aquinas

on ethics and moral education in contemporary times

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Abstract

There are two things that this paper endeavors to do. One, this paper intends to make an honest attempt in revisiting the Thomist notion of virtues and related ideas such as reason, practical wisdom, prudence, and the natural law, as well as the connection between and among the said concepts, most importantly how reason allows a human person to determine the 'good' in particular cases in one's life. The paper advances the position that Aquinas's contribution to the grand narrative of ethical discourse cannot be discounted and his version of the 'good' remains relevant and timely.

Following the exposition on the nature of what is ethical, the second part of the paper has to do with how reason and practical wisdom directly leads one to the acquisition of the 'good' and how this model apparently can be made a centerpiece in moral education. It is proposed that the medieval view propounded by Aquinas may be used as a guide in contemporary philosophy of education, specifically, in moral education. This definitely is one of the many ways on how the ideas that were borne out of the medieval cathedrals may still be of use in deciphering the puzzles of the contemporary world.

Keywords

Thomistic ethics, practical wisdom, virtues, natural law, contemporary education

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> Custom, especially if it dates from our childhood, acquires the force of nature, the result being that the mind holds those things with which it was imbued from childhood as firmly as if they were self-evident.
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> – *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib, 1, cap. XI

Setting the Stage

My aims in this paper are twofold. Neatly dividing them on the basis of focus, my initial intent has to do with an honest attempt to revisit the Thomist notion of virtues and the place that this has occupied in the history of thought. Instigated by the positions forwarded by M.W.F. Stone,[1] I advance the stance that Aquinas has a unique contribution to the grand edifice of ethical discourse and to the extensive literature on the role of reason in the determination of the good. Following from the nature of what is ethical as a response to reason, my second aim has to do with the symbiosis between reason and the good in Aquinas and how this can be made a fulcrum for a progressive societal program. I propose that the medieval view of virtues espoused by Aquinas can possibly be appropriated in contemporary life, more specifically, in programs in virtue education. Having established the direct link between reason and virtues, Aquinas has opened the possibility for a program that allows for the flourishing of individuals by honing reason, and as a consequence, deriving virtues. This, I reckon, is one of the best ways where the verities of Thomas Aquinas's concepts and products of philosophizing can be made relevant in contemporary times.

The Relevance of Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas has been relegated, for the most part, almost into oblivion by philosophers of recent times. "Secularization, among many reasons, catalyzed this change in his stature in the philosophical quarters. Some even think that medieval philosophers have of little value to offer men of contemporary life. Referring to medieval philosophers,

[1] Against the common conception that Aquinas is merely Aristotelian in his treatment of ethics, Stone argues for the profound difference in position of the two on ethics. In the process, he also highlights the most important aspects of Aquinas's theory of ethics and natural law. For a complete elucidation of his article, please see M.W.F. Stone, "The Angelic Doctor and the Stagirite: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary 'Aristotelian' Ethics," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Vol. 101 (2001), 97-128.

Copleston earlier points out that "it is widely felt that their general outlook and their general ways of thinking about the world are obsolete and their philosophical systems have passed away with the culture to which they belonged."[2] It is in the background of this arguably mistaken view that it is also implicitly or explicitly assumed that the writings of a medieval philosopher like Aquinas has nothing to contribute to the present-day issues and problems. From the zenith of repute and respect in medieval times, Aquinas has been forced to resign from the stage to give way to other paradigms and modes of thought in philosophy. In the sphere of the science of morality, for instance, Aquinas is hardly mentioned as a giant, alongside Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and McIntyre, anymore — a figure whom students should attempt to climb and stand onto to enable them to view the wider panorama of the ethical landscape. Stone comments that "[f]or most of the twentieth century the ethical thought of Thomas Aquinas was considered marginal to the interests and direction of English-speaking moral philosophy."[3] This is a misfortune, in my opinion. The thoughts of Thomas Aquinas are as alive as it used to be when the gothic interiors of the 13th century churches and the grand halls of the universities were illumed by nothing else but his light.

There is, however, hope in the resurgence of looking at Aquinas, not just as a Catholic Theologian, but as a philosopher. Part of the reason is his sustenance and a fair share of reinterpretation of Aristotle's ethics. The past decades have seen a return to the grand tradition in ethics attributable to Aristotle from a historical perspective, virtue ethics. Tired of technical and arid modern ethical schools that also failed in delivering what they purport to, a reexamination of virtue has been on the rise. A number of philosophers have advocated for a return to a study of virtue "because modern moral philosophy is bankrupt and that, in order to salvage the subject, a return to Aristotle's way of thinking has to be revisited.[4] It was Elizabeth Anscombe who initiated this movement. Her 1958 article entitled "Modern Moral Philosophy" in the academic journal *Philosophy* suggests that "modern moral philosophy is misguided because it rests on the incoherent notion of a "law" without a lawgiver. The very concepts of obligation, duty, and rightness, on which modern moral philosophers have concentrated, are inextricably linked to this nonsensical notion."[5] She advises therefore a return to Aristotle's approach. A return to Aristotle and if one takes him to be following the former's lead, Aquinas, may be both helpful in culling the gems of the ancient and medieval world that may still be applicable in the present time.

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[2] Frederick C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Baltimore: Penguin books, Ltd., 1955), 16.

[3] Stone, "The Angelic Doctor and the Stagirite," 97.

[4] James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2003), 174.

[5] Cited in Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 15.

Aquinas on the Good

Aquinas specifies that the acts human agents perform are moral acts, which is why the theory of them is moral theory. This presupposes a distinction that Aquinas makes between human acts *[actus humani)* and acts of a human being *(actus hominis)*. The proper human acts qua human are those that are called such because they are directed to a particular end, either the good, or happiness. Human acts are what human agents do and as such are the proper objects of the moral. Human acts are those that humans intend and emanate from the will. Consider the difference Socrates aging and Socrates eating. The former is not within the control and is certainly not intended by Socrates but is attributable to him. This is certainly an act of a human being, but is not a human act. Socrates eating is an instance of a truly human act because his eating certainly comes from his wanting to eat, presumably because of a particular end (whether simple quench of hunger or happiness) that the agent (Socrates) has in doing the action. The acts of a human being are acts performed by a human being; they are "those activities truly ascribable to a human agent but not as such, not as a human agent."[6] Human acts, on the other hand, are those that proceed from deliberate will. "It is the mark of the human act that it is undertaken for the sake of an end, with an eye to some good, to bring something about."[7] Human acts define the realm of morality.

A preliminary note, however, is in order before I proceed. It may be easy to simply dismiss Aquinas and state blatantly that his allegiance to a particular religion, his being a theologian, diminishes his *gravitas* as a philosopher who may be free from biases. A careful reconsideration however, of his writings simply does not buttress this position and reduction.

In order to take away this seeming bias, it has to be laid down at the outset where the supposed partiality lies. In his account of happiness, clear is his adherence. He says: "Happiness consists in an operation of the speculative rather than of the practical intellect."[8] He goes on to provide three reasons for this.

"First because if man's happiness is an operation, it must be man's highest operation. Now man's highest operation is that of his highest power in respect of his highest object, and his highest power is the intellect, whose highest object is the Divine Good, which is the object not of the practical, but of the speculative intellect."[9] Aquinas

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[6] Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 8.

[7] Ibid., 13.

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd Edition (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, Ltd., 1964), q. 3, a.5 res. From here on, I will refer to the *Summa Theologiae* as ST.

[9] ST I-II q. 3, a.5 res.

thinks that since the Divine Good is the *telos* of Man, the highest form of happiness can only be attained in the great acquisition of this encounter with the Divine. This encounter cannot be provided by practical intellect, but only by speculative reason.

He likewise mentions as a justification that contemplation is sought for the sake of itself alone and not of something else, unlike the practical intellect. Speculative intellect is engaged in for its own sake and innate purpose, unlike the instrumental nature of the use of practical reason.

Thirdly, he says, it is in contemplative life that "man has something in common with the things above him, namely, with God and the angels. . . ."[10] This gradation of human beings has been laid down clearly in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Man occupies a special position in the taxonomy of beings because man lies in between angels and other divine beings below God and animals just below man.

It may be true that the crux of happiness can be found in the grace of the Divine. However, Aquinas recognizes that as man maneuvers into and around the world, happiness can also be attained, no matter how imperfect this happiness may be. Practical reason occupies a salient place in how he attempts to ground ethics, because he concedes that in some areas of existence, speculative reason cannot and is not always present. "Like Aristotle, Thomas conceives ethics as a practical study (*scientia practica)*, being an organized type of knowledge leading to certain highly generalized judgments about what is right and what is wrong, good and true, in human activity."[11] Aquinas's ethics is not concerned with specific, everyday concerns. This is left to the sphere of prudence and conscience. His concern is more general practices which eventually are specified and analyzed in the context of localized context. It is therefore incumbent upon the practical reason to exercise diligence in bringing us happiness, through the natural law.

Aquinas's treatment of practical reason (*ratio practica)* is found in his discussion of the *lex naturalis* (natural law) found at *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94. "[T]he precepts of the natural law are to the practical reason what the first principles of demonstrations are to the speculative reason; because both are self-evident principles."[12] Aquinas thinks that practical reason is manifested in man through his recognition of the natural law. In so far as speculative reason luminously surface in man through his appeal to the first principles (these have been thoroughly dealt with by Aristotle in *Metaphysics*), we also draw closer to practical reason by our acknowledgement of the natural law as a self-evident principle in man. "[T]he first principle in the practical reason is one founded in the notion of good, namely, that the good is what all desire… that good is to be pursued and done, and evil is

[10] Ibid.

[11] Stone, "The Angelic Doctor and the Stagirite," 104.

[12] ST I-II q. 94, a.2 res.

to be avoided."[13] Everything else follows from this axiom. All actions and objects apprehended by the practical reason are sorted out between the two categories of that which is to be done and that which is to be avoided. Does this therefore make Thomas a black or white person when it comes to ethics, as what some might allege?

"Thomistic ethics is concerned with general practices . . . which are then specified and evaluated in the context of particular cases. As this involves formulating universal principles, the task of practical reasoning is to make these principles specific in order that they can meet the assorted requirements of particular cases."[14] For Aquinas, individual ethical acts are not simply prescribed. Particular actions do not carry within them the judgment of whether or not they are good. It is the task of practical reason to determine whether or not a particular act is good or not. "For many things are done virtuously to which nature does not incline at first, but which, through the inquiry of reason, have been found by men to be conducive to well-living."[15]

How is the determination of the good done, then? What sort of barometer is to be applied and utilized in order to yield a clear-cut demarcation of what is good and what is otherwise? Aquinas is clear: "Law is a rule and measure of acts, by which man is induced to act or is restrained from acting; for *lex* (law) is derived from *ligare* (to bind), because it obliges (*obligare)* one to act. Now the rule and measure of human acts is reason, which is the first principle of human acts . . . for it belongs to the reason to direct to the end, which is the first principle in all matters of action. . . ."[16] Participation in the natural law means recognition of the first principles of practical reason and inclination towards the good.

Reason is what makes man legislate laws. Reason is what makes man recognize what is good. Reason is what forces man to face up to what is apparent. Reason is the referee that calls the shots in the game called life. "Reason in every domain is the rule and measure of what is done. If the law is truly nothing more than the formulation of this rule, it appears at once as an obligation based on the demands of reason. Law is a decree that is at least based on custom and is in accord with universal conscience. The decrees of an unreasonable tyrant can usurp the name of laws, but they can never be true laws. When reason is wanting, there is neither law nor equity but sheer iniquity."[17] Natural law is a true concoction of an informed reason. As such, only the same can recognize the correct application of the said law.

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[13] ST I-II q. 94, a.2 res.

[14] Stone, "The Angelic Doctor and the Stagirite," 105.

[15] ST I-II q. 94, a.3 res.

[16] ST I-II q. 90, a.1 res.

[17] Etienne Gilson, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence Shook and Armand Maurer (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2002), 302.

Every man is inclined to what is proper to man, including reason. Reason is the driving force in doing what is right, according to natural law. The natural law, however, does not prescribe specific cases of actions because it assumes that the general rule provided for by the law should be an enough guide in determining specific actions in specific situations. "The practical reason . . . is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned; and consequently, although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail the more frequently we encounter defects."[18] Experience, my reading of Aquinas, is what hones and sharpens our reason and capacity for discernment.

Indeed, no one set of actions is right and good, for Aquinas. Specific, case-to-case moments propel reason to determine the right course of action to take. ". . . [W]e must say that the natural law, as to first common principles, is the same for all, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge. But as to certain matters of detail, which are conclusions, as it were of those common principles, it is the same for all in the majority of cases, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge."[19] In other words, for Aquinas, because circumstances and contexts differ, moral wind vane may also change its swing depending on the blow and the current of air. Determination of what is good and the kind of action appropriate for any given moment and situation will also be delegated to the individual person and not to an overarching "moral imperative". "From this it follows that we should expect degrees of variation in the natural law as it is expressed in its secondary precepts."[20]

Moral force is not the same as metaphysical force. Aquinas admits that what is true of the demonstrative science is not true of moral science. For one, the kind of universality applicable to demonstrative science, say in mathematics, cannot be discovered in the realm of ethics. Principles drawn in ethics may only generally apply, but particular circumstances will still dictate what specific turn is most befitting any given circumstance. Aquinas "reasons that a situation could arise in which a specific precept dictated a course of action that collided with what a more primary standing precept required in that situation."[21] Morally correct acts are never absolute because circumstances can always change and transform, switching the right application and employment of moral principles.

There are also general reasons why morality may be very varied for individuals. Fallibility of man in terms of the different aspects and elements of his life may be seen as determinants of his tendency towards the natural law. His passions, discussed at length by

[18] ST I-II q. 94, a.4 res.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Stone, "The Angelic Doctor and the Stagirite," 114.

[21] Ibid., 111.

Aquinas in ST I-II q. 22-25, can sway him towards a different direction from his reason. Man must constantly strive to keep his passion at bay to make sure that reason reigns until the end. Aquinas also notes that some men have their sense of reason and practical insight developed fairly differently from others. Some may hold wrong convictions as a result of wrong reason both on the level of theoretical and practical spheres of thought. Finally, Aquinas also concurs with Aristotle, in accepting that some externalities can also influence man's moral insight such as economic situation or even family affairs.

But even as it were, Aquinas still thinks that it is highly possible for man to attain a certain level of state where reason, practical reason will arise and dictate what man should do in any particular circumstance. "Thomas thinks that as the primary precepts of natural law are universal yet highly general principles, these principles can only be translated to the level of action by agents specifying and further specifying what they can concede to these principles in particular cases."[22] Aquinas does not belong then to the highbrow moderns who suppose that they can spell out what is moral using formulas and calculations that are meant to reduce actions into mathematical statements of right and wrong. To Aquinas, even as the good is found nowhere else but in the Divine, the Divine has infused the human mind to go through the world discovering what is right according to his own situation and context. Indeed, Stone wraps up his treatise on Thomist ethics by stating that the "principles of the natural law are designed to appeal to the intellect, upholding the divine origin and order of the universe without elimination or contradicting our experience of rational freedom and without discarding the peculiarities of our experience."[23] Therefore, in Thomas Aquinas, our freedom to seek happiness and good is preserved. But how do we concretize the kind of abstraction that the natural law provides?

Towards a Moral Community of Thinkers

Aquinas affirms that it is in local experiences that one gets the chance to test and to hone one's reason. It is only in the constancy of exposure to peculiar experiences that one obtains the capacity to single out what is right and is wrong, that one gets a sense of what is good and what is bad. How do we actualize this goal of educating our 'reason' to be fully prepared for the different eventualities that the moral world might throw our way? Can this be done within schools? Or is sharpening the rough edges of the moral sword best left undisturbed by the school?

I am a believer that the school is a very huge influence in how the world will eventually be, because of the huge role that the former plays in shaping the future

[22] Ibid., 123.
[23] Ibid., 124.

citizens of the latter. Pope Francis himself once noted, "[n]o one is unaware that education is one of the principal pillars for this reconstruction of the sense of community, although it cannot be dissociated from other equally fundamental dimensions like the economic and the political. . . . For this reason, I do not think I am exaggerating if I affirm that *any project that does not put education in a priority position will simply be 'more of the same'*."[24] The whole culture of schooling, sometimes reduced to the whole mafia of certification, is actually a training for the world and knowing how to go about the world, with all its beauty, spots, and cruelties.

If Aquinas affirms that being good involves the utility of reason in discerning what sort of action is right given individual situations, then the task of the school is not to impose its own list of what is right and what is wrong, but to provide an able ground for the exploration of the kind of freedom that is innate in each one of us. It is the task of the school to provide a safe haven for moral experimentation, testing of waters, and taking chances, all in the grand hope that by undergoing such, the self will be more aware of the limits of goodness that the natural law allows. If being good is actually being cognizant of different circumstances and going about and around these circumstances to uphold what is good and what the natural law bids, then the school has the primary role of exposing students to these different circumstances and situations that have the potential of sharpening the crude edges of these students' moral judgments. The school is principally tasked to provide different atmospheres that will allow students to cast their nets into the real world. The primary task of the school is to provide this chance, no matter how unrefined and unnatural the kind of mimicked set-up is.

Aristotle mentions *phronimos* as the kind of man who has harnessed practical wisdom in its generous amounts. "Aristotle tells us that virtuous action is the action that the person of practical wisdom would choose. That person is one and the same as the person of good character, who in turn is the person who has a full complement of virtues or excellent states of character."[25] A *phronimos* is someone who is immersed in real-life action and is well aware of how to act virtuously in any given situation. It takes a certain length of life before a *phronimos* becomes actualized. This is of course brought about by the demand for varying situations and events in one's life that can shape one's character along side the thrust of practical reason. The *phronimos* is the kind of man in Aquinas whose practical reason is honed and is familiar with different specific situations that test one's acquaintance with the natural law. How can the school provide some form of

[24] Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Education for Choosing Life: Proposal for Difficult Times* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 44-45.

[25] Nancy Sherman, "Character Development and Aristotelian Virtue," in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, ed. David Carr and Jan Steutel (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 36.

training for life so that time spent in school becomes advantageous, hastening the process of accumulating life lessons?

There is a famous fable that is usually attributed to Aesop. A number of versions in different cultures also appear. Let me briefly retell here the story of the boy and the filberts. The story goes that there was a boy who put his hand into a container full of filberts. He tried to get as many filberts as he could and so when he pulled out his hand from the container, the narrow neck of the container prevented him from taking out his hand. He was so frustrated because of his dilemma: he wanted to withdraw his hand from the container yet doing so required him to let go of his filberts, something he wasn't willing to do. There was a bystander who saw him and advised him, "let go of half of the filberts and you will be able to take out your hand from the container." A *phronimos* is someone who will know how many filberts will allow him to still withdraw his hand while at the same time provide him with the reward that he so wants. This skill involves going through the same motion of getting your hand inside the jar over and over again.

Another educational philosophy that we can glean from a reading of Aquinas is this: that schools should inform us on how to reason well. Attaining what is moral is a function of lubricating one's practical reason and assuring that it is up to the task of determining what is right in any given circumstance. The school therefore is tasked, not just to provide us with ample supply of situations and set-ups for our moral experiments. It should also provide a steady flow of exercises for the mind to allow it to grow in the process of reasoning and deduction. The quick-paced decision-making involved in moral dilemmas includes the discipline that only in a mind that's used to decision-making can be found. The school is also tasked to supply the necessary training ground for such a mind.

Thirdly, the school, in complementing the home, I think, is tasked to supply the needed exemplars for the young. These models generate the variation of human spirit that young people can learn from, choose idols from, and squeeze out qualities that they want to emulate from. Role models provide the perfect opportunity to indirectly imbue virtues that direct instruction may not successfully impart.

In another paper, I have stated that teachers indirectly concede to the task of providing moral exemplars to their students as the most effective way of inculcating virtues to their students. "Fenstermacher mentions three different ways on how teachers may do this (inculcating virtues). First, they can be directive, teaching morality outright. Secondly, they may also teach *about* morality. Lastly, the teacher may choose to act morally, holding up oneself as a possible model."[26] Teaching virtues outright will only result into half-baked learning as this may be seen as indoctrinating. Merely exposing students to ethical frameworks (which the second method, teaching about morality, may

[26] Bernardo Caslib, Jr., "On the Nature of Ethics for Teachers," *Philippine Social Sciences Review*, Vol. 66 No. 1 (2014): 67-90.

entail) on the other hand, does not convert rude students to moral ones. "Moral education has a preference for 'learning by observation' and 'repetition and affirmation' in contrast from 'learning from books, words, and papers'."[27] It is only in the presence of these models that young men can see through cases of real people acting on different circumstances that they themselves can experience. This is where learning of what reasonable action might be can arise.

Most importantly, an education that provides ample opportunity to talk and to discuss is a kind of education that provides the students the chance to go through the creases of everyday practice of reason. "It is now widely agreed that educators have no business inculcating moral views in the classroom. According to many philosophers and educational theorists, all attempts to influence students' moral behavior through exhortation and personal example are indoctrinative and should give way to more discursive efforts to guide children in developing their own values."[28] Without the opportunity to interact and share insights, education might only result into demagogues who are convinced of their own postulations. A real effective education is one that allows for clashes in interpretation of data, for intellectual skirmishes brought about by differences in positions made, and for sharing of insights no matter how seemingly discrete and differentiated these insights may be. An effective education is one that recognizes that "knowledge should be seen as a cultural construct which should be viewed within the cultural context in which it was taught and acquired. Knowledge, therefore, could not have universal features that could lead to the assessment of its quality transnationally."[29]

Lastly, an effective virtue education is one that teaches respect among every one and that does not absolutize any moral precepts, allowing for the liberty in finding out the best application of one's practical reason in getting closer to the Divine.

With Aquinas's emphasis on ethics as a sphere of freedom, of truly human action, no other philosophy of education can emerge from his ideas but one that cradles this freedom and shepherds men into the fullness of this freedom: the good.

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[27] Ibid.

[28] George Sher and William J. Bennett, "Moral Education and Indoctrination," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79, No. 11 (Nov. 1992): 665.

[29] Jo Cairns, "Moral, Ethics and Citizenship in Contemporary Teaching," in *Education for Values: Morals, Ethics and Citizenship in Contemporary Teaching*, ed. Roy Gardner, Ho Cairns, and Denis Lawton (Great Britain: Kogan Page Limited, 2000), 8.

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