To 'go beyond'. Or decode the Christic symbol beyond any traditional morality. To read, in it, the fruit of the covenant between word and nature, between *logos* and *cosmos*. A marriage that has never been consummated and that the spirit, in Mary, would renew?
The spirit? Not, this time, the product of the love between Father and son, but the universe already made flesh or capable of becoming flesh, and remaining in excess to the existing world.
Grace that speaks silently through and beyond the word?

The strange affinity between Irigaray's metaphors and the gender symbolism of recent papal thinking certainly isolates the equal rights feminism of a self-styled 'liberal' Catholic like Schüssler Fiorenza. Whether any compromise is possible between her 'discipleship of equals' and the gender-centred vision of the Church as a nuptial mystery seems very unlikely.

Ten Reasons why Thomas Aquinas is Important for Ethics Today

James F. Keenan SJ

Recently several works that study Thomas Aquinas's ethics have been published.[1] Why is it, too, that a return to Thomas's ethics yields insights into his writings that have escaped us for decades, even centuries? Why is he a perennial font of reflection that prompts new writers to find fresh insights at the end of the second millennium?

The answer rests, I believe, in the fact that he captures an understanding of the moral life that is enormously helpful in forming a vision of the type of people we ought to become. In an age that wants to respect the individual conscience while maintaining a sense of the objectively right and wrong, Thomas provides a framework in which we can achieve both. In order to demonstrate how Thomas accomplishes this,

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I advance along the way ten key points that Thomas makes that serve as sign posts to our conclusions.

1. *Rather than retreat from public life, Thomas believes that good religious life, like good theology, can be at home in the life of the city.* At the age of six, Thomas's parents sent him to the famous Benedictine Abbey, Monte Casino, where they (reasonably) hoped that he would become abbot. At fifteen, he leaves the order and, after five years of studies in Naples, enters the relatively new order of St. Dominic. As urban areas emerge for the first time in human history, the fifteen year old Thomas makes his first adult decision to leave an order that requires a vow of permanence and enters a new order already known for their work of preaching in the cities and teaching in the medieval universities.

Thomas enters the new cities, indeed. As the late James Weisheipl recounts in *Friar Thomas D'Aquino*, after finally being released from a year's detention by his family, who oppose his decision to leave the abbey and to enter an order known for poverty, Thomas journeys with the Dominicans to Paris for three years of studies (1245–48) and another four in Cologne (1248–52). In 1252 he begins another sojourn in Paris teaching his first major work, the *Commentary on the Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and then assuming the position of Regent master. There he finishes *De Veritate*, begins the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and lectures on the Gospel of Saint Matthew. After a brief stay in Naples (1260–61) he goes to the papal city of Orvieto where during his four years there he completes the *Contra Gentiles* and his commentary on the *Book of Job*, among other works. In 1265, he begins his teaching at Rome where he remains for three years, before being summoned to return to Paris for an extraordinary second term of teaching. In 1272, he leaves Paris and returns to Naples for two years before he dies. His death is doubly ironic. First, the forty-nine year old Dominican who abandons a vocation for permanence collapses while *walking* to Lyons. Second, he dies in a monastic community not far from his home (Roccasecca) and Monte Casino.

Despite his girth, we must not imagine an inactive man. On the contrary this man walks from one major city to another and becomes one of the most travelled men of the 13th century. At a time when cities are emerging and the Renaissance is about to be born in the paintings of Cimabue, Duccio, and Giotto, Thomas enters the active life of the centers of learning in these cities. For Thomas, the place to learn will not be the monastery, but the rising city and its universities.

At the end of his *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that we are living on the eve of an age of barbarism. In the face of that threat, he argues that we ought to retire to small closed communities, instruct one

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another on the virtues and await another St. Benedict. MacIntyre's solution may be right, but is not the Thomistic solution. The man who rediscovered virtue in the thirteenth century found it in his studies at Naples and again at Paris, by reading the "pagan" philosopher, Aristotle, whom he found compatible with his other two sources, the Scriptures and Augustine. Thomas found virtue by leaving Monte Casino, not by retreating to it.

2. *Thomas believes that priests and religious should be well educated.*
In 1217 the Dominican order is approved as the Order of Preachers, but in 1221 Pope Honorius III; gives the Dominicans the mandate to hear confession, as well. In response to this new apostolic charge, Dominican leaders write a plethora of manuals describing sins and their gravity.

The seriousness of the new task is seen in Dominican formation. A few extraordinary Dominican students are singled out and sent to one of the studia set up at the five major universities, Oxford, Bologna, Paris, Montpelier, and Cologne. The majority, however, remain in their own communities where they are all required, including the prior, to attend the lector's lectures on these manuals, especially the *Summa de casibus* of Raymond of Penafort.

In *The Setting for the Summa Theologiae*, Leonard Boyle writes that Thomas, while at Orvieto, attends the Provincial chapter at Anagni where he proposes establishing an experimental program or *studium* for young Dominican students, not among the élite at the universities, but intelligent enough for something more theologically sophisticated than Raymond's cases. The Dominicans grant him his wish and he opens a personal studium at Rome, where eventually he begins producing the *Summa Theologiae* for these above average students who are open to experiments in a new order. For this reason, Boyle calls the *Summa*, a "Dominican" work.

Thomas's concern in setting up the experiment at Rome is not for those students at the university, but rather for those who will eventually be preachers and confessors. Undoubtedly, Thomas believes that one cannot be a good preacher or confessor unless one studies theology. Behind that presupposition is its obvious parallel, that one cannot become a decent theologian without being a decent preacher and confessor.

3. *He provides a theological context for ethics.*
In Rome, after one year of teaching probably the fourth book of the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Thomas constructs his *Summa Theologiae*, dividing it into three parts, with the second part having two sections. The first part is about God's relationship to us as Creator and Mover. The second part is about our response: the first section concerns general matter in morals and the second treats specific virtues, vices, and sins. The third

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part is about Jesus Christ and the sacraments.

The second half of the second part which considers the specifics of ethics is derived from Raymond's *Summa de casibus*. Thomas reconstructs it and introduces it with the first half, a treatise on the moral life. Moreover, he brackets the middle part on the moral life with the first part on God the Creator and the third part on Jesus and the sacraments.

In our own day when so many Catholics are more familiar with teachings on birth control, homosexuality, and divorce, and yet ignorant of redemption, grace, resurrection, creation, and other eternal matters, Thomas provides us, instead of a simple list of "dos" and "don'ts", with an introduction to moral theology in the context of a theological *Summa*. There is an irony, here, however. As Boyle remarks, in terms of book sales, citations, and publications, the second half of the second part is the most successful of the four sections. The readers bought Thomas's least original section which he "contextualized". Not unlike our own day, many people preferred to know more about the specific sins than about grace, free will, and the nature of God.

4. *Thomas believes that theology should be dialogical.*

As the theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu demonstrates in *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, nowhere is Thomas more dialogical than in the structure of the *Summa* itself. Consider the three parts: God's call; our response; Jesus, the Word Incarnate. The entire work reflects a dialogue.

Thomas's life is a dialogue as well. Weisheipl describes that from 1269 to 1272, during his second tenure in Paris, Thomas has four scribes to whom he simultaneously (it seems) dictates to one, the *Summa Theologiae*; to another, his commentaries on Aristotle's works (e.g., the *Ethics*, the *Metaphysics*, the *Physics*, the *Metaphysics*); to another his commentaries on the Scriptures (specifically, John's Gospel and the Pauline Epistles); and, to the fourth, the polemical discourses against the anti-mendicants and the Averroists.

Thomas, the man who joins the Order of Preachers, loves the Word and lives the Word. His theology and his life is dialogical. His use of so many sources and his variety of interests demonstrate how convincingly he believes in the gift of human reason. No wonder, then, when he asserts that the human is made in God's image by being rational. The Summa, then, does not only leave the reader with new insights; more importantly, it prompts the reader to emulate the probing intellect that wrote it. Thomas draws us into the habit of inquiring deeply.

5. *Thomas upholds the primacy of the conscience.*

Not surprisingly, the man who draws us into inquiry defends the seat of moral dictate in each person. Thomas, instead of asking whether an

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erroneous conscience excuses, asks whether we can ever go against our conscience. The question is central: if we do not heed our conscience, then what will we heed? And why? Thomas answers that every time we act against our conscience, we sin (ST I—I;. 19. 5). *Then*, Thomas asks, Are we called good when we follow our conscience that is in error? Thomas simply answers, if we could have avoided the error, then we are culpable for not having had a rightly-formed conscience, but if we could not have known otherwise, then we are excused from our error (ST I—II. 19. 6).

Thomas enters another controversy. In his first major work, the *Commentary on the Sentences* Thomas entertains Peter Lombard's (1095-1160) position on the possible conflict between what the Church teaches and what our conscience dictates. Lombard writes that in such a situation, we should follow the Church. Thomas writes "here the Master is wrong" ("hic magister falsum dicit") and argues that it is better to die excommunicated than to violate our conscience.[2] This position cannot be understood as a position of privilege or luxury; on the contrary, Thomas always writes about the dictates of conscience. He is not describing conscience as an instrument that excuses us from responsibility, but one that imposes moral obligation. Thus, Thomas's argument is that we should never disobey that which articulates and imposes moral commands upon us.

6. *Thomas insists that the primary concept in moral theology is the object.* Object is the primary concept in Thomas's moral writings. This is perhaps surprising since we often associate morals with *acts*, e.g. acts of lying, acts of contraception, acts of homosexuals, etc. But for Thomas ethics is about objects.

In English the word "object" is like the phrase "subject matter"; object is something conceptual, rather than physical. For Thomas the object is first found in the intention or as he also calls it the internal act and then later in the external act. But what is an object?

Say you go to a lecture by Brian Davies called "Fr. Sadowsky bakes a cake" and you think it's a cooking class, but it turns out to be a study of Fr. Sadowsky's logic. You sit there thinking, "What am I doing here? I thought we would be doing crepes, but instead we're doing syllogisms!!! I have to get out of this lecture." And then you start figuring out how you will exit. The object of your intention, "I've made a mistake and I have to get out of this lecture," is the subject matter that gives meaning to your external action. Thus, you get up and leave. Davies may think, upon seeing you leave, that perhaps you are indisposed, or perhaps that you are vehemently opposed to Fr. Sadowsky. But the-meaning of your external action is derived from the object of your internal act which is to simply get out of a lecture that you mistook for a culinary class. Thomas

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discusses morals at the level of intentionality; he wants us to realize that what we think, what we intend, what we engage as our purpose is really what we must measure morally. Thomas holds that we cannot simply look, as Raymond did, at our external actions; rather, if we want to become more moral we must look at how we think and intend. For instance, if I keep thinking ill of someone, I will eventually utter an unkindness. If I keep having envious thoughts, envy will become more rooted in me. If I wish harm on some one, I will rejoice in their suffering. Thomas wants us to realize that goodness and badness are something, as Jesus says, that comes out of us.

7. Thomas puts the measure of objectivity in the intention.

By giving us the object in the intention, Thomas gives us a way out of the impasse presently found among some in the Church concerning moral objectivity. This issue concerns whether we can claim that an assertion like, "That killing was wrong" or "That life-saving was right" is anything more than an opinion. Those who claim that those remarks are true defend moral objectivity. Those who argue that no one can prove the truth of those remarks are relativists.

In the Church today we find two claims. On the one hand there are those who argue for moral objectivity, but locate it in external acts. First, they claim that certain external acts have their own moral meaning prior to anyone's intention. To some extent, Thomas holds this position, as do, contemporary moral theologians known as proportionalists. Second, this group adds that we can only avoid relativism if we recognize that some of these acts, regardless of circumstances, are always immoral. They call these acts intrinsically evil. Interestingly, the concept intrinsically evil acts derives from the writings of Thomas's most famous detractor in the 14th century, Durandus of St. Pourcain.[3]

On the other hand, there are relativists who argue that we can never measure whether a person's action is right or wrong. So long as a person has charity or loves or is well meaning, their action is good. These (note, not the proportionalists) confuse a person's loving motivations with one's behaviour.[4] As any parent knows, a loving parent is no guarantee for right parenting. Thus, though we may want to say that we cannot measure love, we can measure whether an action is right or wrong.

Between these two groups is Thomas who insists that there is moral objectivity. We must, can and do measure whether an action is right or wrong. To determine this, however, Thomas measures the internal action first, that is, the intention. We can measure the intention by asking what is the object. If an envious object is in the intention, then it, like a lusty or malicious one, is wrong; if a temperate object is in the intention then it, like a just or prudent one, is right.

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If the intention is wrong, then the external act will be wrong. If the intention is right, then for the external act to be right it must be a "fitting" or "appropriate" expression of the intention. If it falls short, then, though the intention or internal act is right, the external act is wrong. (So often we have the right intentions and still get the act wrong!)

Thus, Thomas insists on moral objectivity, but within the context of intention. He is able to argue this because he claims that the object or the subject matter, that is, the stuff that one has in the intention, is measurable. He prevents us, therefore, from saying that moral objectivity is rooted in something like intrinsically evil acts.

8. *Thomas provides us with terms for measuring the intention, the virtues and the vices.*

Unfortunately, we tend to think that for Thomas the standard for measuring morals is in the natural law. When we do, we tend to think that Thomas is concerned about external acts. But in the Preface to the second half of the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas writes that all of morals comes down to the virtues. In fact, Thomas writes very little on the natural law; his investigations focus on the virtues. Not only does he write the whole second part of the *Summa* on the virtues, but while at Paris for the second time he writes, his commentary on the Ethics of Aristotle (1271) as well as his *De virtutibus in communi*, *De caritate*, *De spe*, and *De virtutibus cardinalibus* (1269–1272). His ethical reflection singularly devolves around the virtues.

In his writing on the virtues, Thomas specifically writes that a right intention must be just and prudent. To know whether an intention is just we need to know whether it aims correctly at giving each one their due. Thus, if I have the intention of writing a true essay about Thomas Aquinas, then I am just, to Thomas, to my readers, to *New Blackfriars* and to myself as a theologian. If, however, I want to persuade people to think like me and use Thomas's writings in such a way that I take them out of context, then I am not just to my readers, to Thomas, to *New Blackfriars*, or to myself.

Moreover, Thomas does not claim that a person is just by trying to be just, or that a courageous person is one who tries to be courageous. Rather, the just person is one who has attempted and attained justice; the courageous person is one who actually is courageous. Too often we think that the virtues are about people meaning well; but, as a matter of fact, they are about thinking and acting well. Thus, in order to attain a virtue we need, then, to make sure that our acts are right. If I keep trying to be virtuous but never act virtuously, I cannot become virtuous.

To make sure that my intention and my act are right, I need prudence. My intention in writing this article, for instance, is to give readers an

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opportunity to see the value of Thomas's insight for moral living today. But, I know that readers of *New Blackfriars*, while not experts in the *Summa*, are nonetheless more sophisticated than other readers. Thus, I must be prudent and make the material challenging as well as insightful. I must give some details without going into too much detail. That is, I must hit the mean, between too much and too little.

Obviously the prudent mean is a tense one, between too much and too little. To help my students understand, I usually give the example of someone who is afraid of heights and wants to become more courageous. How do we prudently help him attain courage about heights? Should we take him to the observation deck of the world Trade Center in New York? I don't think so. Or for a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge, straight across the East River? No, I don't think so. Well should we take him to the first floor balcony of a restaurant? Why bother, he's not afraid of heights like that. Eventually the students agree to take him where he feels some tension and when they find the tension or the mean, they find the objectively right or prudent answer.

Prudence helps us to determine in the here and now what exactly we need to grow. In fact, Thomas borrows from Avicenna the insight that to grow in virtue we need to reflect and exercise (*studium et exercitium*). This suggests that the moral life ought to be fairly like athletics where we try to anticipate what areas of our lives need more attention than others and though our intentions set up the way we will proceed. Thus prudence is not only about intending this or that action; more importantly, prudence is about self-understanding and setting for ourselves short and long term goals for growing in the virtues. Along these lines the Gregorian moral theologian Klaus Demmer reminds us that the moral life is not about reacting, but about anticipating.

Good parenting is a perfect paradigm for prudence. Parents are constantly trying to get into the heads of their children right ways of thinking about their relations with family members, neighbours, class mates, teachers, and themselves. They want to get their children thinking about right objects. They teach them to constantly set minor, but attainable goals. They teach them to think before they act, to take one step at a time, and to continue moving forward. These are all the prudential insights that Thomas wholeheartedly endorses.

9. *Thomas argues that we become what we do.*

What does this mean? It means that Thomas appreciates that anything that we intentionally do (and he always means intentionally in the broad sense) makes us become what we are doing. Thomas wants to get to the object, that is, to whatever we have in mind because he recognizes that the intention is the seed of our actions and of the people we are becoming.

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Thomas recognizes, of course, that if we only intend, but do not act, then we never realize what we can become. If I intend to speak up to my domineering boss, but never do, I will never attain the assertive stance that I believe is just. If 1 intend to give up drinking large quantities of beer, but never do, I will continue to be a heavy drinker.

To demonstrate his insight, Thomas distinguishes two categories of acting, those that we make (transient) and those that we do (immanent). If I make a chair, a table, or a cake, the effects of my efforts pass from me into the thing that I make. But in those actions that I do, the object of my activity redounds to me: I become what I do. If I dance, I become a dancer. If I run, I become a runner. If I lie, I become a liar. Each of us is called then to become master of our lives, by becoming master of our internal and external actions. We become masters of our actions by prudent reflection and exercise, by intending the courses of action that we ought to engage and by doing them.

10. *Thomas argues that every human act is a moral act.*
I remarked earlier that we tend to think of ethics as some actions like abortions, divorce, etc. To correct this way of thinking, I suggest to my students that they take a piece of paper and write down five concerns that they think involve morality. Usually they write, abortion, homosexuality, divorce, war, birth control, etc. Then I tell them to turn the paper over and to write down five concerns with which they woke up this morning. Those concerns include repairing a relationship, drinking less, eating less, getting more sleep, getting more work or more leisure, talking with one's spouse, children, or boss, being less compulsive or obsessive, being less timid, being more assertive. confronting a friend, supporting a friend, being more generous, etc. This side of the paper, I say, is moral matter. Ordinary life is the matter for moral reflection, intention, and action.

When Thomas asks whether there are any actions that are free of moral meaning, he responds that if we are talking about acts in the abstract, then there are indifferent acts. Once we discuss acts that we do, however, then the only indifferent acts are those that we do unconsciously. He gives an example, "Stroking one's beard, unknowingly." Everything else is about moral living. Even small acts? Yes, Thomas replies, and uses the scriptures to talk about an incidental act like breaking stalks of grain in a field.

The moral agenda for Thomas is extraordinarily full. Anything that we do: how we wake up, how we drive, how we clean, how we write, how we talk, how we dress, etc., are all moral activities. Everything that we do shapes us as either more virtuous or more vicious. For Thomas there are not one or two moral moments every week, but thousands every day. Every moment is literally an occasion for being freer for Christ and

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neighbor.

Two dangers are apparent here. First, overload. Prudence reminds us that if our lives are a compulsive expression of a perpetual agenda, then the agenda cannot be right, fitting, or appropriate. Still, we are all busy people and what Thomas is urging us to, is not more activity, but of being more aware, more intentional about our activity. Assuredly, Thomas wants us to become masters of our lives. Thus, Thomas is not asking his readers to do more, but to be more intentional in what we do.

Secondly, by examining our intentions, he could be suggesting a very introverted agenda. As a matter of fact, Thomas's agenda is extroverted, that is, he wants us to get our intentions right so that our external actions will be right. In fact, the "brilliance of his psychology is his insistence that the object in the mind that counts as the intention is that which is most proximate to the external action. Say, you ask me why did I write this article? I say because I think that Thomas has something to say to each of us today about the moral life. But you ask again, why did you really write this article? Now you are looking for more remote reasons, and Thomas prefers to leave them as remote. He acknowledges that we can measure them as right or wrong and that in the long run we should attend to them, but he insists that the moral agenda is set in the intention, that is, proximate or near to the external act. Thomas examines our intentions so that we act; for unless we act, we cannot grow.

Act, Thomas tells us, is the perfection of being. This active Dominican, who does a great deal of teaching, writing, walking, reading, thinking, discoursing, preaching, and planning in the city, realizes that we each have within us the ability to realize that God has placed within us. Looking into himself, he found what he could do; likewise he invites-us to look into our the minds, so that through action good may come out cf it. This achievement of Thomas in his writing and in his life captures the attention again for people looking for an objective, yet personal ethics.

1 James Keenan, *Goodness and Rightness in Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae* (Washington: Georgetown, 1992); Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas* (University Park, PA: Penn. State Press, 1992); Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue* (Westminster Press, 1990); Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

2 *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV, 38. 2. 4 q.a 3; See also IV. 27. 1. 2. q.a. 4 ad3; IV. 27. 3. 3.

3 John Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts: The Emergence of a Doctrine," *Recherches de theologie ancienne et medievale* 50 (1983): 191-226; "Intrinsically Evil Acts: An Historical Study of the Mind of St. Thomas," *The Thomist* 43 (1979) 385-413.

4 See my "Distinguishing Charity As Goodness and Prudence As Rightness: A Key To Thomas' *Pars Secunda*" *The Thomist* 56 (1992) 407–426; "The Problem with Thomas Aquinas's Concept of Sin," *Heythrop Journal*, July 1994.

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