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Traditional Ethics Today. The case of Thomas Aquinas

This paper concerns an ethics of our medieval tradition (in particular good, happiness, natural law and virtue) and tries to show how to recover it, facing the problems of pluralism, freedom and scientific approach in modern and contemporary age. The author points out:

- The central role of the desire for good and happiness and for goods adequate or inadequate to the openness of desire (particularly of the human person). Today we speak of the meaning of life.

- The role of ethical virtues as the flowering of the first principles of natural law.

- The principle of the entirety of the good (bonum ex integra causa) in order to judge the moral goodness of an action and as a criterion to compare different ethics in a pluralistic world. This is to distinguish between different levels of the human and moral good.

- The principles of natural law as a result of the encounter between certain inclinations and practical rationality that recognizes them as normative. Nature and natural law are the conditions of freedom, not primarily a limit to it.

- Now we must increase the role of freedom of choice – which is based on rationality – and the virtues as a way to freedom. It is essential to emphasize the value of personal risk and the fact that evil can serve the good.

In general the author tries to face the challenges of deontology, utilitarianism and contemporary virtue ethics.

I. Contemporary and classical ethics

We will consider the following problem: how to recover today traditional ethics, ethics of virtue, of character education and of natural law such as that of Thomas Aquinas? We must first of all be aware of the distance between that ethics and contemporary ethics. This is due to several factors, including:

1 the end of medieval religious context and theological unity¹.

2 the role of modern scientific paradigms in ethics that favored fragmentation of traditional ethics based on character formation, focusing on other perspectives (deontologism, utilitarianism, intuitionism, etc.), stressing the role of foundationalism also in ethics and neglecting the temporal dimension inherent in virtue-based ethics.

3 more recently the influence of ethical issues raised by technology requiring precise answers (applied ethics).

4 the centrality of freedom of choice and authenticity².

5 However, there are important aspects that allow to recover ethics as that of Aquinas today. In general:

a) First of all terms such as ethical, moral etc. have become heavily moralistic or even meaningless due to the gap between ethics and human life, ethics and happiness³. On the contrary the

¹ On this topic see C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MS) 2007.

² See C. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, Anansi press, Toronto 1998.

³ Cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", «Philosophy», 33, 124 (1958), pp. 1-19; *Collected Philosophical Papers* III, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1981, in particular, p. 176: «[...]if such a conception (of obligation) is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of "obligation", of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root, and if the word "ought" has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of "obligation", it too will remain to be spoken with a special

main question of classical ethics, ancient and medieval, is: how to become happier and more human?⁴ This concept of ethics has a new appeal today.

b) Today the «plastic» idea of practical rationality that Thomas Aquinas derives from Aristotle is very interesting. Practical reason puts order in reality, aiming at good actions and looking closely at reality (precisely at the object of *natural* inclinations)⁵. The practical dimension of the *unique* human reason concerns both moral experience and moral philosophy. According to Aquinas practical reason is always also speculative reason (speculative from *speculum*-mirror), because it knows reality. We must stress that reason is always speculative (in a wide sense) also when it is practical (has a practical aim) and makes order. Moral knowledge presupposes the knowledge of real goods (ontological goods, human beings, perfections as knowledge, friendship etc.), but its object is the intentional order with which it informs will concerned with real goods. Therefore practical rationality creates the moral order of habits, virtues, laws etc. From this point of view every day experience of dialogue is very important because we find in it both the practical and the speculative dimension of the *unique* reason. In fact when trying to convince someone (practical rationality), we always look at the expressions of his/her face (speculative rationality) and we might also consider his/her dignity as a person: we switch the approach of practical reason to its object. It is worth noting that we find this kind of relationship between metaphysics and ethics in a contemporary philosopher like Iris Murdoch:

I would suggest that at the level of serious common sense and of an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge: not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline⁶.

II. The main topics of Aquinas' ethics

emphasis and special feeling in these contexts».

⁴ See T. Chappell, "Virtue Ethics in the Twentieth Century", in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, CUP, Cambridge 2013, p. 152: «When modern readers who have been brought up on our moral/prudential distinction see Plato's and Aristotle's insistence on rooting the reasons that the virtues give us in the notion of well-being, they regularly classify both as "moral egoists". But that is a misapplication to them of a distinction that they were right not to recognize». In fact Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas had no word for "moral"».

⁵ See ST I-II, 94, 2: «Now as "being" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so "good" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that "good is that which all things seek after". Hence this is the first precept of law, that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided". All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical reason naturally apprehends as man's good (or evil) belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided. Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law. Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. Secondly, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals: and in virtue of this inclination, those things are said to belong to the natural law, "which nature has taught to all animals" [Pandect. Just. I, tit. i], such as sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth. Thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination».

⁶ I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of God*, Routledge, Oxford and New York 1970, p. 38.

Let's consider the main topics of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* I-II, which concerns general ethics:

1) the true goal of man (*perfect and imperfect happiness*); 2) human acts (philosophy of action – the same act can have different *meanings* from the ethical point of view)⁷. Aristotelian and Thomistic theory of action has been recovered in the second half of the Twentieth Century by Elizabeth Anscombe, Anthony Kenny etc. as a condition for ethics. But we will not deal with this topic here⁸. 3) good and evil of human acts (the good comes from an integral cause: end, object, circumstances of an act), 4) emotions, ethical virtues («internal» principles of human acts) and prudence⁹; 5) law and natural law («external» principles of human acts). Since Aquinas' ethics deals with passions and virtues, it is a virtue ethics that is rooted in law and in human inclinations.

Therefore, according to Aquinas, natural law is not immediately evident (as it is for most modern thought, Calvin and Locke in particular)¹⁰. Natural law is not immediately known, as it is the eternal law of God (*lex aeterna* – the point of view or the plan of God on our world). Man cannot know the plan of God putting himself in God's place, from God's point of view. Instead we can say that man «is conformed to the Divine will, because he wills what God wishes him to will».¹¹ The first principles of natural law are a kind of beginning (*inchoatio*);¹² they are the very seeds of virtues – *semina* or *seminalia virtutum*.¹³ We learn to know the first principles of natural law not immediately, but by means of a *resolutio* (analysis) going step by step from moral experience, from civil law, object of *determinatio* (we might say of *interpretation*), and from virtues and vices, that are the fruit of habituation, towards first principles. We learn the first principles of natural law asking, for example: what is the real ground of that virtuous behaviour or of that civil law? Or, why is there something morally wrong here and now?

III. Happiness and virtue

Let's consider some main topics of Aquinas' ethics. First, the central role of the desire for good and happiness («flourishment») and for goods adequate or inadequate to the openness of desire. Furthermore we should note the central role of the human person among goods: this role is implicit in Aquinas. Today we speak of the issue of the meaning of life. According to Aquinas the more the true goal of life is known and loved, the more there is happiness (imperfect happiness), the more the order of reason (*ordo rationis*) informs life, inclinations and passions. The more we are fascinated by true goods and by the Good (the goods considered as signs of the Good-God), the happier we are or the more we hope for happiness and are capable of a virtuous life, of the order of reason in our life. Macintyre maintains that this concept of happiness comprehends all the features that are found in the

⁷ Cf. J. Porter, *Nature as Reason. A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*, Eerdmans, Cambridge 2005, p. 303: «Aquinas offers a credible way of distinguishing between doing and allowing in the form of a more fundamental analysis of the structure of human action, in terms of which we can (non ironically) speak of “the act itself” and distinguish it both from its consequences and from the agent's overall intention».,

⁸ See, in particular, E. Anscombe, *Intention*, Blackwell, Oxford 1957.

⁹ Cf. *ST* I-II, 56, 3: «The subject of a disposition (*habitus*) which is simpliciter called a virtue can only be the will or some other power in so far as it is moved by the will. The reason for this is that the will moves to their acts all those other powers that are in some way rational (as distinct from powers to digest or have dreams). That a man acts well is because he has a good will (quo homo bene agat contingit ex hoc quod homo habet bonam voluntatem) [...] just as the subject of scientific knowledge is the theoretical intellect ordered by the light of the creative mind, so the subject of prudentia is the practical intellect ordered by a right will».

¹⁰ See J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; and J. Locke, *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*.

¹¹ *ST* I-II, q. 19, a. 10.

¹² See *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 2; *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 8, co.

¹³ Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 51, a. 1: «In the appetitive powers, however, no habit is natural in its beginning, on the part of the soul itself, as to the substance of the habit; but only as to certain principles thereof, as, for instance, the principles of common law are called the “nurseries of virtue.” The reason of this is because the inclination to its proper objects, which seems to be the beginning of a habit, does not belong to the habit, but rather to the very nature of the powers». Cf. *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 2.

various concepts of happiness of modern philosophers (Utilitarians, Kantians, etc.).

The best defence of Natural Law will consist in radical, philosophical, moral, and cultural critiques of rival standpoints[...] The claim that I am advancing that is that the failure of utilitarians to overcome the difficulties that arise from their use of the concept of happiness, or of some substitute of it, provides Thomistic Aristotelians with sufficient reason to judge that they are able to understand the truth about utilitarians better than utilitarians can.¹⁴

According to Aquinas happiness does not consist primarily in anything to deserve, be worthy of (Kant), nor in the result of a calculation (Consequentialism, Utilitarianism). These approaches share an extrinsic connection between means and ends. On the contrary, happiness is the task of desire and is always anticipated by partial tasks and not by extrinsic and instrumental means. Although in a secular age we might not believe in the Christian God, the topic of the true end of man and of openness towards being and God still have some appeal¹⁵.

Evil is still today a great problem for ethics, in particular for religious ethics. In facing the problem of evil the philosopher's and every man's main problem is to understand the concept of ontological good and to experience it, birth (*natura*), self preservation and movement towards perfection of beings, more than the concept of evil and death. In other words, knowledge of ontological good as condition of ethical good. Aquinas says: *Si est malum, est Deus*. Only from the point of view of good, of goodness as God, can we recognize something as evil. According to Thomas where there is evil, right there is also the presence of God. Furthermore from a wider and theological point of view in this life the answer to the problem of the meaning of evil is more a presence, the presence of the Christian God, rather than an exhaustive rational answer¹⁶.

IV. Integrity and beauty

¹⁴ A. Macintyre, *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law. Alasdair Macintyre and Critics*, L.S. Cunningham, ed., Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame 2009, in particular pp. 19-52.

¹⁵ See C. Vogler, *Aristotle, Aquinas, Anscombe and the New Virtue Ethics*, http://www.academia.edu/2500806/Aristotle_Aquinas_Anscombe_and_the_New_Virtue_Ethics, p. 18: «The Christian story inspires the expectation that there is more to be said on behalf of respecting moral prohibitions than non-theists can say».

¹⁶ Today according to a secular and naturalistic approach a) What we call *evil* is the effect of natural evolution (of chance as chaos or of a nature that does not care about human beings).

1. There is no ontological goodness in our world or God is not omnipotent
2. There is no difference between good and evil.

In general we can hold that there is a deep connection between the relationship with God (in second person) or the absence of that relationship on the one hand, and the philosophical-theological argument about evil (in third person) on the other hand. A merely philosophical approach towards evil might not be adequate. Nowadays (in the "age of nihilism" after the tragedies of the XX century) most philosophers and theologians believe that Aquinas's approach to the problem of evil is too optimistic. I think that, if we want to understand Aquinas's approach towards evil, we must pay attention to the following:

- 1) Evil is *privatio debiti boni*. But *privatio est* exists. There is not evil without ontological goodness, without nature and order.
- 2) Evil can be done because man always likes good (a particular good) and thanks to ontological good. Therefore we can understand why the effects of evil increase when there is more ontological goodness. Nowadays this might be the case of technology.
- 3) We must consider the problem of evil within the whole work of Thomas which has also a religious-theological meaning (and not only a philosophical meaning). The faith in Christ helps the believers in facing evil. Evil always has a meaning, although we cannot know which is the precise meaning for us of that particular evil.
- 4) *Malum culpae* is more important than *malum poenae*, because it is in action: «malum culpae est malum in actu voluntatis».
- 5) Moral evil is easier to do than moral good: «bonum ex integra causa, malum ex singularibus defectibus». In particular: evil is without reason, without measure (*sine ratione, sine mensura*).

The principle of the integrity and entirety of good (*bonum ex integra causa*) to judge the moral goodness of an action and as a criterion to compare different ethics in a pluralistic world. This is to distinguish between different levels of human and moral good. In Aquinas' ethics moral goodness concerns the goal, the object and the circumstances of action, according to the Dionysian principle by which any single defect causes evil, but good is due to the integral cause («*bonum ex integra causa*»)¹⁷. To be a moral man means to answer here and now with the wholeness (integrity) of ourselves to the wholeness (integrity) of being.

Integrity is the sign of beauty. Moral goodness, *bonum honestum* is beautiful and can be fascinating for man. Also according to a contemporary philosopher and novelist as Iris Murdoch moral goodness and beauty are largely part of the same structure:

Goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure. Plato, who tells us that beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love immediately by nature, treats the beautiful as an introductory section of the good [...]. Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature: something which is easy to name, but very hard to achieve¹⁸.

Furthermore goodness as complete human perfection is not only appealing, but puts forward a moral claim. From this point of view I hold that integrity as a pattern and aim of man and his reason (Putnam and other contemporary philosophers used to speak of “flourishment”¹⁹) does not develop a priori in a Platonic or Kantian way. On the contrary, it develops in an Aristotelian or Thomistic way, continuously in touch with experience of reality and its order as well as of the human person, playing a role of focus in the horizon of being. Without such experience of reality both speculative use of reason (in the narrower sense of philosophy) and practical use of reason could not develop. If it is true that, without ontological experience of integrity, there would be no idea of epistemic, ethical and aesthetic integrity, it is also true that our experience of human and moral integrity makes possible, on the philosophical level of reflection, to acknowledge and complete our pattern of epistemic metaphysical and scientific integrity. This is not surprising: man is a part of reality, the most important part of reality we can perceive. A certain anthropomorphism is necessary. We can acknowledge here a specific hermeneutic circle that safeguards the classical distinction between speculative and practical reason.

Today the topic of integrity in anthropology and ethics seems to be very important²⁰. In the first place for the central role played by hermeneutics in considering the characters and the circumstances of ethical action; in the second place, because, in an ethical crisis period, it gives the criteria to evaluate one ethics in comparison with another one: which attitude considers every aspect of an action, which misses some aspect? What attitude considers coherently every value? These are very important questions. In the third place, the topic of integrity connects also ethics and aesthetics (*integritas* is a basic character of beauty), **allowing to read reading in moral action a beauty, full of appeal**. This character has been missed by modern Kantian and Utilitarian ethics.

V. Virtue and Natural Law

Addressing the role of ethical virtues as the flowering of the first principles of natural law:

¹⁷ Cf. A. Campodonico, “*Bonum ex integra causa*”. *Aquinas and the sources of a basic concept* in *Aquinas's Sources*, The Notre Dame Symposium, Smith Timothy Editor, St. Augustine Press, South Bend 2012, pp. 209-233.

¹⁸ I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 41.

¹⁹ See, for instance, H. Putnam, *Pragmatism. An Open Question*, Blackwell, Oxford 1995, p. 51.

²⁰ On the topic of integrity in ethics see H. Ramsay, *Beyond virtue. Integrity and Morality*, Macmillan press, London 1997.

[...]Aquinas' systematic analysis of the virtues in terms of a metaphysics of perfection is the most striking aspect of his distinctive theory of the virtues. Nearly every scholastic theologian up to Aquinas' time would have agreed that the virtues are perfections of the agent, but Aquinas stands out for the systematic way in which he interprets and integrates this claim in the light of his overall metaphysics²¹.

According to Aquinas, ethical virtues are the flourishing of the main natural inclinations and of the main precepts called the *seeds* of natural law (*semina virtutum* or *seminalia virtutum*). Jean Porter holds that

even though the practice of the virtues, and therefore, happiness, does not depend on the attainment of well being for Aquinas, the idea of well being does have a normative function in his overall account of moral virtue. Virtues are the dispositions of human capacities oriented toward well being, and such as they take their norms, in key part if not entirely, from the exigencies of basic well being (see, for example II-II 141, 6) and since the idea of well being forms the link between nature in the more comprehensive sense and the norms of natural law – between nature as nature and nature as reason – this suggests that for Aquinas the idea of human well being yields natural law precepts through the mediation of ideals of virtue, which are themselves developed from general paradigms to reflective ideals through a process of reflection on what it means to live a complete, fulfilled – in a word – perfect human life[...]the life of virtue is paradigmatically linked to pursuing and enjoying these goods in a particular way which is itself enjoying and satisfying²².

We can grasp the *narrative* character of virtues, their capacity of giving sense and unity to life²³. Today we have to stress that in Aquinas as in classical and medieval tradition, ethical virtue means an excellence of character and not only (as happens often today) a mere motivation in order to act applying moral precepts. This topic is relevant if we want to give a sound foundation to moral education and to education in general: only aiming at the good, the supreme good we can be whole, happy, and therefore able to educate others. Without virtues as outstanding qualities there is no education.

The principles of natural law as a result of the encounter between certain inclinations and practical rationality that recognizes them as normative²⁴. Furthermore from this point of view virtues and moral law are both present: they have in common practical rationality that makes order («ordinem facit»), with attention to reality. But virtues are not deducted from precepts of natural law. Virtues grow from rational inclinations and from the main principles (ultimate ends) of natural law under the

²¹ J. Porter, *Virtue Ethics in the Medieval Period*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. by D.C. Russell, CUP, Cambridge 2013, p. 81.

²² J. Porter, *Nature as Reason, A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*, Eerdmans, Cambridge 2005, pp. 174- 221. Cf. ST. II-II, 141, 6: «**I answer that**, As stated above (1; 109, 2; 123, 12), the good of moral virtue consists chiefly in the order of reason: because “man's good is to be in accord with reason”, as Dionysius asserts (*Div. Nom.* iv). Now the principal order of reason is that by which it directs certain things towards their end, and the good of reason consists chiefly in this order; since good has the aspect of end, and the end is the rule of whatever is directed to the end. Now all the pleasurable objects that are at man's disposal, are directed to some necessity of this life as to their end. Wherefore temperance takes the need of this life, as the rule of the pleasurable objects of which it makes use, and uses them only for as much as the need of this life requires».

²³ Cf. H. McCabe, *On Aquinas* edited by B. Davies and A. Kenny, Burns and Oates, London 2008, p. 52: «We are not just human *beings* but human *becomings*. Like all other animals, but unlike rock crystals, for us, to be is to have a lifetime, a development; but for us, to be is to have a lifetime, a development and unlike for other animals, our lifetime is a life *story*. Human animals are to this extent in charge of their lifetimes, their life stories[...]. Ethics then is just the study of human lives considered precisely as life stories. And what it is concretely to be a human being is to be a character in a life story – this is what is known as your “self”». See also P. Hall, *Narrative and Natural Law. An Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame and London 1994.

²⁴ On this topic cf. A. Campodonico, *How to read today natural law in Aquinas?*, in «New Blackfriars» 94, 1054, 2013, p. 716-732.

influence of practical rationality. There is no deduction from propositions, but flourishing from the very seeds (The ends or principles of natural law) of moral virtues by means of habituation and the application of prudence (*prudencia*) here and now²⁵. The idea that natural law is based on the consideration of the order of nature is, instead, a modern and rationalistic conception that we can find, for example, in Locke and in the modern school of natural law²⁶. Natural law requires harmony between practical reason and basic human inclinations (not every inclination, but inclinations towards perfect goods). Inclinations towards good are known (also implicitly), valued, and interpreted by practical reason. In particular they become moral norms (precepts) thanks to the very practical reason.

Ethical order according to Aquinas is based on the encounter between reason, which is nature (*ratio ut natura*) in an analogical sense, and *human nature* as unity of body and soul with its main inclinations. Also when they are common both to human beings and to other animals, they are *human* thanks to rationality with its openness to the infinity of being that informs them:

Now good in general, which has the nature of an end, is the object of the will. Consequently, in this respect, the will moves the other powers of the soul to their acts, for we make use of the other powers when we will. For the end and perfection of every other power, is included under the object of the will as some particular good: and always the art or power to which the universal end belongs, moves to their acts the arts or powers to which belong the particular ends included in the universal end. Thus the leader of an army, who intends the common good – i.e. the order of the whole army – by his command moves one of the captains, who intends the order of one company²⁷.

Contrary to many streams of modern thought our desire «has eyes», because it is informed by reason. As Steve Brock holds:

My basic thesis, then, is that not only the apprehension that Thomas is talking about in our passage (I-II, 94, 2), but also the inclination, is rational. Reason's natural understanding of human goods does not follow the natural inclinations to them. The inclinations follow the understanding²⁸[...]. Another point is the calibre of the inclinations that he must be talking about. They are right inclinations. Their objects are true human goods. Otherwise they could hardly correspond to the precepts of natural law²⁹.

²⁵ Cf. C. Vogler, p. 15: according to Thomas, «[...] the only universal moral principles geared to kind/species of act are the negative ones that tell us never to do acts of such and such a kind. Anscombe might put the point this way; we are always in the ethical; the only way to ensure that a particular act, ordinarily good, will be good to do here and now will be to screen out the world in such a way that it cannot obtrude and make what is ordinarily good bad under the circumstances; it is not in our power to stop the world from interfering in this way». On the topic of *phronesis-prudence* in Aristotle and Aquinas see M.S. Vaccarezza, *Le ragioni del contingente. La saggezza pratica tra Aristotele e Tommaso d'Aquino*, Orthotes, Napoli 2012.

²⁶ Cfr. J. Locke, *Questions concerning the Law of Nature*, Cornell University Press, Cornell 1990.

²⁷ ST. I-II. 9, 1.

²⁸ Cf. *In II De anima* lect. XII, §747: «Desire or shunning did not follow at once from the grasp of that which is good or bad, as here with intellect; but pleasure and pain followed, and then from this, desire and shunning. The reason for this is that just as sense does not grasp universal good, so too the appetite of the sensitive part is not moved by universal good or bad, but by a certain determinate good which is pleasant to sense, and by a certain determinate bad which is painful to sense. But in the intellective part there is the grasp of universal good and bad; whence too, the appetite of the intellective part is moved immediately by the apprehended good or bad-**II, 19, 3: I answer that**, As stated above (1,2), the goodness of the will depends properly on the object. Now the will's object is proposed to it by reason. Because the good understood is the proportionate object of the will; while sensitive or imaginary good is proportionate not to the will but to the sensitive appetite: since the will can tend to the universal good, which reason apprehends; whereas the sensitive appetite tends only to the particular good, apprehended by the sensitive power. Therefore the goodness of the will depends on reason, in the same way as it depends on the object». There are different interpretations of the inclinations in Aquinas' natural law.

²⁹ S. Brock, «Natural Inclination and the Intelligibility of the Good in Thomistic natural law», «Vera lex», VI 1-2, p. 61-

But Thomas is quite explicit about the fact that sometimes the non-rational inclinations existing naturally in a human being are wrong. This is particularly clear in the case of the sensitive appetite. Unreasoned feeling may be right or wrong. The rectitude of a person's feeling is guaranteed only when it is directed by (right) reason³⁰. Thomas holds:

what is desired according to concupiscence seems good because it is desired. For concupiscence perverts the judgment of reason, such that what is pleasant seems good to it. But what is desired with intellectual appetite is desired because it seems good in itself (*secundum se*)³¹.

These *natural* inclinations are known (also in an implicit way), valued, interpreted by practical reason and they become moral norms thanks to the same practical reason. Individual inclinations known in their ontological goodness by practical reason in its speculative dimension, give a content to moral experience; practical reason as such makes them normative (precepts).

The risks here are:

a) On one hand a formalistic interpretation of practical rationality, which ignores human nature and natural inclinations that are to be known and interpreted, and

b) on the other hand an idea of human nature, which would become normative without the work of practical reason. These are the risks of a Kantian interpretation of Aquinas (in which inclination does not play any role and practical reason does not know reality) on one hand, and of an objectivist or naturalistic interpretation of his ethics, where practical reason does not play an autonomous role. Sometimes norms are deducted from metaphysics or they are only inclinations conceived biologically as mere instincts. The first position implies voluntarism in order to apply norms.

Let us look at some examples of how inclinations become precepts according to Aquinas. These moral judgements might not be explicit, but only implicit, according to Maritain's idea of «dynamic schemes of action», although they can be made explicit on the justification level. Within the main formal and inclusive inclination toward goodness with the main precept founded on it «good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided», there are some basic natural inclinations or dynamic evidences on which precepts are founded. Although every kind of inclination is informed by reason and sometimes the inferior inclination might be sacrificed to a superior one, they proceed from the more general, common to every thing, to the more particular: 1) «I wish to preserve my health. It is morally good to preserve our health». 2) «I desire to educate my kids. It is morally good to educate our kids». 3) «I desire to read books in order to know. It is morally good to read books». Or: «I desire to be happy. It is morally good to search for happiness».

Thus, even the topic of the desire for happiness, the most inclusive inclination, belongs to natural law. It concerns the general precept, all the three precepts and, particularly, the third inclination and the third precept. As Daniel Russell holds dealing with Aristotelian happiness (*eudaimonia*):

[...] where philosophers like me disagree with Kant is less over the nature of obligation than over the nature of happiness. Happiness or *eudaimonia*, is entirely different from desire satisfaction; in fact, it is a normative notion in a couple of ways. First of all, it is the very nature of practical reasoning that shapes our understanding of happiness, since happiness is the final end (recall the «formal

62. Cf. **ST I, 60, 1: Reply to Objection 3**: «As natural knowledge is always true, so is natural love well regulated; because natural love is nothing else than the inclination implanted in nature by its Author. To say that a natural inclination is not well regulated, is to derogate from the Author of nature».

³⁰ Cf. ST. I-II, q. 94, a. 2, ad 2. See I-II, q. 94, a. 4, ad 3: «the inclinations of the parts of human nature, such as the concupiscible and irascible appetites, pertain to natural law insofar as they are regulated by reason».

³¹ *In XII Meta.*, lect. vii, §2522.

constraints» on happiness). And second, the conception of human nature employed in our account of happiness is, I would argue, part of a broader ethical outlook³².

In Aquinas' ethics there is a primacy of love of the goal. The relationship with God has a strict connection with happiness and this has a strict connection with ethics³³. According to the Bible, but somehow also to Aristotle, since human desire is open to the infinity of being, only an infinite being can fulfil it and not a finite one (i.e. wealth, honour, glory, science etc.)³⁴.

As we have seen, the normative dimension of law is, according to Aquinas, also finalistic. There is no normativity without teleology. Its criterion is *convenientia*, *fitness* (something is convenient, *fits*) or, more precisely, that kind of good called *bonum honestum*. What is the meaning of *conveniens* as *honestum*? It does not mean neither the extrinsecal usefulness of modern Utilitarianism and *Consequentialism*, nor the mere a priori *ought* of deontological Kantianism³⁵. Natural law is what is convenient with human being in his wholeness and in the hierarchical harmony of his dimensions (also the dimensions of human act as end, object and circumstances) according to the phrase of Dionysius «the good comes about from the integral cause, but evil from single defects».³⁶

VI. Virtue and Freedom

Finally there is a widespread difficulty in accepting the term *natural* in ethics. This happens paradoxically, despite the fact that one continues to use expressions like «it's natural» to state what should or should not be done. The problem is that affirming nature, when speaking of man and morality, seems to clash against the exaltation of freedom, understood as essentially the absolute rule of freedom of choice, which is a dogma of the anthropocentric, modern and contemporary conception. Human nature is often perceived, in fact, in the negative, as a limit on freedom, and not as a possibility, a condition for the use of that freedom. This suggests that above all the testimony of man can now be fully convincing about the truth of natural law (the seed of virtue) as a wellspring of a fully human life.

Reading Aquinas' ethics today, we must increase the role of freedom of choice which is based on rationality and virtues. It is essential to emphasize the value of personal risk and the fact that even

³² D.C. Russell, *Virtue, Ethics, Happiness and the Good Life. The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. by D.C. Russell, CUP, Cambridge 2013, p. 25.

³³ Cf. A. Campodonico, M.S. Vaccarezza, *La pretesa del bene. Teoria dell'azione ed etica in Tommaso d'Aquino*, Orthotes, Napoli 2012, pp. 150-188.

³⁴ Cf. *ST I-II*, qq. 1-5. See in particular 2, 1 ad 3: «The desire for natural riches is not infinite: because they suffice for nature in a certain measure. But the desire for artificial wealth is infinite, for it is the servant of disordered concupiscence, which is not curbed, as the Philosopher makes clear (*Polit. i, 3*). Yet this desire for wealth is infinite otherwise than the desire for the sovereign good. For the more perfectly the sovereign good is possessed, the more it is loved, and other things despised: because the more we possess it, the more we know it. Hence it is written (Sirach 24:29): "They that eat me shall yet hunger." Whereas in the desire for wealth and for whatsoever temporal goods, the contrary is the case: for when we already possess them, we despise them, and seek others: which is the sense of Our Lord's words (John 4:13): "Whosoever drinketh of this water," by which temporal goods are signified, "shall thirst again." The reason of this is that we realize more their insufficiency when we possess them: and this very fact shows that they are imperfect, and the sovereign good does not consist therein».

³⁵ Cf. C. Vogler, *Aristotle, Aquinas, Anscombe and the New Virtue Ethics*, http://www.academia.edu/2500806/Aristotle_Aquinas_Anscombe_and_the_New_Virtue_Ethics, p. 8: «Consequentialism comes into play whenever we are inclined to calculate the likelihood that doing something specifically bad (bad in its kind, bad because of the kind of action that it is) will result in getting something good, or in preventing something worse. In coining the term *consequentialism*, Anscombe highlighted the philosophical source of the loss of an ability to comprehend moral prohibitions. Anscombe's term drew attention to accounts of good, bad, right and wrong that focused on expected outcomes of actions (the part that became the standard definition of consequentialism) and obliterated the distinction between intended and merely foreseen expected outcomes of an action (the part that was ignored by most of her followers)».

³⁶ *ST I-II*, q. 20, a. 6, ad 1.

evil can serve good.

There is a deep ontological reason why there is no opposition between human nature and freedom, natural law and freedom: of course nature is a limit, but it is also an occasion, a chance to become more human. As Harry Frankfurt maintains:

The notion that necessity does not inevitably undermine autonomy is familiar and widely accepted. But necessity is not only compatible with autonomy; it is in certain respects essential to it. There must be limits to our freedom if we are to have sufficient personal reality to exercise genuine autonomy at all. What has no boundaries has no shape. By the same token, a person can have no essential nature or identity as an agent unless he is bound with respect to that very feature of himself – namely the will whose shape most closely coincides with and reveals what he is³⁷.

And will is directed towards the object of our love. But we do not decide *here and now* what we should choose to love and which are the traits of our character.

According to Thomas Aquinas freedom is founded on reason (*intellect as nature – intellectus ut natura*) and on the openness of will towards good in general. Furthermore loving more true good, putting order among goods, we become more and more virtuous, whole and freer, because we can consider finite beings as relative. In fact, as moral beings, we cannot act without freedom or against freedom (here Kant agrees with Aquinas), nor act without searching freely for all fundamental human goods and for a supreme good. Otherwise freedom is an empty idea. This is the meaning of nihilism in contemporary thought.

³⁷ H. Frankfurt, *The Importance of what we care about. Philosophical Essays*, CUP, Cambridge 1988, p. IX.