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ENS, VERUM AND BONUM. AQUINAS ON EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

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Abstract

This scholarship article explains how Thomas Aquinas understood the very beginning of the intellect both practical and theoretical in a person. a) On commencement of the abstraction of the first universal concepts: ens, verum et bonum simpliciter, universal or wisdom seeds. b) On formulating the first practical commandments, and the second ones in the integral person, in quantum talis, compound of real nature or essence, and act of being. c) Therefore, about the use of reason and morality, as general level «do (universal) good and avoid (universal) evil», as particular level «do (human) good and avoid (human) evil». d) The natural law (ethics) is naturally derived or concluded from integral human beings (anthropology).

Keywords: Aquinas; epistemology; ethics;

1. 1.INTRODUCTION. THE INTELLECTUAL AND UNIVERSAL CONCEPTS: ENS, VERUM ET BONUM

In his work it is affirmed, although Aquinas doesn't enter into detail regarding age, that only from a certain period onwards —months of life— it can be talked of intellectual apprehension of the universal ens (being), truth and good. In his philosophy the first concepts -also known as seeds of wisdom (S. Th. I-II, q. 63, a. 1, co)-, are only abstracted and formed after a certain stage of life, given that both a baby of few weeks of age (due to insufficient mental development) and an adult that suffers severe mental damages have their internal sensory powers –common sense, imagination, memory and cogitative-impeded from functioning correctly and producing the species sensibilis.

The use of reason depends in a certain manner on the use of the sensitive powers; wherefore, while the senses are tired and the interior sensitive powers hampered, man has not the perfect use of reason, as we see in those who are asleep or delirious. Now the sensitive powers are situate in corporeal organs



(brain, hands, legs, etc); and therefore, so long as the latter are hindered, the action of the former is of necessity hindered also; and likewise, consequently, the use of reason. Now children are hindered in the use of these powers on account of the lack of development of the brain; wherefore they have perfect use neither of these powers nor of reason (Sum. Theol. I, q. 101, a. 2, co).

Internal sensory powers are organic in the brain. They are necessary for rationality —although intelligence and will are inorganic powers—, given that the active intellect needs the species sensibilis over which it acts, illuminating and producing the species intelligibilis. Finally this species intelligibilis is received by the passive intellect, which produces the universal conceptio or simpliciter notion.

In (this) state (...) in which the soul is united to a passible body, it is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually, except by turning to the phantasms (...), because the intellect, being a power that does not make use of a corporeal organ, would in no way be hindered in its act through the lesion of a corporeal organ, if for its act there were not required the act of some power that does make use of a corporeal organ. Now sense, imagination and the other powers belonging to the sensitive part, make use of a corporeal organ (brain). Wherefore it is clear that for the intellect to understand actually, not only when it acquires fresh knowledge, but also when it applies knowledge already acquired, there is need for the act of the imagination and of the other powers. For when the act of the imagination is hindered by a lesion of the corporeal organ, for instance in a case of frenzy; or when the act of the memory is hindered, as in the case of lethargy, we see that a man is hindered from actually understanding things of which he had a previous knowledge (Sum. Theol. I, q. 101, a. 2, co).

In this sense, he further adds that “human understanding, in the beginning, is [like a tablet, on which nothing is written] (Aristotle, De anima, III 4; 429b, 31), but, later, acquires knowledge through the senses by virtue of the agent intellect” (De Veritate, q. 18, a. 7, co). Lack of cognitive development means that the active intellect in the first weeks of his life, finds himself obnubilated and inoperative in act. Although external senses may be stimulated correctly by external sensations. V.g., baby moves his (or her) head toward a sound that attracts him, or correctly follows with his eyes the golden ball used by the doctor to check his sight. Nevertheless, the internal senses, caused by poor functioning of its organ, are not able to supply the species sensibilis to the active intellect, and as such this one cannot present anything to the passive intellect, which consequently cannot express any universal or simpliciter concept.

Hence, since it is necessary that moistness, especially in the brain, abound in children, and it is the brain in which imagination, natural judgment (cogitative), memory, and common sense have their organs, the acts of these powers must be particularly hindered, and, consequently, understanding, which receives something immediately from these powers, and turns to them whenever it is in act, must be hindered, too.

It is clear, therefore, that for Aquinas, during the first period of his or her life, the brain is still not sufficiently developed to present any species sensibilis to the active intellect. Continuing with the argument, the author clearly distinguishes between intellectual understanding of the first universal concepts: ens, verum, bonum, and the mere feeling of a person that, due to malfunctioning of brain - whether baby or person that entered adulthood with severe mental deficiencies- possess internal senses but is still not able to offer any species sensibilis to the active agent.

A child is potentially understanding, not as though he has not yet the nature enabling him to understand, but as having an obstacle to understanding, since he is prevented from understanding (...).(Therefore there was some time when he didn't understand actively, but only in potency) he is not said to have the power of understanding because the possible intellect, which is the principle of understanding, can be joined to him, but because it is already in contact with him and is prevented from exercising its proper action; so that, upon the removal of the obstacle, he immediately understands.(Contra Gentiles, lib. 2 cap. 60).

He does not understand in act because the passive intellect has not yet received any species intelligibilis from the active agent. Such persons are certainly capable of reactions, but it must be noted that they are purely sensory reactions. They are not intellectual apprehension nor are they driven by the will (De Veritate, q. 18, a. 8, ad 2).

It must be pointed out that the object of the intellect or reason is the nature, essence or quidditas of being (ens). The way of people know nature of ens is through senses and accidents as if they were doorways. For this, the reason it is called reason, because it is a discursive knowledge (Super Sent., lib. 3 d. 35 q. 2 a. 2 qc. 1 co). Furthermore, the operation of the intellect or reason is two-fold. One is apprehending nature or essence of beings. Other is producing first principles of intellect or reason

practical or theoretical; composing (affirming) or dividing (denying) a sentence or precept, theoretical or practical (Expositio Peryermeneias, pr. 1). In this sense, it shall be argued that practical understanding as theoretical reason have as object the truth. But theoretical reason involves the truth itself, while practical reason involves the truth ordered to the operation. Therefore, the good and fair truth should rule and govern human action, i.e., rational action.

Aquinas' concept of nature undoubtedly has Aristotelian roots, and he uses the concept of nature in his books on both physics and metaphysics. Since then there has been a legitimate use of the term nature in both empirical and metaphysical senses. As such, it can be affirmed that the concept of nature is analogical, which means that in each case the term nature is applied differently. Man possesses nature, animal possesses nature, plant possesses nature and stone that falls to ground also possesses nature. Therefore, it would be erroneous to categorise each of them in the same way and simply label all of them as possessing nature. Aquinas is always very clear on this point. Moreover, the natural doctrine means that all beings possess in themselves the principle of action, which implies autonomy. I.e. all substances by way of their respective natures possess intrinsic tendencies toward their own ends.

As such, nature adds to essence its aspect of movement and principle of action. In this sense, the concept of appetitus, just as that of nature, is also necessarily an analogical concept. So, the nature of every substance tends to its end and the appetitus will depend on the specific nature of each ens. Therefore, it would similarly be a grave error to gather all rational ens (with intellectual appetite or will) and irrational ens (without intellectual will) and put in all of the them identically the same label, appetitus. (S. Th, I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co).

2. THE NATURAL LAW

In light of this doctrine, it can be asserted that natural law presupposes a knowledge of nature in general and of human nature in particular. The enunciation of practical precepts of natural law are derived from the first universal, ontological and simpliciter concepts. Practical reason shall only produce them, naturally, as moral imperatives ordered to real actions -both universal "do good (general) and avoid evil (general)" and particular "do good (human) and avoid evil (human)- when intellect and will (of every person) already know and desire (or do not desire and avoid) in act the universal concepts of ens-no ens, true-false, good-bad and the concrete concepts of human good and evil. Which implies knowing and desiring the human nature and the human inclinations in quantum talils. This is to say, that natural law is also fruit of moral experience, "our understanding of principles, for that is very imperfect, come to us from nature and not because of our search for truth" (Contra Gentiles, lib. 3 cap. 37). Reason uses natural human tendencies -i.e., tendencies governed and a result of intelligence and will- as indicators, signalling to practical reason and will; upon which part of human nature they should focus to produce the precepts of natural law. And "it is as natural as it is befitting to the principles of human nature" (Sum. Theol. I, q. 99, a. 1. Co).

Using the analogy between the order of theoretical and practical truths, Aquinas determines the natural law as rational, as *ordo preceptorum*, because *ordo* necessarily implies rationality. For this, the natural law is the gathering of the first precepts desired by will and understood by practical reasoning of all people (with use of reason). The secondary precepts of the natural law are the precepts, necessarily, immediately and naturally derived from the first precepts, understood and desired by most of people. Hereafter, it will be shown how Aquinas related universal tendencies of each person with the first principles of natural law.

Hence this is the first precept of law, that 1st) "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided." *All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this. (...) Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law. Because in man there is (...) an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of 2nd) preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. (...) there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially,*

according to that nature which he has in common with other animals: and in virtue of this inclination, those things are said to belong to the natural law, [which nature has taught to all animals], such as 3rd) sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth. (...), there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, 4th) to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination (S. Th. I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co).

This locus deals exclusively with the human beings in quantum talis, as a rational beings with human inclinations in quantum talis; i.e., ruled and governed by reason. “As, in man, reason rules and commands the other powers, so all the natural inclinations belonging to the other powers must needs be directed according to reason. Wherefore it is universally right for all men, that all their inclinations should be directed according to reason” (S.Th. I-II, q. 94, a. 4, ad 3). This supposes that human inclination refers to man in quantum talis, that which is genuine and specifically human, not the conception and inclination that a serial killer could have toward life of other people. Or sexual inclination that a paedophile, rapist could have with “the reason (...) perverted by passion, or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature” (Sum. Theol. I-II, q. 94, a. 4, co).

Aquinas claims that a completely free man —given that who desires doing evil actions toward others, killing, raping, committing adultery, etc., is not entirely free, because, in certain sense, he is slave of his passions — is the man in quantum talis. This expression man in quantum talis or simply person makes reference to which is distinct, genuine and exclusive of human species. I.e., act according to intelligence and will, therefore in accordance with human nature; also, to act in accordance with those tendencies that are genuinely human: not to kill, rape, steal, etc.

God acts in everything in accordance to their nature; thus in natural things (animals like dolphins or dogs) he intervene giving them the power of acting determined by their respective natures (...). Nevertheless (in human beings) with free will intervene giving them the power of acting freely (right or wrong) (Super Sent., lib. 2 d. 25 q. 1 a. 1, ad 3).

In this sense, natural inclinations in quantum talia of a genuine individual in quantum talis are those that arise from his human nature. Inclinations of genuine human beings arise from their rational nature, which is the genuine form specifically human. I.e. the inclinations in quantum talia are naturally in accordance with the human nature and spring from the rational nature. This is the way by which people have their proper place in human species and these genuine tendencies belong to natural law. As is asserted in this text: “natural law belongs to those things to which a man is inclined naturally: and among these it is proper for man to be inclined to act according to reason” (S. Th. I-II, q. 94, a. 4, co).

It does not mean that: a) People who act voluntarily in an unethical way cease to be free persons or truly human, “the will stands undetermined in regard to many things, it is not under necessity in regard to everything but only in regard to those things to which it is determined by a natural inclination (first precepts of the natural law) (...). (Therefore) it can desire good or evil” (De veritate, q. 22, a.6, co). But it means that this particular person acting badly is not following which is natural and specifically human in quantum talis. In this sense is self-enslaving (John 8:34). “Any created will can degenerate in its act because come from nothing and therefore can deteriorate” (Super Sent., d. 39, q. 1, a.1, co). b) Any tendency of any person driven or governed by practical reason —as good as it may be, being attracted to cure the wounds of injured people— belongs to natural law. Because there are free, rational and good people that do not feel naturally inclined to engage in these acts. c) A murderer, robber or rapist search their bad. For Aquinas, everybody search some good, but sometimes this good is evil disguised as good (Sum. Theol. I, q. 48, a. 3, co). A murderer seeks his good, on his own terms, to satisfy his anger. A robber seeks his good on his own terms, to satisfy his greed. A rapist seeks his good on his own terms, to satisfy his sexual appetite, etc. In summary, for a tendency to belong to natural law it must fulfil these two requirements: 1) being governed and being the result of practical reason and that 2) every person tends naturally to that good.

In this sense, for our author, the law, in this case natural law, is defined as “an ordinance of reason for the common good” (Sum. Theol. I-II q. 90, a. 4, co). Consequently, the essential part of natural law is that it is the product of practical reason ordered toward good —universal, not selfish and subjective good

of any particular person, as we have seen before. This means that there is essentially no law without an order to good simpliciter, ontological or with transcendental property.

An erroneous definition of natural law would be define it simply as a natural instinct of any man. However, the true and fair definition of natural law is only the product of human reasoning as a precept of the intelligence of any person toward his ends. Consequently, it is wrong and unfair for Thomas Aquinas to confuse natural law with the inclination of any person. On the contrary, he maintains that natural law was the product of the practical reason of persons, directing actions and inclinations teleologically toward human end. Even though if natural law must govern human inclinations which are a very contingent matter. This is the ethical essence of people, given that “the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation of the eternal law” (S. Th. I-II, q. 91, a.2, co). Eternal law considers all creation acting and following its own end in order to the universal common good. Some beings rationally and freely, such as man, while other irrationally.

With respect to the secondary precepts it must be said that the precepts of natural law —v.g., do not steal, do not kill or return which has been lent to you— are specific, and necessary, conclusions of practical reason derived directly from the first precepts. These secondary precepts are fair and good in most of the cases but can fail on occasions (Sum. Theol. I-II, q. 94, a.4, ad.2).

Consequently we must say that the natural law, as to general principles, is the same for all, both as to rectitude (will, wanting) and as to knowledge (intellect). But as to certain matters of detail, which are conclusions, as it were, of those general principles, it is the same for all in the majority of cases, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge; and yet in some few cases it may fail, both as to rectitude(will, wanting), by reason of certain obstacles (...), and as to knowledge (intellect), since in some the reason is perverted by passion, or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature; thus formerly, theft, although it is expressly contrary to the natural law (i.e., toward a second precept of moral natural law, not toward a first one), was not considered wrong among the Germans (...) (Sum. Theol. I-II, q. 94, a. 4. Co).

There is a natural moral limit that may not be transgressed. At the most, the errors in of understanding and volition would be related to the second precepts of the natural law, never respect to the first precepts. With respect to these first precepts, not even the intellect could be deceived, nor will desire them, irrespective of how much pressure is placed on them by lower appetites. However, respect to the goods of secondary precepts of natural law, although the will is an immaterial and spiritual power, could be influenced and to accept what lower passions, of the very same person, offer her. Then, the will reaches that the intellect only focus on the positive aspects that the evil action has. The universal inclinations exclusively occur as a consequence of an intellectual process which orders that persons incline towards the universal goods. It can happen that a particular man chooses to act against an universal good, this is because persons are naturally free and responsible for their actions. Even so, human beings always have to seek good under any aspect, sub specie boni; because if not, they would not pursue it neither voluntarily nor guiltily. For example, someone who commits suicide to stop suffering or a particular man who kills his own daughter (filicide) to satisfy his hatred against her mother

But in our own case that which causes motion as a desirable good differs from that which causes motion as an intelligible good, though each causes motion as an unmoved mover. This is particularly evident in the case of an incontinent person; for according to his reason he is moved by an intelligible good, but according to his concupiscible power he is moved by something pleasant to the senses, which, while it seems to be good, is not good absolutely but only with some qualification.—However, this kind of difference cannot be found in the first intelligible and the first desirable good. But the first intelligible and the first desirable good must be the same. The reason is that a concupiscible good, which is not an intelligible good, is merely an apparent good; but the first good “must be an object of will,” i.e., an object desired by intellectual appetite. For will belongs to the intellectual order and not merely to that of concupiscible appetite. And this is so because what is desired by the concupiscible power seems to be good because it is desired; for concupiscence perverts the judgment of reason (sensitive appetite always follows the judgement of practical reason) insofar as something pleasant to sense seems to be good to reason. But what is desired by intellectual appetite is desired because it seems to be good in itself. For “understanding” as such, i.e., the act of intellection, which is moved in a way by an intelligible object, “is the principle of desire.” Therefore it is evident that the object of concupiscible appetite is good only when it is desired through a dictate of reason. Hence it cannot be the first good, but only that which,

because it is good, moves desire and is at once both appetible and intelligible (so the intelligible good) (Sententia Metaphysicae, lib. 12, l. 7).

With respect to synderesis, it should be indicated that, for Aquinas, it is the natural habit quasi innatus that reminds to reason the precepts of natural law (De veritate, q. 16, a. 2, co), which are the principles of practical reason (De veritate, q. 16, a. 1, co).

a) Conscience is the act of practical reason, b) natural law is more precisely the fructus of practical reason c) and the habit of first principles of natural law is the synderesis. Synderesis asserts universally the precepts of natural law, whilst conscience establishes which must be realised or omitted in each particular case. Therefore, synderesis cannot fail, because, it cannot get confused by any passion (Super sent, lib. 2, d. 39, q. 3, a. 1, ad 1). But the conscience can fail in applying the general rule to the particular case or conclusion. The synderesis knows the first principles of natural law when practical intellect produces them. So, the potency goes before its habit. Synderesis saves and reminds the first principles to practical intellect when it goes in search of them. "Synderesis is said to be the law of our mind, because it is a habit containing the precepts of the natural law, which are the first principles of human actions" (Sum. Theol. I-II, q. 94, a. 1, ad 2).

The natural law appears unclear and complicated but at the same time attractive and desirable for the motive that the practical reason more than participating in the divine understanding, participates in the divine will. Because of this, natural law is complex to understand but easy to desire it. If synderesis is the habit of the practical intellect, similarly, intelligence is the habit of the speculative intellect when we understand something. V.g., an arithmetic or moral rule can be conserved despite of thinking only occasionally about it. Although "those in whom the imaginative, cogitative, and memorative powers are of better disposition, are better disposed to understand" (Sum. Theol. I, q. 85. a. 7, co).

3. HUMAN NATURAL LAW NATURALLY CONCLUDED OR DERIVED FROM THE INTEGRAL ONTOLOGY

Bonum coincides with ens, however, the concept of bonum adds to ens a relationship with appetite. Bonum formally refers to good operations according to nature of real ens to which it is always connected. Ens which supposes a bonum (human perfection) is not only human nature, nor is only (act of) being, nor the sole operations, but rather ens that supposes a bonum is, above all, a requirement of practical reason, which knowing itself and knowing other beings naturally produces the natural law, which is a participation of the eternal law in rational creature. Therefore, it is practical human intellect that knowing its own rational human nature, knowing the nature of other creatures, knowing its own tendencies and aptitudes, produces naturally and necessarily a practical judgement or precept of natural law that implies a self-perfection. This occurs because people intrinsically possess an (act of) being, a human nature, and some operations in search of their own good, perfection and end. This operations pursuit to transmit and communicate their own perfection or actuality according to natural law.

It is important to highlight that the only beings that freely demand an end are the rational beings; nevertheless this status implies naturally some freedoms and responsibilities. Sui generis, irrational beings like cats, worms or apple trees as well seek to realise their end, not completely free but determined by their respective natures. Freedom and responsibility in the rational being are substantially joined because man is naturally, by his will, self-determining and arbiter of his own actions and as such not only free, with rights, but also responsible for his own actions.

Moral good is radically initiated in the act of being of person given that, he is an immortal ens, although his essence or nature is composed of form and matter. His form is such that it is not simply substantial form of material body (quod), but also, at the same time, spiritual. It can act separately from matter (quo), and therefore it is universally open to the ontological good.

It must necessarily be allowed that the principle of intellectual operation which we call the soul, is a principle both incorporeal and subsistent. For it is clear that by means of the intellect man can have knowledge of all corporeal things. Now whatever knows certain things cannot have any of them in its own nature; because that which is in it naturally would impede the knowledge of anything else. Thus we observe that a sick man's tongue being vitiated by a feverish and bitter humour, is insensible to anything sweet, and everything seems bitter to it. Therefore, if the intellectual principle contained the nature of a body it would be unable to know all bodies. Now everybody has its own determinate nature. Therefore it

is impossible for the intellectual principle to be a body (...). We must conclude, therefore, that the human soul, which is called the intellect or the mind, is something incorporeal and subsistent (Sum. Theol. I, q. 75, a. 2, co).

In this sense, moral good formally refers to free and human operations, according to their ultimate end which they must necessarily search, “Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided” (Sum. Theol. I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co) . It should be observed that physical good, which is the good that physical agents search (physical or natural agents in the sense of irrational), is much less than that free agents search. Even though bonum is initially in the (act of) being and (essence or) nature of these irrational beings their operations are very limited, given that these beings are not able to apprehend intellectually the concept of ultimate end.

4. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded indicating that Aquinas’ human ethics is a natural consequence of his ontology (anthropology, epistemology), particularly the concepts of being (ens) and good (bonum) in man. The only legitimate sense of the concept human nature —when he writes about natural moral law— is the metaphysical, teleological, and free one. Thus, the natural moral law is essentially metaphysical as the concept of human nature is.

Further, if nature is conceived only in a material sense, as biological or physical nature; it must be affirmed that man does not possess such nature. Given that, man has specific and genuinely a rational nature. He is, above all, a rational and free being, which can be all things (quodammodo omnia) by his intellect (Sum. Theol. I, q. 16, a. 3 co).

Nevertheless, if nature is conceived in a metaphysical sense, as principle of operations, every being possesses a nature or essence, which specifies its genuine way of being and acting. In this sense, man does possess a human nature, that is, a free and rational nature. Furthermore, a person who has never reached the age of reason, not because of it should be considered less man. As, he possesses in this life, naturally, an intelligence and will open to infinite.

Inclinations of human nature are ordered hierarchically where the most important ones are those that distinguish man from other species. He is the most perfect being of earth by his rational nature (Sum. Theol. I, q. 29, a. 1, co). There is in him some inclinations to good (bonum) corresponding to his rational nature. V.g., his natural inclination to seek the truth and to live in society. Therefore, man can move himself to seek his own good, moral perfection and rational end. “Do and pursue good (intellectum and universal), and avoid the contrary” (Sum. Theol. I-II, q. 94, a.2, co).

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