words, presupposes causality. That is, to say of things that they are, and that they are good insofar as they are perfective of others and themselves, and therefore seek ends (both extrinsic and intrinsic) by virtue of the fact that they are caused to be, is the same as to say that being is inconceivable apart from causality. And, since being and good are convertible, and since a being's goodness is derived from its *esse*, the claim "all things seek the good" carries the weight of a law, of an *a priori* or self-

evidently true principle—a principle that is universally and necessarily true—which first comes to light in the intellect’s knowledge of its own being. This is a rule, then, which commands our obedience, since it is a principle of our being. But the causality presupposed by being (including our own), of course, is a causality hierarchically conceived, and ending in an ultimate, Final Cause. An ultimate Final Cause, however, implies intention, or design. Thus being is from the start shot through with value, for things “are” only by virtue of the intention of the ultimate Final Cause. Consequently, one cannot separate facts from values. For Aquinas, no being is an object in the first sense, for the *esse* of all being, including our own, is by participation of the last end. That last end, of course, is unlimited *esse*, and hence inherently free *esse*. Everything in creation is thus the result of a free act. That things are, that they are good, and that each implicitly desires to possess the last end (each in its own way), is the consequence of a free act proceeding from a genuinely free being. Of course, insofar as we participate in the Last End, that end is in us by similitude or likeness. That “Good is to be done and evil avoided,” then, is simply commanded of us by virtue of the fact that “All things seek the good.” In sum, the reformulators who miss this, end up trying to excise goodness from Thomas’s metaphysics in order to make of the good and/or ethics something autonomous. As one leading theorist has said recently, “The initial impulse for an ethical question is not an awe-inspiring confrontation with being itself, but rather practical experience.... [T]he starting point of any science of human affairs is the experience of intentionally striving after a good that accompanies every human being,” and, “The question about the ‘ought’ does not answer to the experience of being, but rather to the experience—the subjective experience—of the goal-directed nature of our striving, choosing, and doing. Moral philosophy arises from the systematic reflection upon this experience.”<sup>23</sup> For these thinkers, the metaphysical and the ethical represent two different orders (an order of being and an order of goodness) known, or apprehended through two different intuitions (an intuition of being through simple apprehension and judgment, and an intuition of the good as that after which we intentionally strive), given in two different operations having two different ends (an operation of speculative reason directed toward truth, and an operation of practical reason reflecting upon the subjective experience of the goal-directed nature of our striving), giving rise to two different kinds of judgment having to do either with what is apprehensible, or what

23. Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, trans. Gerald Malsbary, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 23.

is appetible as the object of our striving. Because we are talking about two distinct orders, the first principle of practical reason, they say, cannot be reconstructed from the first principles of theoretical reason.

As this paper has made clear, however, this position simply misrepresents Thomas, because for Aquinas being and goodness do not constitute two distinct orders, but rather form a fundamental unity. Consequently, when it comes to being and goodness (and thereby metaphysics and ethics), we are not talking about two distinct intuitions, operations, or judgments. They are one in reality, different in reason, or reflection alone.

Thus, both reason and being are the measure of right action. Yet the measure is not taken from an apprehension of essence, but rather from an apprehension of *esse*, for it is the *esse* of beings, and most importantly our own *esse*, that is understood by practical reason to be good, i.e., perfective.

### III

Thomas's personalism, his philosophy of the person and the common good, rests on this foundation of the metaphysics of *esse*, for only a metaphysics that gives priority to the act of being and participation enables us to see that "the human person is ordained directly to God as the ultimate end."<sup>24</sup> As Maritain correctly pointed out, this truth lies at the very heart of Christian wisdom. As participations of the highest goodness, our goodness (degree of perfection or actualization) has being only in relation to the Final End, Whose very essence is His *esse*, or goodness. As such, our ordination transcends every created common good. Because we are extrinsically and intrinsically perfected beings, we understand that our being is necessarily caused by, and is dependent on, Infinite, or Unlimited Being, and we understand this precisely in our acts of critical reflection on our own being. Our being, therefore, and hence our goodness, is known to consist of a real relation of dependency on God, and this means that there is in us, insofar as we know this truth, an image of God shared by no other creature. Our very being, in other words, is relational—it is that degree of perfection made possible by the whole series of ends perfective of us both extrinsically and intrinsically, and culminating in the Highest Good. In a very real sense, our perfection, and thus our being, is realized only in the other. We seek our perfection in the perfection of God, the ultimate Final End. And, because

24. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, p. 15.

the Last End is in all of its secondary ends, the freedom found in the Last End is also found in us, albeit in a participated way.

But as Maritain also pointed out, because this freedom is necessarily the freedom of spirit, it is also eminently personal. This means that our being is unlike the being of other creatures, for our being is a spiritual existence, a self-possession made possible through intellect and love. Unlike individuality, which is turned toward matter, personality is turned toward the highest dimensions of being. As a real dependency on that which perfects us as our ultimate final cause, our being, as person, has its roots in the Last End. Therefore, as a reflection of that original self-giving, the person is also a self-giving, a reaching out to, and a desire for, the other, as well as a dependency on the other. The subjectivity or interiority of the person is dialogic—the person only has being relationally, for the person is only actuated through the other. Indeed the “other” is the very precondition for the interiority of the person. Thus insofar as our free acts tend toward the Highest End, we desire that uncreated common good which (as origin and source of all goodness) informs every other common good by way of participation. Quoting Maritain, “Personality tends by nature to communion.”<sup>25</sup> The implication, of course, is that pursuit of the Highest Good entails pursuit of the lesser, created common goods, such as the life of the family, and life in society. The person cannot reach perfection apart from the other, and so must pursue his perfection in and through the other. The person must, in other words, pursue the common good. Only in this way can the person reach his ultimate perfection. Yet as Maritain says, this good is common in that it is “common to both the whole and the parts into which it flows back, and which in turn, must benefit from it.”<sup>26</sup> The common good, in effect, is the good of human persons—not the good of the mere individual, nor the good of the whole collection of individuals. This notion of the common good presupposes the human person as the very condition for its possibility, and can only be realized in persons.<sup>27</sup>

25. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

27. Maritain makes an analogy with the Persons of the Trinity to clarify this relation. For the Divine Persons, each one is in the other through infinite communion, such that their common good is the good proper to each. Yet because human beings are individuals as well as persons, the common good that we are called to pursue is not absolutely identical to the good of each person. Rather, the common good for man is superior only if it benefits persons and flows back to them. On the hand, the spiritual value, or good of the person transcends the whole of the common good, in material terms.

Finally, just as the person is a participation of the Highest Good, and thus is subordinated to it, so the common created good of persons is a participation of the Highest Good, and therefore also subordinated to it. Hence the extent to which the person pursues the common good is the very extent to which he also pursues his own perfection, and vice versa. In conclusion, it is clear that Thomas's philosophy of the human person and the common good, which lies at the very heart of his moral philosophy, presupposes a metaphysically grounded notion of practical reason. But it is also clear that the metaphysics in question must be a metaphysics that gives priority to *esse* and participation, rather than essence, for when practical reason apprehends the good, it apprehends *esse*, either the *esse* of its own being or the *esse* of some other being, which stands in a real relation of dependency necessarily on an ultimate, Final End. This recognition, in turn, becomes the foundation for a moral philosophy based on an understanding of the human being as person, whose good is inseparable from that of the common good. If, on the other hand, we attempt to ground practical reason in a metaphysics of essence, we are forced to either accept the criticism of having attempted to derive values from facts, or to reformulate Thomas's philosophy in such a way as to excise his ethics from his metaphysics. The first result is philosophically untenable, and the second result leads to the destruction of Thomas's philosophy of the person and the common good. Only the metaphysics of *esse* and participation enables us to avoid being impaled on the horns of this dilemma. By embracing the metaphysics of *esse* and participation, as both Aquinas and his great interpreter, Maritain, envisioned it, we avoid the first by demonstrating that the fact/value distinction does not hold in a metaphysics where priority is given to *esse*, and we avoid the second by showing that because the distinction does not hold in the metaphysics of *esse*, there is no need to reformulate Thomas's system, and hence no need to sever the link between his ethics and metaphysics. Most importantly we also show, thereby, that the foundation for Thomas's personalism is sound.