Aquinas and the Ethics of Virtue

Thomas Williams

> *Note: This is a preprint of my introduction to the forthcoming translation by Margaret Atkins of Thomas Aquinas's* Disputed Questions on the Virtues *(Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy).*

The basic procedure was simple. The topic would be announced in advance so that everyone could prepare an arsenal of clever arguments. When the faculty and students had gathered, the professor would offer a brief introduction and state his thesis. All morning long an appointed graduate student would take objections from the audience and defend the professor's thesis against those objections. (And if the graduate student began to flounder, the professor was allowed to help him out.) A secretary would take shorthand notes. The next day the group would reassemble. This time it would be the professor's job to summarise the arguments on both sides and give his own response to the question at issue. The whole thing would be written up, either in a rough-and-tumble version deriving from the secretary's notes or in a more carefully crafted and edited version prepared by the professor himself. Records of such academic exercises have come down to us under the title 'disputed questions'.

The present text offers translations of some disputed questions on ethical topics presided over by Thomas Aquinas (1224/6-1274), probably during the period of 1271-72, when he was for the second time the Dominican regent master in theology at the University of Paris. They examine the nature of virtues in general; the fundamental or "cardinal" virtues of practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperateness; the divinely bestowed virtues of hope and charity; and the practical question of how, when, and why one should rebuke a "brother" for wrongdoing. Whether these were formal public disputations of the sort I have described, or a more low-key version adapted for use in Aquinas's own classroom, is not altogether clear. What is certainly undeniable is that they show Aquinas using the disputed-question format with characteristic brilliance, as we can see by contrasting the *Disputed Questions on the Virtues* with discussions of the same topics in the second part of the *Summa theologiae*, which dates from roughly the same period of Aquinas's career. The articles of the *Summa theologiae* follow a truncated disputed-question format, suited perhaps to the "beginners" for whom he intended that great work. They typically include three opposing arguments for each thesis, and Aquinas's "determinations" (the "My reply" or "I answer that" sections) are ordinarily a couple of paragraphs. In the *Disputed Questions on the Virtues* the determinations run much longer, and there are (on average) fifteen or sixteen opposing arguments. This more expansive treatment, though initially somewhat challenging for the present-day reader, allows Aquinas to offer more supporting examples, tease out more nuances, draw more helpful distinctions, and guard against a wider variety of possible misunderstandings than in the *Summa*.

These *Disputed Questions* focus on virtue. But is a close look at Aquinas's account of virtue really the best way into his ethics? Many historians of philosophy see Aquinas principally as a defender of natural-law theory. Others regard his account of happiness, his analysis of human action, or his theory of practical reasoning as the cornerstone of his ethics. One need only look at some recent titles of books on Aquinas's ethics to see the differing emphases: *The Recovery of Virtue*, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law*, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good*, *Aquinas on Human Action*, *Right Practical Reason*. Some scholars argue that their favoured discussion has at least *expository* priority: in other words, that in laying out Aquinas's ethics one must talk about that area first, and only then can one understand other areas properly. Some go still further and argue for something stronger, which we might call *logical* priority: that their favoured area is the real heart of Aquinas's ethics, and other areas are at best mere appendages and at worst regrettable excrescences. There has been a particular rivalry between interpreters who focus on natural law theory and those who focus on the doctrine of virtue.

In an introduction to a set of questions on virtue one might expect to find a defence of the centrality of virtue in Aquinas's ethical thought. But in fact I think it is a mistake to describe his theory of virtue as any more or less central than his accounts of happiness, the natural law, practical reasoning, and responsible action. Aquinas's ethics is so thoroughly systematic that one cannot adequately understand any of these accounts without drawing heavily on all the others; to talk in anything like sufficient detail about any one of them requires one to talk about all of them. Since the doctrines of natural law and virtue have been regarded as particularly remote from each other, I can best make my case for the systematic unity of Aquinas's moral theory, and illustrate the place of virtue within it, by beginning from the theory of natural law and showing how it leads inevitably to the discussion of virtue.

From natural law to virtue

A good place to start is with the first appearance of what will become a standing analogy in the so-called *Treatise on Law*: the analogy between the functioning of speculative reason (the sort of thinking that aims simply at knowing the truth) and the functioning of practical reason (the sort of thinking that aims at making or doing something). Aquinas writes:

> Now in speculative reason, what comes first is the definition, then the proposition, and then the syllogism or argument. And since practical reason also makes use of a syllogism of sorts having to do with possible actions . . . we need to find something in practical reason that bears to actions the same relation that the proposition in speculative reason bears to conclusions. Such universal propositions of practical reason ordered to actions have the character of law. (*ST* 1a2ae 90.1 ad 2)

We can think of Aquinas as setting forth an analogy with all the points of comparison filled in but one:

	speculative reason	*practical reason*
starts from	propositions (aka first principles)	?
proceeds by way of	theoretical argument/syllogism	practical argument/syllogism
until it reaches	a conclusion	a particular act

His proposal is that we give the name "natural law" to those universal principles in practical reason that function in a way analogous to principles in speculative reason.

Now Aquinas does not think that anyone who engages in speculative reasoning is actually thinking about first principles in every single argument she makes; in fact, unless she is a philosopher, she may well *never* think about first principles. Nevertheless, those principles are operative in her reasoning, even though they may not be actively before her mind. When someone has a bit of knowledge in this way, Aquinas says that she has that knowledge "dispositionally" (*habitualiter*). The disposition of the speculative intellect in virtue of which it grasps first principles is called *intellectus*. Since there are analogous principles — the natural law — operative in practical thinking, even if the thinker is not at the moment attending to them (or indeed has never attended to them), we can expect that there is an analogous disposition in the practical intellect. That disposition is called *synderesis*. *Synderesis* "is the disposition containing the precepts of the natural law, which are the first principles of human acts" (1a2ae 94.1 ad 2).

Aquinas continues his development of the analogy by noting that in the speculative realm there is one principle that is absolutely first: the principle of non-contradiction. In the practical realm the analogous principle is that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided" (1a2ae 94.2). Both first principles are indemonstrable: that is, they cannot be proved. But they are not the only indemonstrable principles in their respective realms. Principles in the speculative realm are all indemonstrable; even though some of them are of less generality than others, they do not depend on others in the sense of being deducible from them. For example, the principle that the whole is greater than the (proper) part is — in a sense that turns out to be very difficult to pin down — of less generality than the law of non-contradiction, but it cannot be deduced from the law of non-contradiction. We find the same sort of relationship among principles in the practical realm. The most general principles are hierarchically ordered, but they are not deduced from the very first principle or from each other.[1]

---

[1] In fact, being indemonstrable is part of the definition of 'principle'. Keep in mind that the Latin word for 'principle' is *principium*, a beginning or starting-point. Principles are the starting-points of arguments, not conclusions of arguments.

As I have said, the first precept of the natural law is that good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided. The most general precepts of the natural law will be more substantive principles that point out specific goods that are to be pursued. Aquinas identifies these goods by appealing to a general metaphysical theory of goodness and a philosophical anthropology that goes hand in hand with that theory. According to the general metaphysical theory of goodness, a thing is good to the extent to which it lives up to the standards of its specific nature. Like any good Aristotelian, Aquinas holds that there are internal dynamisms in every substance that are naturally directed towards the specific perfections of that substance. Those internal dynamisms are called 'appetite' or 'desire'. Here we have the fundamental sense in which Aquinas believes that "all things seek the good": there is in all things a desire for their proper specific perfection, and that perfection is what it is for those things to be good.[2]

In the case of human beings, that specific perfection is complicated. Aquinas tells us in 1a2ae 94.2 that it involves three broad types of good, hierarchically arranged. As it is for every creature, it is a good for us to maintain ourselves in existence. As it is for every animal, it is a good for us to reproduce ourselves and to care for our offspring. But for us alone among all animals it is also a good to exercise the powers of rational thought, and (consequently) to live in society and to know God. These three goods are not three independent, coordinate goods. They are arranged both hierarchically, so that our unique good is the best of these three goods, and inclusively, so that our unique good subsumes the other two without superseding them.

---

[2] Note, then, that 'desire' (*appetitus*) has a broader extension in Aquinas's philosophy than in our ordinary usage of the term. We would not ordinarily speak of plants, for example, as having desires; but they do have *appetitus*, since they have internal dynamisms by which they tend towards achieving their characteristic good.

In keeping with the general Aristotelian view about desires, Aquinas must then posit desires corresponding to each of these goods. The two lower-level goods are aimed at by the sensory desire, which has two aspects: the aspect that desires what is pleasant and what is conducive to survival and reproduction, and shuns the opposite of these (the sensual part); and the aspect that fights against threats to what is desirable (the aggressive part). The highest good is aimed at by the intellectual desire or will, which is a natural inclination to choose what reason takes to be good.

Both the hierarchy and the inclusiveness of which I have spoken are important for Aquinas's conception of the human good. The hierarchy is important because it tells us that the good of the human being is, in a sense, rational activity itself. The inclusiveness is important because it tells us that the specifically human rational activity that constitutes our good is not theoretical but practical reasoning. It is reasoning about how to achieve our specific perfection — at every level — in our action. In other words, the *aim* of rational activity is the good of the person as a whole integrated system that includes a variety of inclinations; it is not the good of the reason itself.

Three reasons we need the virtues

Now we can see how this works out in the doctrine of the virtues. Virtues are dispositions by which we appropriate our specific good effectively. The other animals do not need virtues because their desires direct them spontaneously to their specific perfection. But because our specific perfection involves reason, it can only be attained through rational choice, and our desires alone do not suffice for fully rational choice. Why not? There are three reasons, each of which exposes the need for a certain type of virtue if we are to attain our good as discerned by reason. The first reason is that the sensory desire is by its nature aimed at only a *part* of our good, the part that we share with the lower animals. It can therefore come into conflict with what reason discerns as good for the person as a whole integrated system. As a result, "When . . . someone has to deal with the objects of the sensory desire, he needs, in order to do this well, a kind of tendency or completeness in the sensory desire that will enable it to obey reason easily. That is what we call virtue." (*DQVirtGen* 4 rep). Temperateness is the virtue that perfects the sensual part, and courage is the virtue that perfects the aggressive part.

So the sensory desire needs virtue in order to follow reason easily and reliably. The will, however, does not. Its very nature is to be a rational desire: that is, to incline to whatever reason presents to it as a good. Nonetheless, even rational desire is not sufficient for us to lead the life of reason, because it is aimed only at our individual good (*DQVirtGen* 5 rep). But our individual good is open-ended in a certain crucial way: part of the human good is to live in society, but life in society requires certain relations to other people that go beyond narrow considerations of our individual perfection (even if they don't actually *contravene* our individual perfection). The will therefore needs to be perfected by justice, by which an individual conforms her own pursuit of the rationally apprehended good to the larger good of the community, whose well-being and institutional integrity provide the context in which she can pursue her own good.

Thus far we have seen two reasons why our appetitive inclinations are not by themselves enough to enable us to attain our characteristic human good. The first concerned the sensory desire: since on its own it can come into conflict with reason, it requires the virtues of temperateness and courage if it is to be properly disposed to the human good as discerned by reason. The second concerned the rational desire: since the will is directed to the good of the individual, it requires the virtue of justice if it is to be properly disposed to the good of others. There is a third reason, which concerns desire in general. Aquinas explains that animals "engage in a limited number of activities" and their good is fixed and unchanging. So they need only what he calls "natural judgement" — a kind of recognition of what is good that does not involve intellectual discernment — and a natural appetite for their fixed and unchanging good. Human beings, by contrast, "engage in many diverse activities." Their "good comes in many varieties, and what is good for human beings comprises many different things. Therefore there could not be a natural appetite in human beings for a determinate good that suited all the conditions needed for something to be good for them." Nor is natural judgment adequate for our attainment of this varied and multifaceted human good. Human beings therefore need reason, "which is capable of comparing different things, to discover and discern their own distinctive good, determined in the light of all relevant circumstances, as it should be sought at this time and in this place" (*DQVirtGen* 6 rep). The virtue that enables reason to do this easily and reliably is practical wisdom.

To summarise the argument thus far: Aquinas's natural law theory is an account of the most general forms of human flourishing. From that account we learn precisely why temperateness, courage, justice, and practical wisdom are necessary for human flourishing. What I want to do now is to discuss Aquinas's account of those virtues and their relation to each other, and show how even the specific details of his conception of virtue and practical reasoning depend upon the general account of human flourishing established in the discussion of the natural law.

Natural law and the virtues: affective virtues

The doctrine of the affective virtues — temperateness and fortitude, which modify not only our actions but our emotions — is part of an explanation of how we go about achieving the end that is set forth in the theory of natural law. As we have seen, the most general principles of practical reason (or, in other words, the precepts of the natural law) prescribe that certain broadly conceived goods be pursued in action. Those goods are arranged both hierarchically and inclusively. So according to the natural law, a life well-lived is one in which reason governs every level of human functioning so that it makes its proper contribution to the overall human good. If we are to live such a life, we must re-educate our emotions so that they spontaneously aim us at our proper end. A life in which we are constantly having to struggle against contrary desires, in which reason is always having to put down insurrections in order to maintain its sway, is not a good life. The affective virtues help ensure that we act consistently, not just haphazardly, in the pursuit of our end, and that we do so in a way that befits a creature endowed with reason.

This overview of the place of temperateness and fortitude in Aquinas's moral theory shows how natural law theory motivates the doctrine of the affective virtues. I now want to point out how natural law theory also supplies part of the content of that doctrine. I shall focus on temperateness. In 2a2ae 141.6, Aquinas explains the "standard of temperateness" (*regula temperantiae*), and he does so by appealing to the natural-law considerations I have already sketched:

> The good of moral virtue consists chiefly in the order of reason, for "the human good is to be in accordance with reason," as Dionysius says. Now reason's preeminent ordering consists in its ordering things to an end, and the good of reason consists chiefly in this ordering: for the good has the character of an end, and the end itself is the standard for those things that bear on the end. Now all pleasant things (*delectabilia*) that are used by human beings are ordered to some need of this life as to their end. And so the need of this life is the standard adopted by temperateness concerning those pleasant things of which it makes use; in other words, it makes use of them only to the extent that the need of this life requires.

In his reply to the second objection Aquinas again appeals to natural-law considerations to clarify this standard. Human beings need not merely subsistence, but a graceful, fitting, well-disposed life. So the standard of temperateness does not imply that human beings may only eat and drink the bare minimum they need to survive, but that human beings may eat and drink whatever is necessary for health and well-being. Indeed, they may eat and drink even more than that, so long as they do not actually indulge themselves so much that they impair their own health or well-being or undermine harmonious relations within their community.

Natural law and justice

Having discussed the relationship between the theory of natural law and the affective virtues, we must return to natural law and show how it informs Aquinas's account of justice as well. Recall that the superordinate and inclusive good for human beings is the good of reason. And as Aquinas explicitly says in 1a2ae 94.2, reason orders us to a common, social good, which involves an individual's relationships with other people. As I have said before, reason does not supersede the lower goods; rather, it transforms them. So in human beings even the lower-level inclinations are transformed in light of this higher-level inclination "to live in society." Even though temperateness and fortitude are directed to the agent's own good, the domains in which temperateness and fortitude are exercised have implications for the common good. We see this clearly in the case of sexuality. Initially sexuality has to do with temperateness, but because sexuality has implications for the common good, there are precepts of justice that regulate our sex lives: fornication and adultery are violations not only of chastity but also of justice. Clearly fear and daring will have implications for the common good as well — think about soldiers. So there is a sense in which temperateness and fortitude are not completely specified and put into context until we have spelled out the demands of justice. What I want to draw your attention to is that neither natural law theory nor virtue theory stands alone here. Although the specific demands of justice are spelled out within virtue theory, it is natural law theory that exposes the need for justice to complete and transform the affective virtues.

This point about the relationship between justice and the affective virtues brings us back to my earlier point about how the goods are arranged inclusively. The goods of reason transform the lower-level goods: what it is for a human being to be good with respect to the lower-level goods is not the same as what it is for a cat to be good at the lower-level goods, precisely because we have reason and cats do not. For us to be good at the lower-level goods means not only for us to have our sensory desire aimed properly at our own attainment of human perfection, but to have both sensory desire and intellectual desire (will) aimed at the common good. So justice, which modifies the intellectual desire, must trickle down into the sensory desire as well if we are to be aimed at the good according to reason.[3]

So far I have shown how the theory of natural law motivates Aquinas's doctrine of justice and its relation to the affective virtues. But as was also true for temperateness and fortitude, natural law theory does not merely motivate the doctrine of justice; it also supplies part of the content of the virtue. Aquinas derives many of the precepts of justice from his conception of the institutional or social necessities without with human beings cannot achieve the good of reason by living in a well-ordered community.

Consider, for example, the moral rules concerning murder and permissible homicide. Some homicide is morally justifiable, even praiseworthy. In *ST* 2a2ae 64, Aquinas offers two criteria by which to distinguish between permissible and impermissible (unjust) homicide. First, if a homicide is to be permissible, it must be done by someone acting at the behest of the community as a whole, not by any private person (2a2ae 64.3). Second, the person killed must have been lawfully convicted of some serious crime and shown to pose a threat to the community (64.2).

The arguments for both criteria come from Aquinas's conception of the common good. Human beings are parts of a whole; that whole is the community. And parts exist for the sake of the whole. Just as you should not impair the body's integrity for just any old reason (chop off your hand just because you feel like it), but you *should* amputate if that is the only way to save the body, so also you should excise dangerous people if that is necessary for the safeguarding of the community (64.2). People who have so deviated from the order of reason have fallen into the state of the beasts (64.2 ad 3). They have in effect put themselves outside the community of the truly human. They do not literally become animals, of course — that is why killing them is of greater significance than killing a stray animal and requires the judgement of the community (64.3 ad 2).

---

[3] See especially 2a2e 58.5,6.

Natural law and practical wisdom

As I have said, the relation Aquinas envisions between the common good and the individual good means that justice, which directs us to the common good, sets the end for temperateness and fortitude. But what in turn sets the end for justice, and through justice for temperateness and fortitude as well? Aquinas argues that the end of the moral virtues is the human good. And since the human good is simply to be in accordance with reason, it follows that the end of the moral virtues must "preexist in reason" (*ST* 2a2ae 47.6). That is, the end of the moral virtues is established by certain self-evident, naturally known principles of practical reason. These are the precepts of the natural law, which are known through *synderesis*.

There are three important points about the ends that are set for us by *synderesis*. First, the self-evident principles are general. They are things like "Do no harm," not things like "Return property entrusted to you unless the person has become insane in the meantime." We therefore need something that will allow us to see how the principles are to be applied in particular circumstances.

Second, they are capable of being realised in a variety of ways. *Synderesis* tells us, for example, that we should live in accordance with reason, but there are any number of ways to live in accordance with reason. We therefore need something that will allow us to specify and make concrete the initially indeterminate goods set by *synderesis*.

Third, all of these goods can be realised in a properly human way only in and through *action*. That is, *synderesis* tells us not merely what we should be, but how it is good and reasonable for us to *act*. And action here means rationally guided, conscious, deliberate action for an end, not just instinctive acts (which according to Aquinas should not be called human acts at all, but rather acts of a human being). We know this because of the hierarchy among the principles set by *synderesis*. As I discussed earlier, because the good of reason is the highest good, rational activity is in a sense the specific end of human beings. So the human good is not simply the actualising of distinctively human potentialities, full stop, as the bovine good is simply the actualising of distinctively bovine potentialities. The human good is the actualising of distinctively human potentialities *as the individual human being's reason directs*.

The specifics of Aquinas's account of practical wisdom make complete sense when understood against this background. Because the ends set by *synderesis* are both non-specific and open-ended (points 1 and 2 above), we need a kind of reasoning that takes us from the secure starting points set by *synderesis* to the particular conclusions that can guide action (point 3). That is what practical wisdom is.

The details of Aquinas's account of practical wisdom depend on his account of the cognitive processes involved in deliberate action. The latter account, in all its rich and intriguing detail, lies well beyond the scope of this introduction. But fortunately Aquinas himself offers us a sort of summary from which he then derives an overview of the aspects of practical wisdom (1a2ae 57.6). In deliberate action we apprehend the end; we take counsel about how that end can be realised and made concrete here and now; having taken counsel, we are then in a position to judge what is to be done; and finally, having judged that such-and-such is to be done, we command the external bodily members to do such-and-such. (The taking counsel part is optional. In order to determine what is to be done in order to act temperately when I am offered a third slice of cheesecake, I can immediately judge that the cheesecake is not to be taken, and I order my vocal apparatus to utter "No thanks.")

Practical wisdom has no role to play at the level of apprehension, because that has to do with the end, which as we have seen is set by *synderesis*. But the other three acts of reason all require dispositions by which they are properly guided in matters pertaining to the end. So practical wisdom in the broadest sense is the intellectual virtue that ensures that we counsel well, judge well, and command well. The sub-virtue by which we counsel well is *euboulia*, excellence in deliberation. There are two virtues by which we judge well: in ordinary cases the practically wise person exercises *synesis* and in exceptional cases *gnome*. The sub-virtue by which we command well is practical wisdom itself, in the strict sense.

There are corresponding sub-vices for each of the three acts as well. Foolish haste or "precipitation" is a failure in the act of taking counsel: you do not stop and think.

Thoughtlessness is a failure in the act of judgement: you cannot be bothered to pay attention to the relevant considerations that count towards the right judgement. Inconstancy is a failure in the act of command: you judge what is to be done but you do not follow through with it.

What is interesting is that Aquinas thinks of all these defects as arising from *moral* defects. Anger, envy, and especially lust divert the reason from its proper role in governing action. They cause us to bypass rational consideration (counsel), ignore or misperceive relevant evidence (judgement), or veer away from what we have determined is to be done (command). What this shows, of course, is that practical wisdom is not possible without the moral virtues, just as the moral virtues were not possible without practical wisdom.

By now it may seem that natural law theory is very far away: the account Aquinas gives of practical wisdom takes its shape from his account of agency, not from his account of natural law. But that appearance is misleading. For one thing, since practical wisdom is inseparable from the moral virtues, and both the role and the content of the moral virtues can be explained only by reference to the natural law, natural law theory is not so far offstage after all. But there is an even closer connection between practical wisdom and natural law, a connection that brings us back to our starting point. Practical wisdom is, as we have seen, an account of excellence in practical reasoning. And practical reasoning, like theoretical reasoning, starts from principles and works towards conclusions. The principles of practical reasoning — the starting point from which the practically wise person sets out on a reasoned path to excellent action — are the precepts of the natural law.

I can draw out the significance of this point by pointing to another comparison between speculative and practical reasoning. In theoretical reasoning there is a purely formal science that sets the norms for proceeding properly from principles to conclusions. That science — called syllogistic or logic — can be expounded and practiced perfectly well without any reference at all to the content of any (non-logical) principles. There can be no equivalent science of practical reasoning. Practical reasoning cannot be practiced perfectly well without any reference at all to the content of any moral principles; good practical reasoning starts from a correct conception of the end. The account of practical reasoning therefore cannot stand without the account of the human end, and that account is given its general theoretical foundation in the theory of natural law and then fleshed out in a doctrine of virtue that is thoroughly dependent on the theory of natural law.

Natural and supernatural goods

I said earlier that the specifically human rational activity that constitutes our good is not theoretical but practical reasoning. The life of practical reasoning, which is the life of the activity of the moral virtues, is (as Aquinas likes to put it) "proportionate to human beings." To put it another way, the life of theoretical reason is in an important sense *superhuman*: "the theoretical intelligence . . . is not found in human beings in the full way that it is in angels, but only through their participating in something else. That is why the life of contemplation is not, strictly speaking, human, but above what is human" (*DQCard* 1 rep.). But as a Christian Aquinas believes that God intends human beings for a life that surpasses their nature, a life that is not "proportionate to human beings" and therefore cannot be attained merely by the cultivation of their natural capacities, even to that peak of perfection that constitutes complete moral virtue. This supernatural human life is a gift, not an accomplishment.

We must not, however, think of that supernatural life as something wholly unrelated to our natural life, merely tacked on afterwards but lacking any intelligible continuity with our natural desires, actions, and dispositions. In fact, the notion that our natural life is the life exclusively of this world, and our supernatural life exclusively the life of the world to come, is completely foreign to Aquinas. Heaven fulfils our nature, though in a way beyond nature's own power; and our supernatural life begins not with death but with baptism.

We can understand what is distinctive in Aquinas's view by looking at the intellectual context in which these disputed questions were raised. By about 1260, or roughly a decade before the *Disputed Questions on the Virtues* were argued, the faculty of arts at the University of Paris had become something like what we would think of as a philosophy department. The arts masters no longer thought of themselves chiefly as providing a preliminary grounding in the liberal arts for budding theologians, but as practitioners of a critical, philosophical discipline with its own independent dignity — a dignity that they were not shy of asserting both on their own behalf and on behalf of the discipline of philosophy itself. For the Aristotelian philosophy that it was their task to develop and teach offered a comprehensive view of the world that did not rely on any purported revelation. Some of the arts masters therefore made very strong claims about the preeminence of philosophy and of the life of speculative (as opposed to practical) reason, as we can see in some of the propositions later condemned by the Bishop of Paris in 1277:

> That there is no more excellent way of life than the philosophical way.
>
> That the highest good of which the human being is capable consists in the intellectual virtues.
>
> That the philosophers alone are the wise men of this world.

The arts masters' assertion of the autonomy and integrity of philosophy (and indeed of the whole natural order, which philosophy purports to explain) has come to be known as "integral Aristotelianism," since it involved the use of Aristotle's work not merely as a conceptual apparatus for elucidating received theological wisdom but as a complete, free-standing philosophy in its own right.

Not surprisingly, some conservatives in the faculty of theology vigorously opposed this "naturalistic" philosophy and were deeply suspicious of the influence of Aristotle. We can get a glimpse of their attitude by looking at the *Conferences on the Hexaemeron*, a series of lectures given by Saint Bonaventure in April and May of 1273. Although by now his own faculty days were behind him, Bonaventure had supported theological opposition to what he saw as the over-exuberant Aristotelianism of many lecturers in the University of Paris. The tenor of that opposition can be seen in passages like these:

> Take note of Gideon, whom the Lord commanded to test the people by the waters. Those who lapped were chosen: that is, those who drink moderately from philosophy. . . . The others who drank while lying down are those who give themselves entirely to philosophy and are not worthy to stand up in the battle-line, but are bent over in submission to infinite errors.

> One must not mingle so much of the water of philosophical science with the wine of Holy Scripture that the wine is transmuted into water. . . . But in modern times the wine is changed into water and the bread into stone, just the reverse of the miracles of Christ.
>
> The professors — even if not openly, at any rate secretly — read, copy, and conceal the quartos of the philosophers as though they were idols, much as Rachel lied about concealing the stolen idols of her father. (*ConfHex* 3.7.13-15)

In short, those who do not rigorously subordinate Aristotelian philosophy to Scriptural theology are deserters from Christ's army, reversers of his miracles, and indeed closet idolaters.

Aquinas aims at avoiding both the extreme naturalism of the integral Aristotelians and what we might call the "rejectionism" of the conservative theologians. Far from rejecting philosophy in general or Aristotle in particular, Aquinas is thoroughly Aristotelian. As Ralph McInerny puts it,

> When Thomas referred to Aristotle as the Philosopher, he was not merely adopting a *façon de parler* of the time. He adopted Aristotle's analysis of physical objects, his view of place, time and motion, his proof of the prime mover, his cosmology. He made his own Aristotle's account of sense perception and intellectual knowledge. His moral philosophy is closely based on what he learned from Aristotle and in his commentary on the *Metaphysics* he provides the most cogent and coherent account of what is going on in those difficult pages.[4]

But even as he adopted much of Aristotle's philosophy, he did not agree with the integral Aristotelians that philosophy by itself offers a comprehensive, autonomous account of everything there is. In addition to the natural order, which philosophy investigates, there is a supernatural order, which is beyond the competence of philosophy. Yet "the highest does not stand without the lowest"[5]; the supernatural order does not obliterate the natural. As Aquinas himself puts it, "grace does not destroy nature, but brings it to fulfilment" (*ST* 1a 1.8 ad 2). This understanding of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural orders allows Aquinas to preserve the whole Aristotelian conceptual apparatus but put it to a wider use than Aristotle envisioned. Aquinas expects to find parallels between the natural and the supernatural orders. He therefore seeks "the discovery of natural analogies to transcendent truths and the ordering of both natural and supernatural truths in a scientific way."[6]

---

[4] "Saint Thomas Aquinas," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Within ethics, this approach allows Aquinas to affirm that there is indeed such a thing as natural happiness, and that it does not lose its importance for moral theory simply because, as Christians affirm, there is also such a thing as supernatural happiness. Jean Porter explains this particularly well:

> the natural end of human life, that is, the attainment of specific perfection as a human being, is not rendered otiose or irrelevant by the fact that we are actually directed toward a supernatural end. The specific natural ideal of humanity remains the proximate norm of morality. That is why Aquinas insists that while the theological virtues transform the cardinal virtues, they do so in such a way as to leave intact the rational structure of the latter, which is itself derived from their orientation toward the natural human good, that is, natural perfection in accordance with the specific kind of humanity.[7]

---

[5] Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*.

[6] C. H. Lohr, "The medieval interpretation of Aristotle," in Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg, eds., *The Cambdridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 80-98, at 93.

[7] *The Recovery of Virtue* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 67. I have omitted parenthetical references.

An application: the question on brotherly correction

The question on brotherly correction is especially useful for illustrating the ways in which this theoretical apparatus can be brought to bear so as to provide determinate moral guidance about highly concrete and specific situations. Brotherly correction involves rebuking or reproving a fellow-Christian — no doubt Aquinas is thinking in particular of one's brothers in a religious order, but the discussion is more broadly applicable. Aquinas's first question is whether "there is a precept about brotherly correction" — that is, whether it is something we are required by a commandment to do.

He argues that it is. We are required by a commandment to love our neighbour, and to love someone is to will what is good for him: not just to want it in an idle way, but actually to take action to secure what is good for him. As Aquinas puts it, "our wills are neither effective nor true if they are not proved in what we do" (*DQBrCorr* 1 rep.). There are three kinds of goods for human beings: external goods, such as money and other possessions; goods of the body, such as bodily health and integrity; and the good of the soul, which is virtue. This last sort of good is the most valuable, since it touches most closely on what is fundamental to and definitive of us as human beings: our capacity for the active exercise of reason in shaping our lives. Now wanting good for someone includes wanting the absence of what is bad. It would be an odd sort of love that worked only to bestow good things on the beloved, never to remove ills. Just as the greatest good is the good of virtue, the greatest ill is the evil of vice. So, as Aristotle says, "someone ought to help a friend avoid sins more than loss of money" (*NE* 9.3.3, 1165b19).

But simply knowing that we are required by commandment to rebuke an errant brother does not tell us much. Unlike negative precepts (commandments that require us to refrain from doing certain things), positive precepts (commandments that require us to do certain things) are not to be acted upon all the time and in every possible way. For one thing, it would be impossible to do so. I cannot take every available opportunity for honouring my father and mother *and* for giving to the poor *and* for worshipping God *and* for the many other things I am obliged by positive precept to do. More important than this purely practical problem, however, is a difficulty that arises from the metaphysics of goodness sketched earlier. Goodness is perfection, completeness, full-being. So if an action is to be good, it must get everything right. It must be done by the right person, with the right aim, from the right state of character, and under the right circumstances. This is what Aquinas is getting at when, as he so often does, he quotes the dictum of pseudo-Dionysius that "Goodness arises from an integral cause."

So we are to act on the precept requiring brotherly correction only "when the appropriate conditions are present regarding persons, places, reasons, and times" (*DQBrCorr* 1 rep.). Most important among these conditions is "that the action corresponds to the end at which the virtue is aiming. When correcting an offender, charity aims at reforming him. The action would not be virtuous if the offender were corrected in such a way as to make him worse" (ad 1). Of course, this means that in order to act virtuously in performing the duty of brotherly correction, someone needs to be able to "read" people well, to find the words and the tone of voice that will soften the offender's heart and inspire reform, not cause him to dig in his heels and add resentment to iniquity. And the other circumstances require astute discernment as well. "It is not possible," Aquinas writes, "to provide a discourse that defines these circumstances" — that is, some general rule or set of rules that could be applied mechanically and would invariably give the right answer about how to act in any given situation — "because judging them must take place in individual cases. This is the job of practical wisdom, whether acquired by experience and over time, or, better still, infused" (rep).

Natural and supernatural virtues

Notice that Aquinas here envisions two quite different ways in which one might acquire the practical wisdom that will enable one to judge correctly about how to act in particular situations. One might acquire it according to the natural means of which Aristotle speaks: "by experience and over time." But one might also acquire it in a supernatural way of which Aristotle knew nothing: it might be "infused" — literally, "poured in" — by God. Infused practical wisdom is even better than the acquired kind. This is not because it is *intellectually* superior to the acquired kind (say, because it is more comprehensive or more accurate), but because it is connected with our supernatural good. As Aquinas puts it,

> it is not necessary for [infused] practical wisdom that someone is good at taking counsel in every area, e.g. commerce or war, but only in those matters that are necessary for salvation. Those who are dwelling in grace do not lack that, however simple they are, in keeping with 1 John 2.27: "Anointing will teach you about everything." (*DQCard* 2 ad 3)

Aquinas holds that there are infused counterparts for all the cardinal virtues: not just infused practical wisdom, but also infused temperateness, courage, and justice. They differ, not in the actions they dispose us to perform, but in the end for the sake of which they dispose us to perform them. For example, the person with acquired temperateness, as we have seen, tempers his sensual desire for the sake of his own good as correctly discerned by reason. The person with infused temperateness does the same thing, but for God's sake.

In purely natural terms, the person with only the acquired virtues is in some ways better off than someone with only the infused virtues. Those who are in a state of grace possess the infused cardinal virtues, but "they can still find it difficult to exercise the virtues which they have received as dispositions, because the tendencies resulting from their earlier sinful activity remain with them. This does not happen with virtues that are acquired through engaging in virtuous activity," because in the very process of acquiring those virtues one roots out the tendencies that oppose virtuous activity (ad 2).

Later theologians will question whether it is necessary, or even rational, to posit infused cardinal virtues.[8] Aquinas, however, is emphatic that there must be such virtues. His insistence on this point is another illustration of his distinctive way of negotiating a middle position between integral Aristotelianism and rejectionism. Although he upholds the integrity of the natural order, allowing that human beings have a natural end and a set of virtues that dispose them to achieve that end, he also acknowledges a distinct and superior supernatural order, with its corresponding set of virtues. Yet there is an intelligible continuity between the two. It is, in a sense, natural for there to be supernaturally infused virtues, and the supernatural has a parallel structure to the natural. Notice how all these points are made in his extended argument that there are some supernaturally infused virtues:

---

[8] Bonnie Kent writes that John Duns Scotus was "the first Scholastic theologian to subject this class of virtues to intense critical scrutiny"; she sketches Scotus's arguments and their subsequent influence in "Rethinking Moral Dispositions: Scotus on the Virtues," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 352-76, especially in sections I and III.2.

> Just as human beings acquire the *first* thing that completes them, i.e. the soul, from the action of God, so they also acquire the *last* thing that completes them, that is complete human happiness, directly from God, and they rest in him. . . .
>
> It is appropriate, then, that just as the first thing that completes a human being, which is the rational soul, exceeds the abilities of the *material* body, so the last state of completeness that human beings can attain, which is the blessedness of eternal life, should exceed the abilities of human nature *as a whole*. Now, each thing is ordered to its end by what it does, and the things that contribute to the end ought to correspond in some way to that end. Consequently, it is necessary for there to be some sorts of completeness in us that exceed the abilities of the principles natural to us and that order us towards our supernatural end. This could only be the case if God infused in human beings certain *supernatural* principles of activity on top of the *natural* ones. (*DQVirtGen* 10 rep.)

So far I have been speaking only of the infused *cardinal* virtues, but there are other infused virtues. The infused cardinal virtues perfect our natural capacities so that we will deal with the concerns of our natural life in a way that is informed by our supernatural destiny. The other infused virtues perfect our natural capacities so that we can deal directly with concerns that transcend our natural life altogether. These virtues, in other words, are supernatural not only in the end to which they direct us but in the subject-matter they allow us to deal with. These are the three “theological” virtues of faith, hope, and charity. “By faith,” Aquinas says, “the intelligence may be enlightened concerning the knowledge of supernatural matters. . . . By hope and charity the will acquires a certain tendency towards that supernatural good” (Ibid.).

A summary of the argument

Early in this essay I stated my conviction that Aquinas's moral theory is so systematically unified that no single discussion — whether of the human good, the natural law, the nature of responsible action, or the virtues — can claim pride of place. A full defence of this claim would require a whole book, but by now I have at least sketched enough of the connections to make the claim plausible. I want to conclude by summarizing my line of argument. The doctrine of natural law identifies and characterises the ends that are presupposed by all genuinely human agency. As Aquinas explicitly says, "the precepts of the natural law . . . are the first principles of human acts" (1a2ae 94.1 ad 3). Those precepts provide the necessary anchor for practical reasoning. That anchor is not explicitly identified when Aquinas comes to discuss the nature of responsible action, but it must be assumed if that discussion is to make sense. For while Aquinas's action theory clearly recognises that all action and all practical reasoning must rest on ends that are objects of both cognitive and appetitive powers, it does not offer us any account of what those ends are; nor does it explain how those ends come to be either known or desired. Without the theory of natural law, therefore, Aquinas's action theory is largely empty; it certainly does not contain all the materials needed to generate a normative ethical view.

But the theory of natural law cannot stand on its own either. Without the accounts of human agency, practical reasoning, and the virtues, natural law theory would offer us only a somewhat sketchy philosophical anthropology, not a fleshed-out ethics. The fleshing out happens only when Aquinas takes the general account of the human good provided by natural law theory and shows how it can be concretely realised by individual human beings through the use of practical reason to shape not only particular purposive actions but patterns of action and reaction. In order to do this, human beings must acquire dispositions — the virtues — that enable them to act readily, reliably, and with pleasure in ways that accord with their overall good. That good in turn is twofold. There is both a natural and a supernatural good, each with its own virtues. But even the supernatural good bears an intelligible relation to the natural, and the virtues by which we attain it have a structure parallel to that of the virtues by which we attain our natural good. Thus, even that aspect of Aquinas's ethics that one would expect to stand apart from the rest turns out to be thoroughly integrated with his whole system, as befits a thinker who holds that "grace does not destroy nature, but brings it to fulfilment." The theory of natural law, therefore, turns out to be a perfect springboard into a theory of supernatural virtue.