

LEO J. ELDERS SVD  
Pontificia Academia di S. Tommaso  
Roma

## THE ETHICS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR OUR AGE

---

The works of St. Thomas Aquinas have been studied by so many and in such detail, that it is a reason for marvel that, year after year, a considerable number of new publications detecting ever new aspects of his thought continue to be published. In addition to these attempts to increase our understanding one must say that Aquinas's doctrine is such a treasure house of wisdom and possesses so much truth that it is also necessary to return to it in order to state for a younger generation its most important conclusions. It would seem that Father Krapiec has done both, sc. explaining St. Thomas's philosophy and *vetera novis augere*. So it seems opportune to honour him by submitting an essay in which old and new are mixed.

The first question deserving attention concerns the distinction between the moral doctrine of the Bible and Greek ethical theories. The Church Fathers took over a considerable number of ethical teachings of the Greek and Roman classical authors. Despite their fundamental criticism of the pagan way of life and immorality, many were convinced that there is a fundamental correspondence between much of what these authors wrote and Christian moral doctrine. Especially definitions and divisions were borrowed as well as the doctrine of the virtues and natural law<sup>1</sup>. As a matter of fact, until the end of the

---

<sup>1</sup> See: J. Liebard, *Les enseignements moraux des Pères Apostoliques*, Gembloux

Middle Ages-Christian moral theology accepted the same starting point as pagan philosophers, sc. Man's quest of happiness<sup>2</sup>.

In the twelfth century the Jewish philosopher Maimonides raised the question of the difference between philosophical ethics and the Thora. He himself wanted to remain within the limits of philosophy which, however, in his view, was highly useful for explaining certain biblical concepts, such as „law“<sup>3</sup>. The conviction of a fundamental correspondence between biblical moral teachings and the ethical views of the ancient philosophers as well as of the possibility to use philosophical categories to explain Christian moral doctrine was promoted considerably by St. Albert the Great. His approach imposed itself once the full text of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in the Latin translation of Robert Grosseteste had become available (after 1240). Before that date William of Auxerre borrowed certain views of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Alexander of Hales attempted to integrate elements of Aristotle's ethics in his theological writings, but St. Albert who, while teaching in Paris, had been using the *Liber Ethicorum* in his *Commentary on the Sententiae*, went so far as to treat the *Nicomachean Ethics* in his course on theology in Cologne. By introducing Aristotle's text into the curriculum of theological disciplines, Albert the Great inaugurated a new era in the study of ethics.

## THE SOURCES OF ST. THOMAS'S ETHICS

Nevertheless Thomas Aquinas has been the first to examine systematically Aristotle's views and to make use of them in the construction of both his own ethics and his moral theology. There are frequent references to and long excerpts from the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, but one finds the most detailed and complete treatment in the Second Part of the *Summa theologiae* and in the *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* which dates to the same period. As R. A. Gauthier, the editor of the critical text of this commentary in the *Leonine Edition* of the works of Aquinas, observes, Thomas did not read in this work of Aristotle a particular doctrine proper to the

---

1970; J. O s b o r n, *Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought*, Cambridge 1976.

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the question of happiness see: R. G u i n d o n, *Béatitude et théologie morale chez saint Thomas d'Aquin. Origines, Intéprétations*, Ottawa 1956.

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: R. L. W e i s s, *Maimonides' Ethics. The Encounter of Philosophical and Religious Morality*, Chicago 1991.

Stagirite, but rather an expose of moral philosophy as such<sup>4</sup>. On the philosophical level a second source for Thomas' ethics besides the works of Aristotle, is the doctrine of the Stoa, which Thomas knew through Cicero, Seneca, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. In many respects Cicero provided important material for the synthesis of Aquinas<sup>5</sup>. Seneca is often quoted in questions about such virtues as gratitude, clemency and meekness<sup>6</sup>. In recent years several authors saw a far-reaching Stoic influence on Thomas, in particular in respect of his doctrine of natural law. However, a careful study of the texts where Stoic theories are mentioned shows that in the great majority of cases Thomas confronts their doctrine with that of the Peripatetics and consequently rejects it. The most important contribution of Stoicism is to have stimulated further research by those theories which deviated from the doctrine of the Peripatetics. In addition to specific Stoic doctrines which he rejected<sup>7</sup>, Aquinas also criticized their materialistic epistemology. On the other hand, as the Stoics Thomas places natural law in a cosmic context: as animals man possesses in himself certain principles which allow him to act in agreement with his nature<sup>8</sup>.

## THE NATURE OF ETHICS

In *Metaphysics* (E, ch. 1), Aristotle divides the sciences in theoretical, practical and operative disciplines. Theoretical knowledge is subdivided in the study of physical nature, mathematics and theology. Ethics and political philosophy come in under the practical sciences belonging to the domain of practical reason, which formulates the rules of what one must do and indicates how to accomplish one's tasks<sup>9</sup>. At the

<sup>4</sup> S. Thomae de Aquino. *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, I, 267.

<sup>5</sup> See: C. v a n S t e e n k i s t e, *Cicerone nelle opere di S. Tommaso*, „Angelicum” 36 (1959), p. 343–382.

<sup>6</sup> Seneca exercised considerable influence on several Christian authors. See: G. V e r b e k e, *The Presence of Stoicism in Medieval Thought*, Washington D. C. 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Some examples of such Stoic views are the following propositions: „Omnia peccata esse paria”; „omnes passionnes esse malas”; „omnem delectationem esse malam”; „bona temporalia non esse hominis bona”; „necessitate quadam vitali hominis vitam duci”; „omnes actus nostros secundum corpora coelestia disponi”.

<sup>8</sup> In *IV Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 1; Cf.: M. S p a n n e u t, *Influences stoïciennes sur la pensée morale de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, in: L. J. E l d e r s, K. H e d w i g, *The Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Città del Vaticano 1984, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 14, a. 4.

beginning of his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* Thomas presents this division in the following way: the wise person studies the realm of beings and brings about order in what he does. There is the order in the physical world – the subject matter of natural philosophy, the ordering of the acts of the intellect – the task of logic, the ordering of the acts of the will – the task of ethics, and the order in the work one does such as building a house, which is the effect of the arts and crafts<sup>10</sup>. This presentation of the different sciences has the advantage to clarify from the very beginning the task of ethics and to assign a place to logic, not mentioned by Aristotle in his division.

St. Thomas defines ethics as the science of human actions in so far as these are ordered to an end, that is freely willed acts according to the order of reason, called *actus humani* – excluding purely bodily acts such as the activity of the vegetative faculties, which are called *actus hominis*<sup>11</sup>.

Subscribing to Aristotle's position Aquinas points out from the very start of his commentary that man is a social being, and belongs to such communities as the family and the political society – societies he needs in order to develop himself and to live a well ordered life<sup>12</sup>. Consequently the study of man's actions is divided into three branches: ethics which deals with man's life as an individual; the discipline which considers what one has to do in the context of the family; the science of man's life in a political community. This last discipline is the accomplishment of ethics and aims at promoting the good of all citizens. As Thomas himself does, we restrict ourselves mainly to the first part. When dealing with the virtues, in particular with justice, man's special duties toward the political society will also be studied.

In the introduction to his commentary Aquinas makes it clear that ethics is not merely about insight in what one must do. Aristotle noted that ethics rather than explaining what virtue is, aims at making us virtuous<sup>13</sup>. Large sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics* consist indeed of prudential reflections on the virtues. Nevertheless the treatise also

---

<sup>10</sup> In this text Aquinas also indicated the distinction between the liberal arts and ethics. Liberal arts belong to the productive sciences, but may prepare one for the study of ethics and help to organize his moral life. See: G. V e r b e k e, *Arts libéraux et morale d'après Saint Thomas*, in: *Arts libéraux et philosophie au Moyen Âge*, Montréal-Paris 1969, p. 653-661.

<sup>11</sup> For an explanation of the term *actus humanus* see: *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*, a. 4.

<sup>12</sup> „ut bene vivat“.

<sup>13</sup> *E. nic.*, 1103 b 27.

proposes theoretical discussions. It is noteworthy that Thomas weakens Aristotle's statement and writes that the purpose of ethics is not only knowledge but also human actions, as is the case with all practical disciplines<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, ethics is a philosophical discipline and therefore the knowledge it gives is of a general nature in so far as it considers the principles of our actions<sup>15</sup>, but in contrast with the theoretical disciplines these general considerations are ordered to the performance of good actions. In agreement with this analysis Aquinas writes that ethics studies the different species of acts, as he himself does in the Second Part of the *Summa theologiae*<sup>16</sup>. However, how one should act in concrete circumstances is not determined by ethics as a science but by the virtue of prudence. Some moralists consider this task of prudence part of ethics itself as a philosophical discipline, but this view contradicts Aristotle's conception of a science. It follows from these explanations that one may call ethics a theoretical-practical science. It studies man's acts from the point of view of his being ordered to a last end.

#### ETHICS AND THE OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL DISCIPLINES

The next question to be discussed is that of the precise relation of ethics with the other philosophical disciplines. Since ethics considers man's actions, it presupposes knowledge of philosophical anthropology which, according to Aquinas, is part of the philosophy of nature<sup>17</sup>. But ethics differs from it because it is based on the first principles of the practical intellect, just like the first principles of the speculative intellect constitute the foundation of the theoretical sciences. For this reason there is no real continuity between the latter and ethics, but there does exist a certain relation of dependence. It is impossible to study the ethics of Aquinas without drawing on the insights reached in the philosophy of nature. In the antiquity this was acknowledged

---

<sup>14</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 3: „Finis enim huius scientiae non est sola cognitio ad quam forte pervenire possunt passionum sectatores, sed finis huius scientiae est actus humanus, sicut et omnium scientiarum practicarum”.

<sup>15</sup> Cf.: *S. th.*, I-II, q. 6, prooem.: „in universali”.

<sup>16</sup> Loc. cit.: „Ideo omnis operativa scientia in particulari consideratione perficitur”; *In IV Ethic.*, l. 15, n. 832: „Cognitio rerum moralium perficitur per hoc quod particularia cognoscuntur”.

<sup>17</sup> Cf.: *In I Ethic.*, l. 19, n. 227: „Unde manifestum est quod oportet politicum aequaliter cognoscere ea quae pertinent ad animam”.

also by many philosophers outside the school of Aristotle, who divided philosophy in three branches: dialectic, the science of nature (which comprised also knowledge about the gods) and ethics<sup>18</sup>. How important the connection is between philosophical anthropology and ethics will appear in the study of happiness as man's last end, but actually also in every single chapter of it. Finally in bio-ethics and in the study of the moral aspects of economic activity the vision one has of man is decisive. A simple example will illustrate this connection of ethics with anthropology. Thomas considers lying as morally wrong. At the background of his argument one has the theory that by its very nature the spoken word must reflect our thinking – a principle of St. Thomas's anthropology. It is perhaps less easy to determine the relationship between ethics and metaphysics<sup>19</sup>. Obviously, the analysis of good and evil is of fundamental importance as is the treatise about God who, according to Aquinas, is the object even of the contemplation characteristic for the imperfect happiness of this life. Moreover, the chapter on the first principles of the practical intellect is developed in analogy with the study of the first principles of the theoretical intellect. These first principles result from the mind's analysis of our fundamental inclinations. In this way the morality of our acts is connected with the ontological order.

More important is the following. St. Thomas's entire moral philosophy is characterized by his doctrine that all things strive to attain the good. Every single choice and all actions must be directed to our real good. The science of ethics helps us to determine what is our good. Metaphysics shows that the good – the object of the appetite – is being. It is man's task to reach his accomplishment by uniting himself with the good. For this reason ethics is not just a science which brings us a certain perfection of the appetitive faculties by equipping us with the virtues, so as to make us perfect individuals in our environment. The end of man is to be united with the good, with reality as it is in itself<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, according to Aquinas, ethics directs our acts

<sup>18</sup> This division was developed in the Academy, but it was also vigorously propagated by Stoic authors.

<sup>19</sup> W. K l u x e n, *Philosophische Ethik bei Thomas von Aquin*, Hamburg 1980, XXXII, argues that one cannot speak of a real dependence („Abhängigkeit oder Ableitung“) and that the relation between both disciplines is not clear („als ungeklärt gelten muß“). This observation would have astonished Aquinas.

<sup>20</sup> *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 22, a. 10: „[...] est aliquid obiectum animae secundum quod ad ipsum anima inclinatur secundum modum ipsius rei in seipsa existentis et haec est ratio appetibilis in quantum est appetibile“; *ibidem*, q. 1, a. 2:

towards our union with reality which, since it is good<sup>21</sup>, accomplishes us as our end<sup>22</sup>. The science of ethics, as it is ordained to help us acquire limited happiness during this life, aims at creating the conditions under which we can unite ourselves with the main object of contemplation, God. Beings, such as they exist, accomplish us<sup>23</sup>, and God does so in the most eminent way, for he is the cause of all good things<sup>24</sup>. For this reason Thomas, in his commentary on the *Ethics*, speaks six times of *bonum intentum* – the good to which man directs himself – when Aristotle writes that moral philosophy concerns the good man does (*bonum operatum*)<sup>25</sup>. Impossible to affirm more clearly the relationship between ethics and metaphysics and the texts quoted surprise by the light they throw on the way Aquinas conceived the science of ethics. One might add that until Kant a certain dependence of moral philosophy with regard to metaphysics was generally accepted, but that Kant caused an upheaval by his attempt to establish metaphysical truths on moral categorical imperatives.

#### ETHICS AND THEOLOGY

According to Aquinas man has only one last end, sc. the vision of God. Reason discovers that we are ordained to this contemplation of God's being and draws the conclusion that our accomplishment as human beings is brought about by this vision, although it does not understand in what this vision consists and how it is to be attained. In view of this position St. Thomas repeatedly states in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the happiness Aristotle is speaking

---

„Motus appetitus terminatur ad res”; q. 8, a. 4 ad 5: „Affectus terminatur ad res ipsas”; I-II, q. 26, 2: „Appetitus tendit in appetibile realiter consequendum”.

<sup>21</sup> „Omne ens est bonum”.

<sup>22</sup> *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 21, a. 2: „Ratio boni in hoc consistit quod aliquid sit perfectivum alterius per modum finis”; C. G., III, ch. 109: „Quaelibet voluntas naturaliter vult illud quod est proprium volentis bonum, scil. ipsum esse perfectum”. Cf.: M. C. D o n a d i o M a g g i d e G a n d o l f i, *Amor y bien. Los problemas del amor en Santo Tomás de Aquino*, Buenos Aires 1999, p. 105–147. The author stresses this orientation to reality.

<sup>23</sup> *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 21, a. 1: „Ens est perfectivum alterius [...] non solum secundum rationem speciei, sed etiam secundum esse quod habet in rerum natura, et per hunc modum est perfectivum bonum”.

<sup>24</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 1, n. 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, l. 9.

about as man's end is the imperfect happiness one can reach in this life<sup>26</sup>. These texts have led some Thomists to argue that an authentically philosophical ethics is not possible<sup>27</sup>. If ethics wants to indicate which is man's final end and how this should be reached, it needs to be complemented by theology. Maritain observes that mankind lives *de facto* in the state of fallen nature, whereas ethics would consider man as if he would live in the state of unspoiled nature. The principles on which ethics is based depend on the science of theology. In this way ethics itself is a discipline subject to theology<sup>28</sup>.

However, Maritain's view runs into considerable difficulties and has been rejected by several Thomists<sup>29</sup>. As a matter of fact, philosophical ethics definitely exists. In order to convince oneself one needs only to read the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Moreover, in this work Aristotle pays so much attention to vices and human weakness that it is obvious he does not consider human nature as immune against sin. Where Aristotle's ethics is incomplete, Aquinas completed it in a masterly way in his commentary where he developed ethics into a coherent science. Ethics has its own first principles which are formulated by the practical intellect, it shows the way to a virtuous life and limited happiness, but it can also call up the desire of a higher destination. Aquinas applies Aristotle's description of happiness to the imperfect happiness of this life, happiness which despite its limits is nevertheless fairly stable, since it gives man what he really needs, when his desires are regulated by reason<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 9: „Loquitur in hoc libro Philosophus de felicitate qualis in hac vita haberi potest, nam felicitas alterius vitae omnem investigationem rationis excedit“; cf. *ibidem*, l. 10: „[...] felicitas qualem possibile est esse praesentis vitae“; l. 17: „[...] vitam praesentem, cuius felicitatem Aristoteles hic inquirere intendit“; *In III Ethic.*, l. 18; *In IX Ethic.*, l. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Cf.: J. M a r i t a i n, *De la philosophie chrétienne*, Paris 1933, p. 101; *Science et sagesse*, Paris 1935, p. 327; *Du savoir moral*, Paris 1936.

<sup>28</sup> „Scientia subalternata theologiae“.

<sup>29</sup> See: J.-M. R a m i r e z, *Sur l'organisation du savoir moral*, „Bulletin thomiste“, IV (1935), p. 423; Th. D e m a n, *L'organisation du savoir moral*, *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 1934, 258-280; R. M c I n e r n y, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, Washington D. C. 1993. Cf. Also: V. J. B o u r k e, *Moral Philosophy without Revelation*, „The Thomist“ 40 (1976), p. 555-570.

<sup>30</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 9: „Haec felicitas habet per se sufficientiam quia scilicet in se continet omne illud quod est homini necessarium, non autem illud quod potest homini advenire; unde potest melior fieri aliquo alio addito, nec tamen remanet desiderium hominis inquietum, quia desiderium ratione regulatum, quale oportet esse felicis, non habet inquietudinem de his quae non sunt necessaria, licet sint possibilis“.

Despite the fact that ethics is a science in its own right, the collaboration between ethics and theology is desirable. Moral theology benefits from the assistance of philosophical ethics, as clearly appears in the Second Part of the *Summa theologiae*. In elaborating his moral theology St. Thomas avails of philosophical insights throughout his whole treatise. These philosophical sections in the *Summa theologiae* are so complete and coherent that they can stand by themselves. Is it allowed to isolate them from their theological context so that they become a philosophical exposé of the science of morals? In the past several authors have done so without any hesitation<sup>31</sup> and it would seem that their approach is possible and legitimate, although recently some objections have been raised against this way of proceeding. Yet the texts of the Second Part of the *Summa theologiae* consisting of philosophical arguments constitute a coherent whole and remain at the level of natural reason in their explanations. This is clearly a sign of the correspondence between the insights of philosophical ethics and the moral precepts of revelation. However, the profound meaning of Thomas' Second Part can only be understood if his doctrine of the virtues is integrated in the study of man as the image of God.

#### THE METHOD TO BE USED IN THE STUDY OF ETHICS

For Aquinas the question of the method to be used in a particular discipline is of great importance. The proper method makes it possible to elaborate analyses and arguments adapted to the subject matter. One must take as a point of departure what is most known to us and proceed to what is less<sup>32</sup>. In mathematics the first principles happen to be what is best known to us, but in natural science and ethics we cannot proceed from some first principles to the knowledge of all the

---

adipisci".

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance: A. D. Sertillanges, *La philosophie morale de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris 1916, M. Wittmann, *Die Ethik des hl. Thomas von Aquin*, München 1933.

<sup>32</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 4, n. 51-52: „Oportet incipere a magis cognitis quia per notiora devenimus ad ignota. Et quia nos ratiocinando notitiam acquirimus, oportet quod procedamus ab his quae sunt magis nota nobis. Et si quidem eadem sunt magis nota nobis et simpliciter, tunc ratio procedit a principiis, sicut in mathematicis. Si autem alia magis nota sint simpliciter, et alia quoad nos, tunc oportet e converso procedere sicut in naturalibus et moralibus”.

rest, but must consider each time what experience tells us<sup>33</sup>. Contact with experience is of great importance also in ethics. On the basis of past experiences one formulates rules and applies them in daily life. In this connection we must also keep in mind that there is a difference between theoretical and practical sciences. The former proceed with the help of analysis (*more resolutivo*) and reduce what is composite to its principles, the latter apply general rules to concrete actions (*more compositivo*). This is the way to proceed in ethics. However, to determine what one has to do in a concrete case in order to reach a certain end – that is at the level of concrete deliberation – one uses analysis<sup>34</sup>.

With regard to the origin of general rules for our conduct Aquinas argues that some of them are known immediately, sc. the first principles of the practical intellect, while other rules result from experience and are obtained by induction. Following Aristotle's account in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II, ch. 7), he distinguishes several types of induction: in mathematics induction helps to formulate a general conclusion such as that numbers are either odd or even<sup>35</sup>. A different type of induction is used in natural science and is based on what is observed. For instance, living beings need nutriments. Induction is also used in ethics: concupiscence becomes weaker the more one resists it<sup>36</sup>. These principles or insights are derived from what normally happens. Finally, there are rules or principles used in the various arts and crafts. These are also based on experience and are of great importance because they let us know and understand the properties of the materials we use.

In ethics one uses the *modus compositionis*, but this does not mean that analysis (*resolutio*) is totally absent. In order to know man's last end one must use analysis. With regard to the *modus compositionis* the

---

<sup>33</sup> Loc. cit.: „Quia in moralibus oportet incipere [...] a quibusdam effectibus consideratis circa actus humanos, oportet illum qui sufficiens auditor vult esse moralis scientiae, quod sit bene manufactus et exercitatus in consuetudinibus humanae vitae“. An example, one learns by experience that „concupiscentiae per abstinentiam superantur“.

<sup>34</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 14, a. 2: „Principium autem in inquisitione consilii est finis, qui quidem est prior in intentione, posterior tamen in esse et secundum hoc oportet quod inquisitio consilii sit resolutiva, incipiendo scilicet ab eo quod in futuro intenditur quousque perveniatur ad id quod statim agendum est“.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas writes that this induction proceeds *ex particularibus imaginatis*.

<sup>36</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 11.

virtue of prudence makes us apply rules to particular situations<sup>37</sup>. The science of morals considers our acts in so far as reason directs them to our end, it does so in agreement with the first principles of the practical intellect. In doing so it adds a moral qualification to these acts which as such are considered in philosophical anthropology. It is not possible, however, to connect all our acts directly with the last end. There are intermediate ends, sc. that at which the different virtues are aiming. In this way the virtues are principles of our actions, although all virtues are practiced in order to reach happiness.

In his commentary on the second chapter of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aquinas observes that because of the enormous variety of human actions, ethics provides approximative knowledge by applying general principles to concrete actions and by proceeding from what is simple to the complex. He stresses more than Aristotle had done the need to follow principles. As we have seen concrete acts are studied with regard to their effects, as these are produced in most cases (*ut in pluribus*). Aristotle appears to have thought that general rules admit exceptions, while Aquinas tends to ascribe the lack of certitude in the application of rules to defects inherent in man, such as the lack of freedom in our choices or the possibility that a virtuous action may at a given moment be blocked by an obstacle. The classical example of such a situation is that of the restitution of a dangerous object made impossible because the owner is in such an emotional state that one cannot hand it to him without the danger of harm.

What is most knowable by itself is not always such for us. In ethics we cannot deduce all obligations from the principle that the good ought to be done and evil avoided, but we must consider the different fields of activity and find out what is to be done in the light of our true end and of what the acts lead to<sup>38</sup>.

As a result of the acts we perform certain *habitus*, determinations to particular types of actions, are formed, sc. virtues and vices. In their turn the virtues help the intellect to form a correct judgment as to how we must reach happiness. In fact in order to know how to act under certain circumstances we must let ourselves be guided by the inclinations to the good which the virtues bring about. In the absence of the virtues the intellect will not always or not often form a correct judg-

---

<sup>37</sup> For this reason prudence also concerns the appetite. Cf.: *In VI Ethic.*, l. 7, n. 1201: „Est autem considerandum quod [...] prudentia non est in ratione solum sed habet aliquid in appetitu”.

<sup>38</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 4, n. 53: „In moralibus oportet incipere ab his quae sunt magis nota quoad nos, id est a quibusdam effectibus consideratis circa actus humanos”.

ment because the appetite when not informed by the virtues will cause the intellect to consider something as good although it is not<sup>39</sup>. For the practical intellect to be right means to be in agreement with the right appetite<sup>40</sup>. To act correctly one should possess experience and some understanding of what is implied in the various options which lay before us.

An important section of the treatise on the method to be used in ethics concerns the division of the subject matter. In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* Thomas writes that one must first study man's last end, happiness, show in what it consists and by which activity it can be attained<sup>41</sup>. The theme is examined in a general way in the *Summa theologiae* I-II and in greater detail in the II-II which considers the different virtues and vices covering the entire field of the morality of human acts.

The study of the virtues is meant to show how man can ordain himself to his end and strengthen this order by performing the proper acts in the changing circumstances of life. In this view the first place is not assigned to commands and duty but to man and his freedom whose privilege consists in being able to determine, on the basis of his basic natural inclinations, what he must do in different situations.

The *Prima Secundae* gives concrete indications on the division of the subject matter of ethics. After having determined man's last end, Aquinas says that this end is reached by man's actions. These actions must be studied, first in general by examining the common aspects of all actions, next in detail, sc. by considering what is proper to the different species of acts. In the first part those actions are studied which have a direct relation with happiness (and which are exclusively proper to man) and the factors which determine the morality of our actions. Subsequently those acts of the sensitive appetite are studied which man has in common with the higher animals, in so far as they can influence moral life, sc. the emotions and passions. The treatise of the passions is followed by the study of the principles and causes of our actions. These can be internal principles, the virtues, and external, sc. the various types of laws and, at the supernatural level, grace.

The study of the virtues in general is followed by that of the different species of virtues in the II-II. By means of two arguments Thomas

<sup>39</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 10, n. 128.

<sup>40</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 57, a. 5 ad 3: „Verum autem intellectus practici accipitur per conformitatem ad appetitum rectum“.

<sup>41</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 4, n. 43.

shows that there are four cardinal virtues: a) Virtues result from the work of right reason. By practicing careful consideration and deliberation the intellect brings about a virtuous habit *in itself*, sc. the virtue of prudence. If it is a good that the intellect causes *outside itself* this good can be in the will, sc. the virtue of justice, or it can be a good concerning the passions refraining and mastering them in so far as they incite us to seek immoderately the pleasurable, the virtue of moderation or temperance, or a good strengthening us against those passions which weaken or paralyze us, the virtue of courage or strength; b) The same conclusion can be reached by pointing out that each of these cardinal virtues has its seat in one of the four faculties: the intellect, the will, the irascible and the concupiscible appetites. All other virtues can be reduced to these four<sup>42</sup>. The treatment of each group of virtues is followed by a discussion of the corresponding vices.

As was pointed out above, the method to be followed in ethics is the *modus compositionis*, sc. the application of norms and rules to concrete actions. How does one come to know these norms? Aquinas distinguishes between first moral principles which the intellect spontaneously formulates on the basis of the fundamental inclinations of our nature (preserving one's being, living with others, acquiring knowledge, concerning oneself with the survival of mankind by procreation, etc.) and secondary principles which are a further determination of the basic norms, as for instance the Ten Commandments are of the precepts to love God and our neighbors<sup>43</sup>. Finally there are norms or rules of conduct such as wise people apply, as for instance the rules about warfare. This last group of rules demands much reflection and experience<sup>44</sup>. Occasionally it is difficult to reach certitude as to the question whether a particular action is lawful or not.

In order to determine what to do one uses arguments in the form of a syllogism. The so called secondary precepts are conclusions of a syllogism. The use of syllogisms means that ethics is structured as a science, which can be taught to others.

The moral qualification of our acts depends on their agreement with the fundamental inclinations of our human nature. An act which agrees with them is experienced as good, an act which goes against

<sup>42</sup> *S. th.*, II-II, q. 61, a. 2: „Aliae virtutes morales omnes aequaliter reducuntur ad virtutes cardinales”.

<sup>43</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 100, a. 3 ad 1: „Omnia praecepta Decalogi ad illa duo referuntur sicut conclusiones ad principia communia”.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*: „Ad quorum iudicium requiritur multa consideratio diversarum circumstantiarum”.

them as bad. Everyone formulates spontaneously the first principle: the good must be done, evil avoided<sup>45</sup>. These fundamental inclinations have their seat in the will. The formulation of the basic precepts results from the collaboration of the intellect with the will, thus it is the work of the practical intellect where these precepts have their seat. But how to apply them to our individual actions?

A virtuous person acts spontaneously in agreement with the demands of his human nature. But it is sometimes difficult to know what one should do. The syllogisms mentioned in this connection by Aristotle have as their starting point the end to be reached<sup>46</sup>. Thomas gives the example of a temperate person who aims at moderating his desires and establishing a mean between excess and deficiency. Keeping this in mind this person deliberates how to behave in certain circumstances<sup>47</sup>. However, when one is beset with vices, it becomes difficult to make the right decision. The virtue of prudence cannot function when one is not virtuous. In such a case one believes that the pleasure resulting from a particular act is at the moment the greatest good which should be sought. In this way the passions corrupt the insight about the right end<sup>48</sup>. However, when one performs a bad action, the intellect is not entirely the prisoner of desire. It does have knowledge of the general norm as regards what is right in a particular matter. But, under the pressure of passion, it formulates besides this principle another judgment. An example: alcoholic beverages are pleasant and one must enjoy them. I am offered a drink. So I accept<sup>49</sup>. The reasoning consists of four stages: in the background there is the principle that evil must be avoided, in this case becoming an alcoholic. Next the argument quoted, which is independent in respect of this first norm. Because of the presence of this norm the alcoholic is responsible of what he does. It happens that his addiction is so great that conscientious knowledge of the norm disappears. One who always pursues pleasure will consider pleasure his greatest good and without hesitation or further deliberation go after what brings him the greatest amount of immediate satisfaction of his need<sup>50</sup>.

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2: „Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis quod bonum est faciendum ac prosequendum et malum vitandum. Et supra hoc fundantur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae”.

<sup>46</sup> *E. nic.*, VI 12, 1144 a 31-36.

<sup>47</sup> *In VI Ethic.*, l. 11, n. 1273.

<sup>48</sup> *In VII Ethic.*, l. 4, n. 1347.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, l. 6, 1388-1389.

Several commentators argue that, according to Aristotle, the syllogism is the normal way of deliberation in our moral choices, but other authors have a different view<sup>51</sup>. St. Thomas for his part is convinced that in every choice a syllogism is used, either in an explicit or in a hidden way. The major proposition formulates the end (frequently subordinate ends) which corresponds with the virtues, as in the example of a drink being offered: when I am going to drive home from the party I must be sober. The drink offered would affect my capacity to drive a car. So I abstain.

The example shows how important it is to possess the virtues which are ordained to the end. Thomas speaks of the right *intentio finis*. He means the secondary ends such as „staying healthy“, fulfilling one's social duties“, etc. Virtues, in particular the virtue of prudence<sup>52</sup>, dispose us to seek the correct ends<sup>53</sup>. One who does not have the virtues, when placed before a decision, will reason in a different way.

The intellect and the appetite collaborate in our choices and decisions. The intellect's judgment must be true and the appetite inclined to the good, so that it approves what the intellect proposes regarding the means needed to reach a subordinate end. The intellect in its turn is guided in its judgments by the fundamental inclinations of our human nature. The order of the will to the good is the basis of our moral life in so far as this order is formulated by the intellect and finds expression in the first principles of moral life.

When the intellect is guided by this order to the good, strengthened by the different virtues, it formulates correctly which are the proper means to reach the good of the various subordinated ends. Acquisition of the virtues is a condition for a morally good life<sup>54</sup>. Without the presence of the virtues ethics is of little use. Education and training are of overruling importance.

Ethics considers human actions from the point of view of their being directed to an end. In the second place it applies principles and rules which indicate the road to be followed and the means to be used. In this respect the role of prudence is of the greatest importance. But the road to be followed can differ for different persons and also according to the circumstances in which they must act. This variety

<sup>51</sup> Cf.: W. F. R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, Oxford 1968, 240–257.

<sup>52</sup> *In I Ethic.*, l. 16, n. 189.

<sup>53</sup> *In VI Ethic.*, l. 10, n. 1269.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, l. 3, n. 40.

implies that total certitude about what is best to do cannot always be reached<sup>55</sup>.

## THE INTELLECTUALISTIC CHARACTER OF AQUINAS' ETHICS

As was explained above the intellect formulates the first principles of the moral order. As St. Thomas observes, by its very nature the human will is inclined to act in agreement with the intellect, that is to act virtuously<sup>56</sup>. Since it is the intellect's vocation to direct man's life, the other faculties in their activities must follow the intellect. Consequently St. Thomas formulates this rule: the good of man is to be in agreement with reason<sup>57</sup>.

However, human nature is characterized by a certain duality. Man has much in common with animals, but he also possesses the mind which enables him to distinguish what is right (*honestum*) and what is wrong (*turpe*)<sup>58</sup>. As he grows up man must learn to free himself from the domination of emotions and desires by subjecting them to the rule of reason. In a virtuous person reason and sensitive nature have become a unity. However, the opposite also happens, so that one's reason is entirely dominated by passions, although there always remains some space for free choice<sup>59</sup>. In this case reason is in the service of unchecked passions<sup>60</sup>. If the desire to satisfy our sensitive nature is no longer subject to the control of reason, it is not an expression of our true nature, since human nature and natural inclinations never direct us to what is morally bad<sup>61</sup>. Aquinas assumes as self understood the distinction between man's reasonable nature and nature in

<sup>55</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 94, a. 4: „In operativis non est eadem veritas vel rectitudo practica apud omnes quantum ad propria”.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, a. 3: „Cum anima rationalis sit propria forma hominis, naturalis inclinatio inest cuilibet homini ad hoc quod agat secundum rationem et hoc est agere secundum virtutem”.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, II-II, q. 47, a. 6. Cf.: *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 13, a. 1: „Bonum hominis est secundum rationem vivere”.

<sup>58</sup> *In V Ethic.*, l. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 10, a. 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, II-II, q. 135, a. 1 ad 2.

<sup>61</sup> *In VII Ethic.*, l. 13: „Unde id quod invenitur in omnibus aut in pluribus, videtur esse ex inclinatione naturae, quae non inclinatur neque ad malum neque ad falsum”. This statement is of great importance. Many authors in Thomas' day and in later ages considered it unacceptable.

so far as he has it in common with animals: acting against the good of man's organism or of one of its parts may sometimes benefit his higher nature. Things outside are subordinated to the human body, but the body is to reason<sup>62</sup>.

Virtues enable us to perform actions in agreement with the good of our nature<sup>63</sup>. Vices, on the other hand, lead us to act against our nature, because they are opposed to reason<sup>64</sup>.

To signify virtuous and sinful acts Thomas prefers to use the expressions „according to reason” and „opposed to reason” instead of „according to nature” and „against nature”<sup>65</sup>. Reason knows the good of man, his end and it formulates which actions are in agreement with the end and which are not<sup>66</sup>. The good of a being consists in the correspondence of its actions with its essential nature. Man's essence is to be a rational animal. Hence his actions will be good if they correspond to the right insight of his mind. To deviate from it is to act contrary to one's nature<sup>67</sup>. The expression „acting against nature” is mainly used to qualify actions which are against human nature, in so far as it coincides with that of the animals, as is the case with sodomy<sup>68</sup>.

As appears from the above for Aquinas human nature with its most fundamental inclinations is the source of the moral qualification of our actions. With regard to those acts that go beyond our immediate needs, reason must determine which agree and which do not agree with our nature. Since human nature has been created by God, St. Thomas can conclude that whatever is conform to the order of reason belongs to the order established by God himself<sup>69</sup>. Reason, indeed, is the measure of morality<sup>70</sup>. The acts of the intellect and the will must agree with the right insight of reason, but reason must also direct us in executing our decisions. To give an example, when following up the

<sup>62</sup> *S. th.*, II-II, q. 152, a. 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, q. 23, a. 3: „Virtus moralis definitur per hoc quod est secundum rationem rectam”. Cf.: *ibidem*, q. 123, a. 1: „Ad virtutem humanam pertinet ut faciat hominem et opus eius secundum rationem esse”.

<sup>64</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 54, a. 3: „[...] cum sint contra rationem”.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, q. 18, a. 5 ad 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, q. 19, a. 3.

<sup>67</sup> *In II Ethic.*, l. 2.

<sup>68</sup> *S. th.*, II-II, q. 154, a. 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, I-II, q. 72, a. 4: „Quaecumque continentur sub ordine rationis, continentur sub ordine ipsius Dei”.

<sup>70</sup> C. G., III, c. 3: „Moralium mensura est ratio”.

inclination to perform a good deed, such as helping the poor, an inclination proper to the virtue of pity, we must nevertheless take into account the circumstances and examine if and how we should help. This examination belongs to the virtue of prudence which suggests which are the actions that, in the changing circumstances of life, make us reach the good, our happiness, and which means we should use, an enormous and never ending task facing human reason.

The doctrine of reason as determining the morality of our acts is the very center of Aquinas' ethics. Even if it is true that Aristotle and, to a certain extent, Plato prepared this doctrine, St. Thomas has developed it in a way proper to him. Reason as the cause of the morality of our acts must not be seen as a self-sufficient and arrogant power, for it remains dependent on the order of nature. Aquinas' doctrine should not be confounded with theories of the age of the Enlightenment which made the mind of each human individual, detached from human nature, the decisive factor<sup>71</sup>. Reason formulates the first principles of the moral order on the basis of the fundamental inclinations of man's nature. We have to do with a natural structure which shows what must be done. The first principles of the practical intellect depend on these natural inclinations and in this way the *ought* follows the *is*. Reason notices that something is a good for us because it is in agreement with our fundamental inclinations. Then it determines which means lead to the end, and which actions remove us from it. In carrying out this task reason relies on the virtue of prudence. In its turn prudence makes use of the other moral virtues we acquired by education, personal efforts and practice. Prudence also avails of our own experience and that of other people. In this way right reason, *ratio recta*, is not a faculty which reasons *in abstracto*, but the practical intellect which collaborates with the will and the virtues. It is an expression of the free human person<sup>72</sup>.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ST. THOMAS'S ETHICS FOR OUR TIME

Our age is marked by pluralism: there are divergent views of what is moral and immoral; the past consensus about Christian moral principles has disappeared from public morality. By public morality we

<sup>71</sup> Cf.: F. U t z, *Deutsche Thomasausgabe*, Bd. 18, p. 360.

<sup>72</sup> Cf.: L. E l d e r s, *Bonum humanae animae est secundum rationem esse*, „Lugano Theological Review“ 1999, p. 75–90.

mean the set of rules of conduct which prevails in a certain society. From the eighteenth century philosophers have held different views with regard to the criteria of morality: utilitarian, deontological, esthetical, emotional and natural law theories circulated among the intelligentsia. However, in daily life people accepted the traditional criteria, inspired mostly by Christianity. Since the end of World War II important changes took place in respect of what people consider right or wrong. As regards what is called macro-morality criteria have become stricter than in the past. People accept a certain responsibility for the preservation of animal and botanic species as well as the duty to fight the pollution of our natural environment. There is also a certain measure of agreement concerning our common task to assist people in underdeveloped countries, the promotion of human rights and the need to fight corruption of public officials. Even influential persons in high positions can now be summoned to appear in court and persecuted for crimes against human rights. Despite certain qualifications these views are in general a great improvement, due to education, the insistence of the media on these points and the fear of being unmasked now that judges have begun to persecute dishonesty and cruelty of leading politicians and business tycoons.

Besides this progress one notices real regress on the level of private morality. Extreme subjectivism makes some people neglect the objective character of our obligations. Individual man makes himself and his desires the measuring rod of what he is allowed to do. Objective duties are forgotten. Such institutions as the family and the state are in crisis. Personal conscience, detached from all ties with morals and nature, becomes the highest authority which declares what is good and what bad. Many choose free forms of cohabitation above marriage, experiment with free love or homosexual activity, and consider freedom from all obligations their highest value. Personal convenience is enough reason to refuse having children or to kill the unborn human being. People believe to have an unlimited right to dispose of their own bodies, a right which extends from genetic manipulations to suicide and active euthanasia. Faithfulness to others has become an exotic attitude, since we do not know what our feelings and instincts will be next month. People live in the „now“ of immediate satisfaction. Thefts, violence, public insecurity and drug abuse have increased in an alarming way.

The changes in moral norms are also partly the effect of the technological revolution, increased contacts with people in countries of different customs, the changes in society, increased affluence which allows to spend considerable amounts of money on purposes other than the

immediate needs of daily life, the changing nature of work in which one no longer feels integrated, the emancipation of women, the possibilities provided by modern science and medicine to effect modification in the human organism, etc. One of the most important developments is the disruption of the natural connection between sexuality and procreation and the resulting idea that any form of sexual praxis is acceptable.

We are now living in the world dominated by technology with the result that the language of nature, which to a great extent is also that of ethics, is no longer understood. Facing complexities of modern life, aware of the demands made on him, seeing the numerous things over which he has no command, man feels himself powerless and consequently not responsible. Parents and educators are discouraged and let things go because they cannot impose their principles and fight the influences their children are exposed to<sup>73</sup>. The decline of religious life, caused by the factors mentioned above, leads in its turn to a further weakening of traditional morality.

Aristotle speaks of pleasure that has suspected sources<sup>74</sup>. At present many expose without shame their immoral conduct. Doubts are voiced about the value of ethics. According to one opinion moral theory is a product of man's social life and is bound to differ according to the culture and historical period in which people live. Others hold that far from being able to formulate universally valid norms, we can only collect facts about the way certain groups of people actually conduct themselves and to deduct from them some recommendations<sup>75</sup>. There is a widespread opinion that consensus in ethical questions is no longer possible and that one should abandon the ideal of a commonly held moral doctrine. Traditional morality is regarded by many as a *Fremdkörper*, which has its place in a museum but not in the modern world.

One understands these criticisms better, if one keeps in mind that in the past moral doctrine has often been presented as a set of rules and prohibitions, imposed from the outside on man, reminding him of his duties, but restricting his freedom. It was also said that traditional morality did not see much positive value in sexuality and led to repressed feelings. The same objections are also voiced against tradition-

---

<sup>73</sup> The point is argued very well by M. Anselme in his *La morale retrouvée*, Paris 1998 (éditions Dangles).

<sup>74</sup> *E. nic.*, 1173 b 28.

<sup>75</sup> See: F. D a g o n e t, *Une nouvelle morale*, Paris 1998.

al moral theology as it was currently taught until the Second Vatican Council. There was frequently question of „is it allowed” and of casuistry. Scarce attention was paid to the present ethical doctrine as an invitation to seek the beauty of a life according to the virtues.

On the other hand, the difficult situation described above has also led some to look for greater certitude as to man’s purpose in life and the best conduct to be adopted. We cannot do away with our human nature and time and again the fundamental principles of moral behavior light up in our conscience. J. H. Newman made a striking comparison with the reflection of the mountains on the surface of a Swiss lake. The wind and the waves chase it away, but when the calm weather returns one sees again the image of the mountains on the water. Insight in our fundamental obligations returns when hyperactivity comes to rest and the storms of the passions fall silent.

Many of us feel the need of rules of conduct to help live in a way worthy of man. But where to find this sort of guidance? Do we have to make our search starting from the present situation of Western man and try to formulate some practical rules in order to secure peaceful coexistence with others? Or are we looking for true knowledge about man’s last end so that we can conduct our life under the guidance of right reason? Do we need help in our task of educating the young? The ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas will provide us this assistance.

The ethics of Aquinas is not only a very intelligent doctrine which stresses our personal responsibility – we must establish rules of conduct as free men in conformity with our human nature and see to it that our actions are always reasonable – but Aquinas directs our attention also to our last end, happiness, reminding us that the practice of the virtues is the road to this end. According to Aquinas the virtues (a) give unity and coherence to our actions. Our will and appetite move into all possible directions if they do not acquire a certain stability by the virtues. (b) The virtues enable us to act swiftly with a certain perfection. One who does not possess the virtues must each time deliberate carefully what to do in a particular situation. (c) Acting according to the virtues also gives us pleasure, for virtues are stable dispositions in accordance with our nature. For this reason, acting according to the virtues provides pleasure<sup>76</sup>.

---

<sup>76</sup> *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 1: „[...] ad tria indiget: primo ut sit uniformitas in operatione [...]; secundo, ut operatio perfecta in promptu habeatur [...]; tertio, ut delectabiliter perfecta operatio compleatur”.

Virtues are acquired by the repetition of right acts. Youth is the best time to begin practicing the virtues, a process which needs to be supported by education and a certain discipline, as Aristotle pointed out<sup>77</sup>. Some simple examples show that this is right. In order to become an experienced pianist one should start practicing from early youth onward and a certain discipline is needed to persevere. This applies also to the learning of a foreign language. The joy to be able to play well or to speak such a language fluently will be experienced only much later.

What has been lacking in Western culture over the past years is a certain measure of discipline, in particular in education. Some believed that a change in educational policy was necessary. In their view children must be treated as adults and should not be forced at all. John Dewey argued that the theory which considers education to be the preparation of children for adult life is wrong and noxious<sup>78</sup>. But his theory has not brought us any real benefit. When children do not receive clear guidance, they are abandoned to their more superficial inclinations and feelings. It becomes also much more difficult for them to acquire a treasure of solid knowledge in history, geography, languages and the sciences. This is what is happening in Western countries.

The ethics of St. Thomas stresses education in the virtues and will be an important contribution to a renewed discovery of moral values. There are those who say that a doctrine, formulated more than 700 years ago, has little to say in a totally changed world. The answer is that man remains man, is made of the same components as his ancestors, must reach the same end and acquit himself of the same duties. New possibilities, problems and demands of contemporary society, which have brought about far reaching changes in our way of life, concern the application or further elaboration of certain norms. In this way the period in which one lives may have a certain influence on the elaboration of norms. But this does not contradict those fundamental rules which receive their lasting value from what man is<sup>79</sup>.

<sup>77</sup> E. nic., 1103 a 14 f. In *Politics* 1334 b 8–9 Aristotle raises the question of whether the young must be educated by arguments or by habituation. As Plato had done before him he privileges the formation of habits.

<sup>78</sup> J. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, New York 1955, p. 147.

<sup>79</sup> See our *L' historicisme en théologie morale*, in: *Persona, verità e morale. Atti del Congresso internazionale di teologia morale (Roma, 7-12 aprile 1986)*, Città Nuova, Roma 1988, p. 51–59.