

# Some Personal Notes in the Context of the Difference between Theoretical and Practical Reason in Aquinas

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## 1 Introduction

Let me tell you about an experience. I noticed that I had become more and more pessimistic about the future of our world from my reading of books by thinkers who reveal the inconsistency and superficiality of our contemporary culture. From the standard of thinkers such as Voegelin, Strauss, but also—partly at least—of Lonergan, Aristotle and Thomas, I came to recognize that modern man has completely lost a notion of himself as a unique being in the world. Modern man is no longer aware that he is bestowed with something which he shares with no other creature in the world.

We owe it to Greek philosophy that human uniqueness found a non-mythological expression. From then on, we can speak about an immortal soul and about the different aspects pertaining to the intellect and reason. Thomas Aquinas could say that, in a certain way, the human intellect participates in the divine intellect. He uses the metaphor of light in saying that the light of our natural reason (*ratio naturalis*) is an impression (*impressio*) of the divine light under the aspect of intelligibility. With regard to a foundation for ethics he can write "that the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation in the eternal law".<sup>1</sup> For Aquinas, such insights can be achieved

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<sup>1</sup>S.th. I-II, q.91, a.2.

by a philosophical mind. In such matters, it is not necessary to transcend the realm of our natural reason.

If we fail to understand reason, intellect, and will in a right way, we will end up with a wrong understanding about what is truly human. If such a misunderstanding goes on over centuries, the result will be a culture where what is wrong is considered to be right and what is right considered to be wrong.

We are a rational animal. It is only by intellect, reason, and will<sup>2</sup> that we can find an order amid the different parts of reality within which we participate. By wrongly understanding these capacities, man falls apart into the different parts in which he participates.

In a distorted understanding of intellect and reason, the soul can no longer be considered to be the form of the body. Then, it is up to the scientists to decide whether this or that agglomeration of molecules can already be called a human being. The way of gaining an insight ceases to be a process where sensual and intellectual capacities are both involved in order to reveal something of reality to us as now knowing is seen as a function of our sense organs or as a construction of our minds, etc. Truth is no longer seen as anything which should be achieved. Instead, it is seen as an illusion. Any assertion of it is seen as an act of intolerance. As to moral values, a human act ceases to be seen as objectively good or evil. Instead, it is seen as good or evil from a standpoint that is determined by one's pure intentions or right and wrong is determined in terms of the possible consequences of an act. Citizens begin to no longer feel any sense of responsibility for the state as a whole which is more than its parts as they begin to feel a sense of responsibility which exists only for themselves as individuals and for their families.

If we were to work out in detail the consequences of man's distorted understanding of himself with respect to the different fields of human culture—looking back over the last 500/600 years of our history—we would discover a law of decline which, in the course of centuries, has come to penetrate our civilization more and more.

A distinguished German historian of church<sup>3</sup> history speaks about an *inner historical necessity*<sup>4</sup> (*innere historische Notwendigkeit*) with respect to the

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<sup>2</sup>In a theological context we would have to add grace.

<sup>3</sup>Hubert Jedin who wrote an excellent book on the Council of Trent.

<sup>4</sup>Necessity, of course, used in an analogous way.

historical process which resulted in the Reformation. This term expresses the fact that it is very difficult for a historical mass or entity to turn around when it has reached, to a certain degree, a critical mass of distortion. In various fields of our culture, we have reached a similar critical mass so that it is more and more unlikely to escape from the historical consequences.

We know the meaning of a function in mathematics. According to a mathematical correspondence, one element of a set is exactly related to each element of this set or another set. Using this term in an analogous way, I came to find more and more that a *functional* relation exists between a distorted understanding of intellect, reason, and will and modern man's behavior and desires, goals and thinking.

Plato's parable of the cave is well known. Now, if the light of intellect is darkened, then it is very difficult for the best members of a society to find their way out from the darkness of the cave towards the light of the sun—the divine light. It is more likely for them (in order to escape a situation which is not felt to be satisfying) simply to dig another cave. Leo Strauss says<sup>5</sup> that, since the distortions of intellect in the wake of the Enlightenment, modern man has not only been caught in a cave which is comparable to Plato's cave but also in a second and third cave. Lonergan analyzed the law of decline and showed that its principle is bias. A whole society can be entangled in a bias.

## 2 A Theoretical Trap

Even a person with a cheerful nature can fall into a pessimistic mood at moments when he or she comes to be fully aware of the power of the function of decline in history in the wake of man's distorted understanding of himself. If a way out cannot be found, if one finds that one is caught in a kind of theoretical trap, the result will not only be a black mood, a mood that will affect one's behavior in society. One's behavior towards one's fellow men will be affected. Then, questions of a certain type will arise. Why should I cooperate with people at work who obviously represent the law of decline which is operative in one's society? Why should I vote for a party at an election if, in the last analysis, my vote will only be for a policy of decline because no existing political party can really offer an alternative between a

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<sup>5</sup>C. Kauffmann, Leo Strauss zur Einführung, p. 19ff.

policy of decline and a policy of progress? Why should I engage myself in my home parish if the local parish priest stands for an erroneous understanding of liturgy and of moral theology? If it is most likely that I cannot convert a person or a society against decline, why cooperate with them?

Now, in order to free oneself from this theoretical trap, one can advert to the following objections:

Christians know that there has been a period of relentless decline since the time when God incarnated himself in Jesus. In the last analysis, Christ is center, mover, and end of history and the law of the Cross is something which is more powerful than any function of decline. The theological virtues of hope, faith, and charity overcome any habits of destruction and decline.

In addition, even within the science of physics, it happens to be the case that a classical physical function or natural law does not fully account for all of the physical matter which allegedly falls under a given law. Scientists of the 19th Century had thought that physical matter could be completely determined by natural laws which can be discovered and expressed in mathematical equations. Contemporary physicists, however, now know that every classical law depends on something which can only be understood and expressed in terms of probability.

In history, with human beings as actors, no function of decline can completely account for the whole of historical reality as this reality has unfolded, let alone the events of our present time. Even in a context that is informed by the most inhuman conditions, counter-movements working against the function of decline create conditions which serve to create islands of humanity. One and the same event in history can present itself as both an element operative within decline and as the starting point or an element which functions within a function of progress. Even under a general law of decline, lines of progress continue to present themselves with regard to many things: developments with respect to the sciences, human rights, social welfare, constitutional democracy, etc. One cannot ignore the fact of progress in different these fields even if we can see that a shadow that is being cast on them by a general law of decline. When I am helped by medical treatment, it is a true help even if the physician who releases me from pain turns out to be someone who is doing research on cells taken from human embryos. I cannot ask every physician about his or her moral standards.

When I am being treated unjustly, it is a true and good help for me to be

vindicated by a judge even if the judge turns out to be someone who heads a pro-abortion committee. When I go to court, I cannot choose who will be my judge. And so, from these examples, we see that the law of decline is not as obvious or as blatant as it might appear at first glance.

Further objections against the power of decline can also be made. Perhaps you have noticed that I have not yet mentioned a very striking argument which tells against the power of decline: the argument of future. A natural law enables a physicist to make precise statements about future events. A historical law of decline, however, only enables one to recognize the direction or vector of a movement, or to classify events in a broad sense. A law of decline seems to have a strange property in this regard: it can be clear in its view of past events but not so with respect to future events. Why then speak about a function or law of decline, or about an inner historical necessity which points to decline?

Here, at last, we sense a need for some kind of clarification. Instead of going more deeply into the law of decline, I would like to offer you a very helpful differentiation: the difference between theoretical and practical reason. An insight into this distinction will shed light on the problems we have mentioned. It is one and the same intellect, reason, and will which is involved in an act of theoretical and practical reason. Yet, they differ from each other to a point even where they do not share the same basic first principle.

### 3 Theoretical and Practical Intellect

What difference distinguishes theoretical from practical reason? They differ in terms of their objects. We know from Aquinas that a sensual or rational capacity receives its specification or is specified by its object. Color is the proper object of sight; sound, the proper object of hearing. And so, it is to be noted that intellectual reason is concerned with what is and practical reason, with what ought to be. What is *is* but what *ought to be* has yet to exist.

What is can serve as an object of inquiry and investigation. It can be asked with respect to the probability of its existence and to its form or nature. In other words, it can be considered under the aspect of truth. What is not yet but ought to be, however, cannot serve in this way as an object of inquiry

and investigation. One cannot ask about its form and nature. What is the nature of what is not yet? We will soon attend to the fact that the form of practical reason is supported by the will.

At this point, we should remind ourselves of the fact that we have a second rational capacity. Our first rational capacity pertains to our ability to have an insight into something. Intellect and reason, understanding and thinking, can be referred to as two modes of this capacity. Our second capacity, on the other hand, refers to our rational appetite or will. The object of our rational appetite is what ought to be done in terms of what is good. By nature, we are ordered towards the principle of good in general. Our rational appetite creates a gravitational field. One pole of this field refers to what we should do; the other, what we should avoid. In terms of Voegelin we can say that we constantly find ourselves in a field of pull and counter-pull. It is this gravitational field which opens or reveals the horizon for our practical reason. Within this gravitational field, our desires, intentions, duties, demands, etc, find or assume a vague kind of order that derives or comes from the resoluteness of our decisions to will what we believe to be good. This vague order, however, is then clarified by the life of our practical reason. It is the task of our practical reason to provide the striving of our will for what is good with concrete means, means that are both proximate and remote.

A metaphor can help one understand the cooperation between will and practical reason. Imagine a man who is a good walker but who is blind. Despite his blindness, he knows the direction to go. Then, imagine another person who has good eyesight but who is lame. He clearly sees the way to go but is not able to walk. The blind walker resembles our will; the lame person with good eyes, our capacity for insight. The capacity of insight which does not exist apart or without being in the will's service is our practical reason.

Practical reason supports our will by choosing the means which are in harmony with the will's striving towards its proper end which is the good in general. Because the will cannot strive to something in general, it needs the service of the practical reason. The will accordingly relates to the means chosen as form relates to matter where the matter in question is such that it does not exist outside or beyond the gravitational field which is exerted by the will. With respect to our capacity for theoretical insight, the objects

are to intellect<sup>6</sup>—the objects on which our intellect depends—as form exists to matter. Hence, while the intellectual reason considers being under the aspect or formality of truth, practical reason attends to it under the aspect of good.<sup>7</sup>

Here one could object as follows. First, we have to know what is before we can know what ought to be done. We cannot separate what is true from what is good. What is good derives its being from what is true. Truth and goodness form a unity. However, while these objections are true from a divine perspective, they do not hold from our limited human perspective. The problem here resembles one pertaining to St. Anselm's proof for God's existence. From God's existence, everything can be derived in terms of God's essence. However, this is true because, in God, an identity exists between existence and essence. Similarly, from a divine viewpoint, what is good can be derived from what is and vice versa. However, for ourselves as human beings, we have to approach being from two sides.<sup>8</sup>

## 4 The First Principle of Theoretical and Practical Reason

Knowing the main difference between theoretical and practical reason, we are able to understand both the first principle of intellectual reason as well as the first principle of practical reason. When we look around, we immediately see things. In reading a book, ideas present themselves to our mind. It can also happen that something comes to our mind from our memory. These

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<sup>6</sup>Intellect is taken here as the possible intellect or *intellectus possibilis*. Things are reversed with respect to the agent intellect or *intellectus agens*.

<sup>7</sup>Let us remind ourselves here of the three different aspects of being developed by classical metaphysics: unity, truth, and good (*unum, verum, and bonum*). A fourth aspect can be added: beauty. These formal aspects of being are called *transcendentals* because they can be ascribed to every being.

<sup>8</sup>See the structure of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. The first part of the *Summa* is about God and about the creation as it derives from God. The second part is about our returning home to God by means of our proper activities. The first part can be understood in terms of the motto: *actus simpliciter prius quam potentia* (first is the act; what is potency can only be derived from an act). The second part begins with the motto: *omne agens agit propter finem* (every agent performs his actions due to its end). Our end is the proper object of our will.

objects all want to be considered under the aspect of truth. We want to ask what-questions and is-it-really-so-questions with regard to them. Let us take an object A. Object A can only be an object of inquiry, investigation, and judgment if A, under the same conditions, is not A and non-A at the same time. This is a principle of being and a principle of thinking. No thinking is possible if a being which exists, at the same time and under the same conditions, is a non-being.<sup>9</sup> And so, one can say that the first principle of intellectual reason is the principle of identity or, expressed negatively, it is the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>10</sup>

As to practical reason, what is first here is not an awareness of something which is but an awareness of what ought to be done. When we are awake, we immediately find ourselves in the gravitational field constituted by what is to be done and what is to be avoided. It starts in the morning when we are immediately aware of this pull: "Get up, don't dawdle" and it goes on throughout the day. And so it can be said that our first impulse is not an awareness of something which exists and of one's desire to know it in terms of what-is-it-questions and is-it-really-so-questions. Instead, one begins with an awareness of pull and of one's responsibility to follow it. Questions of a type which ask Is it right what I am doing? belong in a kind of second place. They depend on our initial awareness of pull and counter-pull.

What is important to grasp here is the right order of consideration. What comes first (the *primum consideratum*) is the experience of pull and counter-pull in one's life. Only in the second place comes one's reflection on it. The Ten Commandments, for instance, exist only as a result of man's reflection on his experience within a gravitational field that is constituted by the struggle between good and evil. Our created intellect is not creative solely by itself. Something must precede it. An insight, for instance, is always an insight into something else (by a *conversio ad phantasma*). Theoretical reason turns to something which is or which is probable. Practical reasons turn to what ought to be done or avoided. And so, in a manner which recalls a traditional definition which says that "good is that which all things seek after," we can understand Aquinas's formulation of the first principle basic to practical reason when he says that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book iv, chapter 3 and 4.

<sup>10</sup>Some authors prefer the positive formulation—e.g. E. Coreth—other authors, the negative one.



avoided.”<sup>11</sup>

## 5 Formal Consideration of Movement

A next step to find a way out of the theoretical trap mentioned above is to be aware of the two sides of any movement which exist with regard to a before and after or, with respect to the movement of human actions, with regard to past and future.

Let us imagine we can follow the movement of a gas molecule on a screen. The molecule is seen as a green point on the screen and the traces of its motion as a green line. After a few seconds we stop monitoring the movement of the gas molecule. The green point on the screen can be seen now both under the aspect of act (it is the result of a movement whose traces can be exactly analyzed) and under the aspect of potency (further movement is possible although its traces cannot be exactly predicted except on the basis of some kind of probability which can be expressed in the equations of a probability calculus).

What we can learn from an analysis of movement is that any point of any movement can be considered both in terms of act and in terms of potency. From the viewpoint of act, it is possible to analyze the traces which a movement has left. From the viewpoint of potency, however, it is much more difficult or it is even impossible to analyze or to predict what movement is to come. In addition, only under the pure conditions of an experiment is it possible for us to abstract from all the many variables which would normally confront us in real conditions. The number of these unknown variables depends on the degree of being which exists with regard to a given object. With regard to man who is a free being, we are confronted with very many bundles of unknown variables.

When applying this insight to the movement of a human being or to a historic entity, we come to understand that, from the viewpoint of act and result, the

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<sup>11</sup>S.th. I-IIae, 94, a. 2 c. "Now as being is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so good is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that good is that which all things seek after. Hence this is the first precept of law, that good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided."

traces left by human actions can serve as an object of inquiry but this is much less the case from the viewpoint of potency. Every prediction of future events is only an extrapolation from facts which are already known.

We are now able to see a positive relation between the viewpoint or formality of act and the specificity of intellectual reason. Intellectual reason is concerned with grasping the nature of what is. First, something has to exist—it must be in the status of an act—before it can become an object of inquiry. So, it is clear that, when we look at history and contemporary events purely from the viewpoint or specificity of intellectual reason, we cannot but avoid seeing history and our present time as a function of some kind.

## 5.1 The Viewpoint of Reasonable Hope

Things differ, however, when we turn to practical reason. The object of practical reason is not a thing or an action that has happened but an action in terms of its goodness. What is shifts into a position or state of potency with regard to the order of good. What is good depends on the will's intention. A medicine for a disease per se is neither good nor evil. Only can the intention of an action in terms of how a physician uses the medicine be judged as either good or evil. A weapon per se is neither good nor evil but only our use of it.

It is important to experience and to understand how the light changes whereby we see reality, depending on whether we turn to it under the aspect of what is or under the aspect of what ought to be done in the order of good. All judgments in human affairs remain as judgments but, at the same time, the horizon of judgment is widened to include the horizon of reasonable hope.

Let us assume a situation where we are engaged in a conversation with a priest or politician. Under the first aspect, my focus will be on how an opinion expressed by my interlocutor will fall under this or that category of history, ideas, or whatever. But, under the second aspect, my focus will shift to how I can cooperate in some way in order to bring forth good fruits for either our church parish or civil state even if I am not able fully to accept the statement or judgment of my interlocutor.

Under the first aspect, I cannot but avoid—and we should not try to avoid it—judging an opinion which has or could be expressed by my interlocutor (whether priest or politician). But, under the second aspect—when we have to add and attend to a whole group of new unknown variables—my judgment

becomes part of the probability of a reasonable hope with respect to possible future developments. Here, I am being asked to make a decision about what is better in order to break with the law of decline: either to offer some kind of cooperation, or to refuse it. What is more reasonable with respect the possibility of changing the mind of my interlocutor?

To avoid any misinterpretation, we should not as follows. The fact that practical reason relies on the gravitation field that is formed by our rational appetite does not mean that some kind of door is opened toward subjectivism. We are not free to choose our last goal. Our last goal is given to us by nature. We are only free to choose the concrete means by which we think we can achieve our last goal. Certain actions are evil per se. Moral theology speaks of actions which are intrinsically evil (*intrinsece malum*<sup>12</sup>). We never should agree with an action that is evil per se; we never should allow it. But, in many cases, we are not confronted with an action which is evil per se but with a very complicated situation in which an evil per se is involved.

To give you an example, in the last general election in my country, we could make a reasonable choice between two political parties. But, in their respective party manifestos, none of them spoke explicitly against abortion although abortion is an action which is evil per se. Is it better thus to not vote at all or to vote for that party which, from the perspective of good, will more likely act in favor of my country?

With regard to this example above, we would need to make further distinctions in order to work out the difference between willing an action directly<sup>13</sup> versus accepting an action that has been willed with a good intention but which has caused some bad consequences. I cannot go into details here, but I would like to mention another helpful distinction: the difference between individual ethics, or virtue ethics, and political ethics.

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<sup>12</sup>Intrinsically evil actions refer to those actions which, at root, destroy the conditions that make for the gravitational field of good order. For example, the presupposition for any kind of conversation is that we should trust each other. Lies violate this trust. They are evil per se because they destroy the presupposition of any human conversation.

<sup>13</sup>Ethics treats this difference under the term *voluntarium indirectum*.

## 6 Virtue Ethics and Political Ethics

We can come to understand this difference on the basis of the European experience of civil wars which occurred in the wake of religious wars which occurred in the 16th Century. When we look at the situation in France in the 16th Century, we see a kingdom on the verge of destruction and ruin because of struggles between the Huguenots (the French Protestants) and the Catholics. A group of thinkers at the king's court argued that the main task of a sovereign is not to see himself as a judge in matters relating to the highest truths. The sovereign's main task is to care for how persons can live together in peace. The most well-know member of this group was Jean Bodin (1530-1596), a very humble Catholic, who was a gifted preacher and writer. On seeing the horrors of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, he wrote a book, *De la Republique*, where he explained an insight that he had: a government should try to provide people with basic foundations and not try to realize any religious values.

So, in a way, individual ethics or virtue ethics are opposed to political ethics. With individual ethics, the highest values take priority over all other values. A wise person is a man who knows how to order his life by reason according to directives which stem from the structure and form of his rational appetite. A truly religious man has learned to subordinate everything to his love for God. Hence, in an extreme case, he would willingly die for his belief and faith. But, in contrast, political ethics tries to provide for the basic elements of man's social existence, elements and conditions which the realization of other, higher values must presuppose. Although Bodin was a man of high moral qualities and although he was convinced of the truth of the Catholic faith, he also knew that he could not apply his convictions to persons who did not share in his convictions without provoking violence.

From this distinction, we learn that we should not expect a political party to realize all those values which are true values for us. On the other hand, this does not mean that a politician should be relieved of his duty and responsibility to make judgments according to high personal moral standards. It remains that a main problem in politics is to find a right balance between basic and higher values.

## 7 Résumé

Our starting point was a statement about my experience of narrowness with respect to reality from the viewpoint of theoretical reason. For me, it was a relief to come to understand more and more about the viewpoint of practical reason<sup>14</sup> and its cooperation with the human will. From the perspective of God, being is an identity between truth and goodness. But, for us, we have to achieve being in two ways. At the beginning of one way, being is present to us in terms of what is. But, at the beginning of the other way, being is present to us as something which should be done. Theoretical and practical reason complement each other. If we are clear about this twofold approach toward being, we should better understand a dilemma which constantly confronts us in reading the bible, particularly the New Testament. On the one hand, many statements say that we should not judge our brothers and our fellow men. We have no right to judge others. But, on the other hand, many sharp judgments and verdicts are pronounced over a number of different persons. However, our dilemma is solved if we can see that, from the perspective of truth, we have to judge but, from the perspective of good, we have both to judge and to hand our judgment over to God because, in the last analysis, only God rules the world. He is the Lord of history. We cannot enter the inner chambers contained in the hearts of other persons in order to know their true intentions and motivations. Some light is given to us which allows us to see what is good for us but, in the end, we cannot see what is good for the world.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we can trust that what is truly good for us is good for the world since, by doing good, we can know that, in some way, we participate in God's government and providence.

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<sup>14</sup>Look at the structure of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa*. The first part is about God and creatures from the perspective of theoretical reason. The first part of the second part is about man's returning home to God by his proper activities.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Plato, *Republic*, Oxford World's Classics; Robin Waterfield in his Introduction on Plato's Moral Egoism: "good for me coincides with good for others."