

Anthropology and Ethics: The Thomistic Vision

by Jordon Bishop

Thomas Aquinas is generally regarded as a pillar of orthodoxy, the cornerstone of an intellectual establishment. He achieved a synthesis that almost became something of this sort, although his impact is often exaggerated. In his own time he challenged accepted tradition on a number of points and was condemned by ecclesiastical authorities.

The principal point at issue in this condemnation is a doctrine of Thomas Aquinas that may sound bizarre to many today: the 'unicity of the substantial form'. It is central to his anthropology and has serious consequences for his ethics. It was regarded by many of his contemporaries as heretical or at least dangerous. And if one were to attempt to place Aquinas in the Marxist-Leninist division of all thinkers into idealists and materialists, this doctrine would earn him a place among the materialists.

I shall not attempt a textual analysis of the problem involved. This would inevitably demand a highly technical discussion in the peculiar language of thirteenth-century scholasticism. Rather, I should like to attempt a description of what I believe to have been Aquinas's view of man and ethics in terms of our own popular picture. I believe that this view can be substantiated through serious historical research and that it is, within the limits imposed by the language gap, a faithful picture of the position of Thomas Aquinas.

It is often assumed that the ethic of Thomas Aquinas is other-worldly, based on a spiritualist anthropology, and ultimately, rationalist. The first assertion is a half-truth; the second and third are false. Aquinas's anthropology is materialistic, and he is no rationalist.

The Other-worldly dialectic

In one sense no ethic worthy of the name could be completely other-worldly. Whatever one's picture of life after death, the activity, or lack of activity after death is beyond the control of human existence as we know it. Ethics are concerned with human activity here and now, and the ethics of Aquinas are no exception.

It is an other-worldly vision in the sense that he carefully established an ultimate end to human activity that can only be fully satisfied in an other-worldly existence. This can be briefly described as the enjoyment of God: we are dealing with a theological ethic. Yet throughout his treatment of the end of human activity, Aquinas

engages in a carefully nuanced dialectic. In the first place, the end of human activity is not something that will not exist for man until he begins his other-worldly existence. It is for Aquinas an end which is very real, as an active element in human activity, during the whole course of man's life on earth. It does not become man's goal after death. It is now the objective towards which man's activity should be directed.

There is another dimension in his analysis of the finality of human activity. The subjective aspect of this is also important, and he describes it simply as *happiness*. Here again a dialectic is at work: he attempts to describe the perfect happiness of the after-life. But he never loses sight of the imperfect happiness of this life.

That he believes it to be such may be shocking to men and women today. We are uncomfortable with a theory that proposes norms for human happiness and conduct and frankly admits that these are out of our reach. It is curious that this should be so. In an age that tends to relativise almost everything, why should we be shocked at a theory that relativises the possibility of attaining happiness or fulfilling norms of human conduct? Put in another way, he does not believe in the perfectibility of man. There are limits to what is possible to man in this life. Yet he does take this life very seriously, and most of what we should call the really practical questions are concerned with it.

For example, while its place should not be exaggerated, sex is given considerable importance in Aquinas's ethic. I say it should not be exaggerated because at a popular level it has been. Some Christian ethics have become obsessed with sex to the point where it becomes the most important consideration. For Aquinas, there are more important things—justice, for example, is one of them. As far as Aquinas knew, sex was not important at all in the after-life. It is very important now. And in his discussion of happiness 'in so far as it is possible now', both sex and the body are important. In one place, he asks the seemingly innocent question: is the body necessary for happiness? His answer, with respect to this life, is that it is.

He does not mean that it is something to be reckoned with, something that weighs man down, or that the soul is imprisoned in a body from which it unfortunately cannot escape. He means that it is necessary, that the stoic vision of human activity as an attempt to live as if we were not bodily beings is false. This attempt should not be made. We are not to behave, in so far as possible, 'as if' we were angels. Whatever may be the case for the other-worldly side of human existence, our present existence is, if you wish, material, animal, and passionate, and not only is all this, but should be. Man must come to terms with himself as an animal if he is to live humanly.

In short, having established an ultimate goal for human activity that transcends material existence and can only be fully realised in

an other-worldly context, Aquinas not only recognises the importance of a this-worldly dimension, but constantly refers to this pole of a dialectic that embraces both. In a sense this, from an ethical point of view, is the most important side of this dialectic: that over which men have some effective control.

A materialist anthropology

I have stated that Aquinas was condemned for a doctrine that is called the 'unicity of the substantial form'. While this is a fairly abstruse, technical expression, it has consequences that are important for our 'picture' of man. It means in effect that Thomas has turned his back on the traditional 'spiritualist' picture of man in the Platonic and the stoic traditions. This picture of man involved a radical dualism. Soul and body were regarded as distinct entities, the soul being a prisoner of the body, crying for liberation. Plato's account of Socrates's death typifies this vision. Death is not to be feared, but welcomed, as a liberation from the prison of the body. The 'life of the soul' is the important thing.

This was the prevalent picture of man at the time of Thomas Aquinas. In a sense it has remained the prevalent picture of man in the Christian tradition in spite of Aquinas. His contemporaries understood very well the consequences of his position. He was a materialist. He did not think that the soul and the body were adequately separate entities, or that the soul is some kind of prisoner in the body.

Some careful nuances must be taken into account. He did believe that the soul can survive death. Given this, the difference may appear to be over-subtle. What he did not believe is that the soul, having survived the body, would be complete, or even human. That perfect happiness is possible after death was not for Aquinas, as for Plato, a datum of nature, but a gift of God that constituted a mystery, something that could not really have been expected. He is concerned with human happiness, and there is a real sense in which a disembodied soul is not a human being, nor is it capable, of itself, of functioning humanly without a body. The enjoyment of God that Thomas saw as the end of human life is something beyond human capabilities. Happiness beyond the grave is not, and cannot be a result of man's innate capabilities. It can exist only as a gift of God.

For the pole of the dialectic concerned with everyday existence, this picture also has some important consequences. The stoic vision of 'passions', or the emotions, as disturbing elements, to be overcome, ignored, in order to provide tranquility for the soul, is rejected, along with the idea of man as a soul imprisoned in a body alien to it. Man's animality is basic to human life and existence.

This is the case even for the contemplation of truth, which Aquinas saw as one of the highest and most noble of human activities. In his

philosophical anthropology, human intelligence simply cannot function without the body, without the imagination which he sees as a bodily function. It is in this sense that his theory of knowledge would be regarded by a classical Marxist as materialist rather than idealist. He did not believe in innate ideas, nor did he believe that there exists any 'spiritual' intellectual activity in which the imagination is not involved.

This was for Aquinas a logical consequence of the abstract theory for which he was condemned. His notion of the 'unicity of the substantial form' means in effect that man is one: a special kind of animal rather than a soul imprisoned in an animal body. And it means, both in the intellectual and the affective life, that the animal is both important and inescapable. It is a mistake for man to try to live as if he had no body, as if he were not an animal, and an ethic constructed on the dualistic premises of Plato and the stoics is necessarily a failure because it disregards something that is real and essential to human existence.

The irrational and human decision

The analysis of human decision-making in the first part of the book dedicated to Aquinas's theological ethics, the *Prima Secundae*, is in one way a model of analytical clarity, a careful and highly technical description of factors that the author sees as involved in ethical decision.

He discusses the acts of will and intellect, and the interplay between them, in a long series of questions under the heading 'on the condition of human action'. Many authors see these acts, such as willing, election, or choosing, as distinct acts rather than elements that can be isolated from their context by a process of abstraction. If one does assume that these are distinct acts, it is easy to come to the conclusion that the ethic of Aquinas is rationalist. That is to say, one can come to the conclusion that human decision-making is simply a matter of clear vision and intellectual choice, of selecting means to an end and making solidly rational decisions.

In fact, his basic category in this discussion is not freedom, but rather what he calls 'the voluntary'. Acts are said to be human in so far as they are 'voluntary', that is to say in so far as they proceed from an intrinsic principle with knowledge of the object. The fact that such knowledge is involved implies for him that freedom is a characteristic of the voluntary in man. But the voluntary, unlike an abstract notion of freedom, includes an element of passion, an emotional factor. This means in effect that an action may be described as more voluntary, more human even, when the freedom of the action is diminished through passion.

In the context of a Platonic anthropology, that is, if one regards the soul as some sort of autonomous being imprisoned in the body, a

ghost in the machine, one can easily arrive at a picture of human decision-making in which a principle is established and a decision made on a 'spiritual' basis, as it were by the soul acting independently of the body. The decision made, the soul then commands the body to act.

For Aquinas, this picture is false. As there can be no intellectual knowledge without the animal element of imagination, neither can there be action and decision without passion. There can be no 'spiritual' act of the will that is free of emotion. More important, such an act is not to be desired or pursued as an ethical goal. Again, the vision of man as a special kind of animal rather than as a soul imprisoned in an animal body comes into play. In abstract analysis, one can speak of a spiritual human will, as a power of the soul. It is sometimes overlooked that Aquinas also speaks of the emotions—animal emotions if you will—as powers of the soul. That these can be distinguished in abstract analysis does not imply that they can be separated in human activity. Aquinas clearly does not think this, and in the *Prima Secundae* he expends a quantity of ink comparable to that used for most contemporary books discussing what he calls the passions.

Even when he considers these in abstraction from the intellectual components of human activity, he does not think that the soul can simply command. Following Aristotle, he states that man's control over his emotional life is at best political, not despotic. The emotions enter into every human decision, and the world of the emotions is not a world of clear and distinct ideas, of simple rational decisions, but a world of love and hate, passion and desire, fear and hope and anger. It is a world of emotion that cannot be commanded as a seaman commands the course of a ship by turning the wheel, or as an expert teamster drives a team of horses or a ten-ton lorry.

With some caution, one might use some of these analogies, but only in the sense that a good driver becomes in a way a part of the car or lorry, that a teamster is one with his horses and a seaman is one with his ship, acquiring a sense of wind and current and tides and reacting with all of these and with the ship herself. Most of us are familiar with driving a car, so perhaps this analogy may speak more to our experience. A good driver has a fairly clear sense of what a car can do, of its power, its limitations, its behaviour on different kinds of road, on snow or gravel or ice. For example, a good driver will not spin the wheels in a fast start, at least not if he has a good car. All the power will go into moving the car. The art involved is as much a question of feeling as of understanding. There is continuity, some unity between the action of the driver and what the car actually does.

If this analogy may be pushed a bit further, one might say that a driver who does not have this 'feel' of his car cannot really understand what is happening. The man at the tiller of a small sailing craft who has studied all the mechanics of sailing, who knows all about it, but

does not have the 'feel' of the wind and the current and the tide and the craft itself cannot really understand why things do not go right. In theory all one has to do is put the helm down and the craft will change course. And this is apparently the way the example is used by those who see the soul as the helmsman and the body as a ship. From Aquinas's point of view, their theory of man is as faulty as their seamanship.

In fact, a driver who gets behind the wheel of a strange car for the first time may be ill at ease until he 'gets the feel of it'. The same would be true of a small sailing craft, or of a team of horses. The control in question is not despotic or dictatorial, but more akin to what Aristotle calls a political control.

The analogy is limited, but for Aquinas human conduct is also an art that involves the development of a sense of the whole, of living with the emotions, and making them part of the whole process of human decision. Rather than a despotic control of reason over the emotions, there is a political control that might in contemporary terms be described as participatory democracy. This leaves little place for a simplistic vision of human action as an abstract, rationalistic process of decision-making. Nor is there any place for the kind of simple, optimistic picture of man as a being 'who will always do good if he be sufficiently well-informed'. Nor is there room for the kind of optimism implied in what T. S. Eliot has called 'systems so perfect, no one will need to be good'. Neither knowledge nor the manipulation of environment is enough.

This is tied in with Aquinas's basic anthropology. There is a real link between his vision of the unity of man and the place of the irrational, the emotional, in the art of human conduct. Socrates, as a good Greek, believed that the soul is a prisoner of the body, somehow autonomous even as it is enslaved. It is then logical to equate knowledge and virtue. If one really knows how to be good, he will be good. This involves a kind of naive optimism, a belief in the power of human intelligence that is foreign to Thomas Aquinas's picture of man in action. Knowledge is not enough, and knowledge itself is never free from the influence of emotion. Man's vision of the good is filtered through his emotional life, and his search for happiness involves the difficult art of educating his emotional response to life as well as making intellectual decisions.

It is in this sense that the treatise on passion, on the emotions, is one of the most important elements in the ethics of Aquinas and the philosophical anthropology that underlies his ethics. Living humanly is a passionate affair.