Moral theories

Aquinas's moral theory

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The moral theory of St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) has a theological as well as a philosophical aspect; indeed Thomistic moral philosophy, while theoretically complete in itself, is subsumed into moral theology. I shall here be concerned only with the moral philosophy of Aquinas, but first a word on the possibility of considering his moral philosophy without discussing his moral theology.

As a Christian, Thomas accepts a great number of propositions as true because they have been revealed by God. A proposition is *de fide* if (a) it is accepted as true (b) because God has revealed it and (c) there is no independent way to decide its truth. Thus, Thomas believes that Christ is human and divine, that there are three persons in God and that there will be a general resurrection. It is another feature of the *de fide* that, while its truth can not be decided by appeal to something other than God's say-so, neither can such propositions be known to be false. Although some Christians have described faith dramatically as the acceptance as true of what is known to be false, Thomas Aquinas is not among them.

De fide truths are chiefly about God, but they can also be about human actions as these are ordered to God. The injunction that one should love one's neighbour as oneself is such a truth. What about the precepts of the Decalogue which were given to Moses on Mount Sinai? Are they not obviously revealed truths?

While the injunction to charity seems one that is incumbent upon the believer as believer, it would seem odd to think the prohibitions of murder, lying, adultery and theft are moral precepts whose acceptance is contingent upon religious belief. And in fact Thomas maintains that by and large the Ten Commandments are moral principles any human person, believer or not, should recognise as true. Either he is guilty of gross confusion or further precision is necessary.

Thomas does not identify 'being revealed' and 'being *de fide*'. Being revealed is a necessary though not sufficient condition of being *de fide* and some truths have been revealed which need not have been because

their truth can be decided by appeal to what anyone knows. Such truths may be believed to be true because God revealed them, but in their case belief can be replaced by knowledge. *De fide* truths, like the incarnation and trinity and general resurrection, cannot be known to be true in this life.

If what has been revealed contains *de fide* truths as well as truths which can be known, we would expect the latter to show up in the teachings of pagan philosophers. Exactly this happens, Thomas holds; hence his insatiable interest in the writings of Aristotle, all of which were becoming available in Latin for the first time.

Moral philosophy can now be defined as that knowledge of how we ought to act which is independent of religious belief for its acceptance.

The moral philosophy of Aquinas is a version of Aristotelian ethics. Like Aristotle, he will take the end to be the beginning of practical considerations, such that moral precepts are in effect judgements as to how the end is to be achieved. A certain kind of action can be assessed as good or bad to the degree that it is conducive to the end desired. But ends too are subject to moral appraisal. As with Aristotle, ends sought and the actions which are the means of attaining them, are appraised with reference to the nature of the human agent. Good ends and means are those befitting the human agent; bad ends and means are those which are not thus fitting. This is what is meant by Natural Law.

Human actions and moral actions are synonymous for Aquinas. What counts as a human action? Anything done with deliberation, consciously, voluntarily. Not every event or activity that can truly be ascribed to a human person counts as a human act. Digesting, ageing, falling when dropped, are what Thomas calls 'acts of man' but not human acts. Thinking and all other activities that come under the sway of thought are moral actions, human acts. It is one thing for Socrates's beard to be growing, it is another for Socrates to grow a beard.

Human acts are teleological; that is, whatever we do, we do for some end or purpose. Actions are responsible because we are answerable for them, and the question asked is: 'Why did you do that?' If it is granted that each and every human act is undertaken for some end, it could be that there is simply a vast number of

Key words

Moral theories; moral theory of St Thomas Aquinas.

disparate and unrelated ends. But clearly some objectives are ordered to further objectives. One studies to pass the course in order to get the degree in order to cure the sick. There are subordinate and superordinate ends for which we act. What if there were some ultimate superordinating end of all that human persons do? If there were, we would have a single ultimate criterion for assessing actions as good or bad. The good ones would be those conducive to that end; the bad ones those which thwart it.

Like Aristotle, Thomas holds that there is such an ultimate end of all we do. Aristotle cited two reasons for thinking so. First, we have a name for it, viz 'happiness'. Second, it is the assumption of legislation that all overt acts can be regulated for the commonweal, which is thus taken to be the ultimate criterion for commanding or prohibiting. Aristotle takes these as *prima facie* reasons for assuming it makes sense to ask what in fact the ultimate end of human action is.

The good for man will be the fulfilment or perfection of that activity or function or task which is peculiar to human agents. If you know what a thing is for, you have a basis for deciding whether it is a good instance of its type. If a knife is for cutting, a knife that cuts well is a good one. If the eye is for seeing, the eye that sees well is a good one. Does man have a function in this sense? Is there some peculiarly human task or function?

Thomas's affirmative answer to this question relies on his earlier distinction between human acts and acts of a man. Quite a number of activities can be truly ascribed to human beings which are not peculiar or proper to them. All of the following may be true (a) Socrates is falling, (b) Socrates is hungry and (c) Socrates tells Xanthippe he is going to the Agora to engage in dialogue. The subject of (a) could be any physical body, of (b) any animal, but only humans engage in the kind of activity mentioned in (c). Peculiarly human activity is rational activity. Thus, on the analogy of the examples in the previous paragraph, the human good consists quite simply in performing rational activity well.

The difficulty is that 'rational activity' can mean a variety of things, and we are back again to the point of saying that even if whatever humans do is truly describable as rational activity, the things humans do are infinitely various, and we do not seem to have achieved a unified view. One thing we can do is sort out some major meanings of 'rational activity'. It can first of all be taken to mean the activity of thinking as such, an activity which aims at ascertaining the truth about the way things are. Call this theoretical thinking. Sometimes thinking is engaged in with an eye to directing some activity other than thinking, like choosing. Call this practical thinking. Activities other than thinking which come under the sway of reason can be called rational activity in a further sense. Virtue is the word used to express a settled way of performing a function well. Thus, we can say that the human good is

had when the virtues of rational activity in its various senses are had. The human good will then have as its constituents the virtues of the speculative intellect, the virtues of the practical intellect, and the virtues of rational activity in the third sense, moral virtues.

It is now clear that 'Performing well some single kind of act' is not a good description of man's ultimate end. The ultimate objective of human action is to act rationally well but that turns out to mean achieving the virtues (in the plural) of rational activity. These virtues can be ranked in two ways, either in terms of dignity or in terms of priority and necessity. Virtues of the speculative use of our mind such as science and wisdom are more desirable as perfective of the activity which is peculiar to man in its purest form. Moral virtues, such as temperance and justice, will be more necessary and come first; if they do not, circumstances conducive to the acquisition of speculative virtues are unlikely to obtain. Thomas, like Aristotle, will speak of the ultimate end, the human good, our happiness, as consisting in contemplation. This should not be taken to mean that there is some single activity the virtue of which is the human good without qualification.

It is sometimes taken to be an objection to this procedure to say: stealing and cheating and spoiling the environment are peculiar to human beings and, since such activities are generally regarded as immoral, distinctively human behaviour is no guide to the human good. But of course the distinctively human function can be performed well or badly. That is the point of speaking of virtue as performing it well. The activities mentioned are precisely instances of performing it badly. Thomas Aquinas is scarcely guilty of saying that every human act is just as such good.

What criteria are there for distinguishing good human action from bad? It is here that Thomas's talk of the ultimate end should be connected with his teaching on the natural moral law. What would Thomas reply to this objection: talk of acting for ends and of rational activity as peculiar to men, talk of virtue as perfective of that activity, is all well and good. Indeed, it is quite useful. Alas, it remains purely formal, since it is compatible with radically different notions of the good life. I may define virtues connected with rational activity undertaken in relation to others as taking advantage of another's ignorance, telling untruths when they are to my advantage, etc and you may embrace some classical conception of justice. We disagree. There is no way to adjudicate the disagreement by argument.

The Thomistic doctrine on a natural moral law is in effect a response to that view. Thomas would take the objection to be incoherent. He holds that there are common guidelines of human action which are embedded in the very nature of the human agent and which no one can fail to know. That may seem an adventurous claim. Reflection on it makes manifest that what is difficult is to maintain its opposite.

By natural law precepts Thomas means the first and self-evident precepts of the practical use of reason, and

he discusses them on an analogy with the first and self-evident precepts of the theoretical or speculative use of reason. Any notion we form will be an instance of the most general notion, 'being'. Any judgement we make will have embedded in it the primary judgement that a thing cannot simultaneously and in the same sense be and not be. In the practical use of our mind, the primary concept is 'good' and the first nongainsayable precept that the good should be pursued and done and evil avoided. The theory does not say that 'being' is the first word anyone utters, only that the first idea he forms is of a being. So too one's first sentence is not 'An affirmation and its contradictory cannot be simultaneously true'. But all human discourse is guided by that basic truth. Knowledge of it is implicit in any knowledge we have. If this analogy works, the common precepts of natural law are precepts embedded in our actions and which are implicitly recognised by all human agents.

The basis for the precepts of natural law are the goods we instinctively seek, ends we naturally desire. Thomas recognises a number of such natural inclinations. First, there is the nature we share with all things, and in this regard we have a natural inclination to preserve ourselves in being. For us to be is to live, so nature in this sense inclines us to seek nourishment. Second, we share a nature with all animals and in this regard have an inclination to reproduce ourselves and to raise our young. Finally, our rational nature inclines us to live in society and to pursue the truth, particularly about God. The objects of these inclinations are goods we cannot not want, given what we are. These natural inclinations are not what Thomas means by natural moral law. The precepts of natural law are directive of our pursuit of these naturally desired goods.

The most general precept, that good should be done and evil avoided, means that we should rationally direct our actions as they bear on these naturally desired goods. Reason is the note of law. Precepts of natural law are directives of practical reason. That our pursuit of food and sex should be regulated by reason is self-evident. For one thing, it is impossible for us to pursue such goods unconsciously. For another, it is clear that without rational direction, these natural inclinations are more likely to be thwarted than fulfilled. The precepts formulated by natural reason must take into account the finality of the inclinations they would bring under the sway of reason. Prescriptive guidelines which would counsel regulating desire by blinding oneself, controlling trespassing by amputating limbs and regulating birth by frustrating the activity of sexual intercourse would be false. That is, it is false to suggest that the good for man is to thwart the attainment of goods men naturally desire. Virtue will consist in so pursuing these naturally desired goods that their constitutive role in human well-being and fulfilment is fostered.

Among the precepts of natural law that Thomas recognises on a level of less generality than 'Pursue virtue' or 'Do good and avoid evil' are the prohibitions

of murder, theft, adultery and lying. Thomas fashions arguments to the effect that these are kinds of activity which are always and everywhere wrong because essentially destructive of the good for man. These are precepts of great generality and relate to more specific precepts in two ways.

First, as the selection of the term 'law' suggests, these precepts are taken to be presupposed by positive law, such that positive laws which are in conflict with them are not morally binding. A law may incorporate a natural law prohibition against murder by distinguishing its degrees with an eye to punitive sanctions. Such extensions do not of course share in the character of general moral precepts which are always and everywhere the same.

Second, moral knowledge of a generalised kind that is embedded in various ways in a given culture is an extension of those very general and universally binding precepts which are natural law. It does not at all follow from the theory of natural law that all morally well-ordered societies will look alike. No more will all moral persons look alike. The moral task, for societies, for peoples, for persons, is to make the moral ideal concrete and this can be done in numberless ways.

Natural law precepts can be either negative or positive. The negative are more easily applicable since they prohibit acts which are wrong in their kind. Once an action is seen to be an instance of this type, we know what we ought to do. Positive precepts like 'Be brave' or 'Be just' are not so easily applicable. Many possible acts may be instances of just action and the precept alone does not tell us which to perform. Justice, courage, temperance, wisdom – these cardinal constituents of the human good are infinitely realisable and not only permit but entail diversity both of persons and of cultures. It is the actions which thwart these ideals which always and everywhere are evil.

Thomistic moral philosophy consists of three stages. The first stage is that of natural law precepts, negative and positive. The second is the level of positive law or less formally enshrined moral codes: here both prohibitions and prescriptions admit of exceptions. Finally, there is the level of application, of singular decisions, the prudential (in the classical sense of the term) order. Neither knowledge of natural law, a sane legal code nor a reasonable ethics can assure that our actions will be good. Good action is the product of character, not simply knowledge, and character is formed by repeated acts of a given kind until our hearts are inclined to good action. Given good character, moral virtue, a person is enabled to do the right deed for the right reason and enjoy doing it.

The moral philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas continues to exercise influence today on both non-Catholic and Catholic thinkers. Friend and foe alike find in Thomas insights and arguments well worth taking into account.

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