JUSTICE and CHARITY

An Introduction to Aquinas’s Moral, Economic, and Political Thought

Michael P. Krom
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St. Thomas Aquinas follows the Aristotelian tradition of dividing practical philosophy, or the “philosophy of human affairs,” into (1) moral philosophy, (2) economics, and (3) political philosophy. In addition, he distinguishes between the truths we can know via reason (philosophy) and those we can know via revelation (theology). After exploring Aquinas’s teachings, we will look at the relevance of Aquinas today in light of Catholic social thought (CST). Thus, the book is divided as follows.

Part 1: Moral Theory

Chapter 1: The Natural Desire for Happiness (Moral Philosophy)

Outline: the goal of moral philosophy is to promote a proper understanding of natural, imperfect happiness and the means to obtaining it; in particular, natural happiness requires the formation of the cardinal virtues, of which justice is the most important; the natural desire for happiness leads one to recognize the limitations of acquired virtue, thus pointing to the need for grace.

Chapter 2: Grace and Perfect Happiness (Moral Theology)

Outline: the goal of moral theology is to promote a proper understanding of perfect happiness and the means to obtaining it; in particular, perfect happiness requires the infused virtues, of which charity is the most important, in conjunction with the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit; knowing the person
and life of Christ is central to living rightly, and one grows in virtue via participation in sacramental life.

Part 2: Economic Theory

Chapter 3: The Goods of the Earth and the Good Life (Economic Philosophy)

Outline: while the goods of the earth should be used so as to promote the happiness of all, this is best achieved by a system of private ownership; yet the owners of the goods of the earth have a moral responsibility to use them for the good of others; most importantly, justice is the virtue by which one determines the proper ownership and use of such goods.

Chapter 4: The Goods of the Earth and Perfect Happiness (Economic Theology)

Outline: in theological tradition, to be rich means to be in least need of the goods of the earth, and thus, to the extent that one owns such goods, to be most ready to share them with others; doing so requires following the order of love and grasping the theological meaning of value; charity guides one in such acts of giving.

Part 3: Political Theory

Chapter 5: The Common Good in the Earthly City (Political Philosophy)

Outline: political philosophy’s aim is to promote life in accordance with the acquired virtues, and thus human law must be rooted in natural law as applicable to the particular circumstances of the community; this is what it means to promote the common good; put differently, the law must determine how justice can be best served in the lives of the citizens; this chapter concludes with a discussion of the just limits of obedience to political authority.

Chapter 6: The Twofold Citizenship of the Christian Wayfarer (Political Theology)

Outline: political theology’s aim is to promote perfect happiness in the Body of Christ, the Church; this requires determining the best relationship between the Church and the state in particular circumstances, pointing all
people toward God as the fount of justice; put differently, the Church promotes charity among Catholics, and by Catholics toward all others; this chapter concludes with a discussion of the charitable limits of obedience to political authority.

**Part 4: The Perennial Teaching of the Angelic Doctor**

*Chapter 7: Aquinas’s Moral, Economic, and Political Theory Today*

Outline: Aquinas must be “updated” so as to apply his insights to the questions of our times; in this chapter we see how Aquinas is compatible with CST but also helps us to understand and articulate it; in morality our focus is on sexual ethics; in economics we look at our wage-based, globalized economy, as well as at care for creation; in politics we look at key concepts that arise due to the dominance of modern liberal democracies.

**Appendix: Schema of the Virtues**

The schema in this appendix provides the principal distinctions between the types of virtues discussed throughout the book.
Introduction

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

—Philippians 4:8

Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man’s whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I.1.1

Peace is not merely the absence of war, nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Rather it is founded on a correct understanding of the human person and requires the establishment of an order based on justice and charity.

—Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church 494

One of the central aspects of Christianity is its conviction that discipleship requires some form of separation from the world. The Christian is to be “in the world but not of it.” While this pithy adage can be interpreted in a variety
of ways, we could say generally that it contains a twofold teaching: on the one 
hand, Christians seek the peace from on high that the world cannot give; on 
the other hand, Christians are sent forth into the world to evangelize those 
captured in worldliness. Christians see themselves as “the light of the world” 
(Matt. 5:14), called to live among those dwelling in darkness so that the lost 
too may come to glorify God.

There is no doubt that the world today labors under darkness and that 
it needs a great light. We live in a time of ideological conflicts, in which the 
citizens of the nations of the modern world seem incapable of agreeing upon 
even the most basic of moral, economic, or political principles. Civil discourse 
has been replaced with violent protest, and reasoned dialogue with character 
assassination. It seems clear enough to the Christian that even the modern 
world, despite all of its self-proclaimed greatness, has proven itself incapable 
of establishing the peace that is the desire of the nations. Political parties 
and philosophical theories have shown themselves to be all too human and 
only remind us of the world’s own pithy adage: man is a wolf to man. The 
Church, then, the “city set on a hill” (Matt. 5:14), continues to stand today 
as a refuge for those who recognize that no earthly city can provide a lasting 
peace and that true citizenship is from on high.

Sadly, this conception of the Church as the alternative to the world would 
hardly be evident to those outside the Church today, and even to many within 
it. While Catholics have often seen the two-thousand-year unity of the Church 
as a response to the problem of exponential divisions within Protestantism in 
its five-hundred-year history, even the most ardent defender of Catholicism 
cannot deny that the Church today looks very much to be both in and of the 
world. Lay Catholics publicly deride one another (often for the benefit of their 
respective political parties), and clergy at the highest levels engage in nasty 
public battles over central teachings of the Church. Even those within the 
Church self-identify using political terms, calling themselves conservative or 
liberal Catholics as if to suggest that their highest allegiance is to party politics 
rather than to the Body of Christ. Catholics appear to be quite comfortable 
in the world, giving the impression that they are Republicans or Democrats 
first, and Catholics second. For all too many, being Catholic is like retaining 
an old-world ethnicity in the US: one privately celebrates feast days and one’s 
cultural heritage but in public speaks and thinks in the terms dictated by the 
nation. While the Church does not force us to reject political citizenship, she 
demands that we direct it to the heavenly, and we can do that by heeding her 
call to engage the world rather than conform to it.

I wrote this book out of the conviction that those who want to heed the 
Church’s call to engage our culture need to look to the past; in particular, they
should familiarize themselves with the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Church’s Angelic Doctor. This book sets before itself the task of introducing the reader to Aquinas’s moral, economic, and political theory both because he is a superb teacher and because his system of thought provides an interpretive key to the Church’s engagement with contemporary society.

While some have seen Pope Francis as a harbinger of a new way of engaging the world that looks less to Christian patrimony than to new modes of thought, he himself has never challenged an oft-repeated teaching issued from the highest levels of Church authority: those who want to think with the Church must have “St. Thomas as a teacher.” As a matter of fact, the Holy Father once responded to his critics by saying, “I want to repeat clearly that the morality of Amoris Laetitia [one of the central documents of his pontificate] is Thomist, the morality of the great Thomas.” Whether or not one sees Pope Francis as advancing the Church’s teaching or departing from it, the point here is that the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas are still relevant to those who want to speak or think with the Church today and join in her new evangelization to the modern world.

Further, in addition to Aquinas’s influence within the Church, many a convert to Catholicism has read his or her way into the Church thanks in no small part to Aquinas. For both Catholics and non-Catholics, despite the cultural and historical distance that separates us from him, Aquinas continues to be seen as a guide to living well, to living in the truth in the face of the complex moral, economic, and political issues that we face each day.

Admittedly, the lamentable divisions within the Church are at least in part a result of disagreements over the value and centrality of Aquinas for us today, and thus it is unclear how Aquinas can help us foster charitable dialogue within a fractured Church. As a Byzantine Catholic myself and thus one who sees tremendous value in retrieving other voices within the Church, I am wary of giving the impression that we should only listen to Aquinas. Byzantine Catholics have often been the victims of a narrow-mindedness among their Roman brethren, and those within the Roman rite who have tried to bring voices other than Aquinas’s to the dialogue have sometimes been met with the same kind of treatment.

The riches of the Church are vast, and there is a veritable cloud of intellectual witnesses to whom we could turn, but we must be aware that Aquinas is a central voice and one which the Church has consistently asked us to heed. The goal is not to close off thinking but to open it up, to understand what the Church is teaching and to equip ourselves with a vocabulary as well as formation that will allow us to dialogue more effectively. Studying Aquinas’s moral, economic, and political theory gives one who wants to think with the Church a critical vocabulary and intellectual formation. As an important voice within the Church who has helped shape her teachings, Aquinas continues to be a guide to living justly and charitably in the face of whatever controversies we may encounter.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) was born into a wealthy Italian family and could have let its influence purchase for him a life of relative ease. Instead, against his family’s wishes he followed his calling with an unestablished order of preachers known as the Dominicans. His brilliance was soon discovered, and he embarked on an all-too-brief professorial career at the University of Paris and in his native Italy. He left behind for posterity an incredible variety of works, most importantly (especially for our purposes) an introduction to theology called the *Summa Theologiae*. Thanks to his encyclopedic memory and zeal for careful argumentation, he was in an ideal position to help synthesize Catholic theology with the newly rediscovered works of the pagan philosopher Aristotle. While he generated controversy of his own, and some of his teachings were condemned by the bishop of Paris shortly after his death, he quickly was recognized as a doctor of the Church. In more recent times, he was given the title of Common Doctor, in light of his centrality to Church teaching.

With all of this praise for a medieval churchman, one may wonder how his thought is applicable today: What could a thirteenth-century friar have to tell us about how to live well in the twenty-first century? How could he help us address the challenges posed by modern views on human sexuality or by technological advances in the field of human reproduction, the difficulties of making morally responsible economic choices in a globalized free market economy, or the problem of being a conscientious citizen in a secular nation? Aquinas’s premodern, feudal, and thoroughly Catholic world would seem to make him of limited value in speaking to our modern, postindustrial, and pluralistic world.

Aquinas can still speak to us because our common humanity unites us more than our respective positions in time and space divide us. We cannot return to the past, but we can look to the same goal of union with our Creator; we cannot turn a blind eye to the incredible advances in science, technology,
economics, and political organization since the thirteenth century, but we can place these on the same foundation of human nature informed by revelation that we share with Aquinas. To learn from Aquinas is not to accept the flawed science he relied upon or to take everything he said as if it were gospel. Rather, to learn from Aquinas is to allow the perennial truths that he unearthed to inform the way we approach the questions posed by life in the twenty-first century.

As a matter of fact, Aquinas’s centrality to the Church today at least in part stems from this desire to speak to the modern world. The body of teachings that has come to be known as Catholic social thought (henceforth CST) was initiated in the late nineteenth century by a pope who, inspired by a revival of Thomism in his times, devoted an entire encyclical to this subject. In Aeterni Patris (1879), Pope Leo XIII exhorted Catholic teachers “to implant the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas in the minds of students, and set forth clearly his solidity and excellence over others.” In his landmark encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891), Leo provided a model of applying Aquinas’s insights to the “brave new world” of modern politics and society. And that encyclical set in motion a series of documents from the Church in which she engages contemporary issues with the wisdom of the past. More recently, while in 1998 John Paul II’s Fides et Ratio opened the door to the study of other philosophical schools besides those of the Thomists, in it he still emphasized the Church’s wisdom in “proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology.” As Pope Francis seems to be telling those caught up in recent controversies, any development in Church teaching must be built upon this veritable foundation. Thus, CST is both a decidedly new approach to talking about moral, economic, and political life and at the same time an opportunity for retrieval. It is as part of this tradition that Pope Francis’s teachings, and those of his predecessors as well as successors, should be read.

Of course, not everybody reads CST through the lens of Aquinas, and to prove that the popes are right to ask us to do so would be a formidable task indeed, one that exceeds our introductory purposes. I hope that a work such as this one can provide some assistance in seeing why the popes have insisted on the value of reading St. Thomas. A colleague of mine once exasperatedly remarked that CST “can mean whatever you want it to mean,” and the claim

here is that studying Aquinas can help us remove this perception. Admittedly, even well-intentioned and informed thinkers will disagree as to how to apply CST to the concrete situations of daily life and public policies, but at least they will be guided by the same fundamental principles and vocabulary as is the Church rather than those provided by the political parties of their nation. As an introduction, this book presents Aquinas’s moral, economic, and political thought as clearly as possible with the goal that the reader will let the Common Doctor’s illuminative mind shed light on whatever difficulties he or she may face on the road ahead.

As is appropriate for our introductory purposes, the focus here is on moral, economic, and political teachings that can be gleaned from Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* (*Summa* or *ST*), which he wrote “to instruct beginners” (*ST* introduction). And, to be clear, we are not following the structure of the *Summa* but are instead selecting those passages that address our respective topics. Further, on occasion it will be necessary to use his other writings to complete our understanding. And, again in keeping with our purposes, the engagement with Thomistic interpreters is kept to a minimum. Hopefully this does not lead to a distortion of these basic points or to not giving credit to the scholars where it is due. I write this book more as a teacher than as a scholar, readily admitting that this forces me to only gloss over issues that one could spend years studying. I acknowledge throughout the extent to which I am indebted to the ideas of others, and I generally try to stick to what scholars broadly agree upon as well as encourage the reader to go to the secondary sources for a deeper understanding of the various topics. That being said, there is no doubt that I am taking stances on debatable points throughout; whenever possible I refer the reader to the works of scholars who in my mind make convincing arguments for the position in question. Most generally, I would extend what Jeffrey Hause says about Aquinas’s relationship to Aristotle’s moral philosophy to Aquinas’s economic and political theories: “When he formulates his own Christian ethics, Aquinas does not repudiate this improved Aristotelian ethics [that he had developed in his commentaries on Aristotle’s works], but adapts it for inclusion in his theological system as an ethics transformed. . . . The result is a dramatic and powerful illustration of the Thomistic theological thesis that grace does not destroy nature but builds on it.”5 In each of the chapters on Aquinas’s philosophy we will see how his Aristotelian approach to the study of human nature points toward

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the need for grace to perfect the human desire for true wisdom, and thus to philosophy’s status as a “handmaid” to theology. In the concluding chapter we take Aquinas himself as a handmaid to CST, showing how his insights can be brought to bear on a variety of contemporary issues.

I urge you to study carefully the suggested background readings from Aquinas at the beginning of each section and see for yourself how this master of philosophy and theology uses the adage “When in doubt, make a distinction.” The time you put into reading them for yourself is well worth it, as they provide a veritable school for the mind and for daily life. If you take my word for it, you make me rather than Aquinas your guide: what I provide here only introduces you to your teacher so that you can gain more fruit from his lectures. You will also find an appendix at the end of this book containing a schema of the virtues that are discussed throughout the book. Further, a bibliography for this introduction (at the end of the book) includes works that can tell you more about Aquinas’s life and thought and the general framework upon which his moral, economic, and political theory rests. That being said, I do not presuppose any familiarity with these works, and so those for whom this will truly be an introduction to Aquinas should not feel unprepared for what lies ahead. Finally, for the reader with a more scholarly purpose (or with a professor who expects him or her to have such a purpose), I provide a bibliography for each part for further study at the end of this book.
1

The Natural Desire for Happiness
(Moral Philosophy)

Happy is the man who finds wisdom,
and the man who gets understanding,
for the gain from it is better than gain from silver
and its profit better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.

—Proverbs 3:13–18

But how can a man be just before God?
If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand times.
He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength
—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?—
he who removes mountains, and they know it not,
when he overturns them in his anger;
who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;
who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;
who alone stretched out the heavens,
and trampled the waves of the sea.

—Job 9:2–8

1. Introduction

As we begin our study of moral philosophy, we must address a popular misconception about ethics: in our society we often think of the moral life in terms of rule following, of doing one’s duty without regard to one’s own well-being. On this conception, ethics is not about our own happiness but about obedience to a moral code regardless of our own interest or desires. Think, for example, of that moral exemplar, Superman. Superman was just “doing his duty,” he tells those he helps; he is the super cop who perfectly serves and protects the human race simply because it is the right thing to do. On our understanding, ethics forces us to choose between what we ought to do and what we want to do. Doing the right thing is like dieting: it does not satisfy our desire for a tasty meal, but we should do it in spite of this.

Aquinas’s moral philosophy is much richer than this: ethics is not so much about doing good as it is about being good, and being good is about satisfying our natural desire for happiness; ethics, then, is the study and pursuit of happiness. Our rule-following, duty-based understanding of ethics is not so much false as it is incomplete. Ethics is about doing what we ought to do, but it turns out that this is what we really want anyway. Doing the right thing is more satisfying than betraying and hating our fellow human beings; friendship and love are naturally pleasant and good, even if we do not recognize this initially. Dieting is initially painful and leaves us dissatisfied with our meal, and yet those who stick with it end up finding delight in eating nutritious foods. Aquinas inherits from the Greek philosophical tradition the recognition that ethics is for the soul what medicine is for the body. We can no more be happy without being just than we can be healthy without a good diet and exercise. Happiness does not come to us accidentally, nor can it be achieved by acts of wickedness. Rather, happiness is achieved through ethical living, and we must choose not between serving others and our own interest but between hope and despair, love and hate.

In addition to this false dichotomy between ethics and personal happiness, another common ethical position in our culture is relativism, the view that nothing is truly good or evil. Maybe in movies there are superhumans who
choose good over evil, but in real life this is not and could not be so, for good
and evil are relative to cultures and to perspectives. One person’s freedom
fighter is another person’s terrorist, and so on. According to the relativist,
ethics is not like mathematics, where there are objective answers to our prob-
lems, but like taste, where there are only subjective likes and dislikes. Ethics
is not objective and absolute, but subjective and relative.

One often hears today that the Catholic position on so many matters is
not “either/or” but “both/and,” and this is a good example of this approach:
since ethics is rooted in our shared human nature from which we can derive
natural laws,1 ethics is objective and absolute; since ethics must consider the
particular circumstances of each person and since every moral situation is
different, ethics is subjective and relative. While (as we will discuss shortly)
some actions such as killing the innocent are intrinsically evil and thus can
never be done, the right thing to do in any situation will depend upon a
variety of unique circumstances. Let us consider again the example of diet:
all humans share in common the need for basic types of foods, and also the
inability to digest certain objects. In this sense, a good diet is fixed for all of
us; however, our height and weight, allergies, available resources, cultures
we live in, and so forth will dictate the particular way that each of us will
achieve our own individual good. It is objectively the case that none of us can
drink motor oil as part of a healthy diet, and yet it is subjectively the case
that some of us can handle an occasional milkshake whereas others, due to
lactose intolerance or obesity, would be harming their health by partaking of
such a delight. Relativism posits just another false dichotomy, for it assumes
that ethics must be subjective because it is not objective in the way that math-
ematics is. Rather, the objective given of human nature is compatible with
the subjectivity of human persons, called in their own unique way to live out
lives of friendship and love.

This chapter outlines Aquinas’s moral philosophy, or the study of what
reason and nature tell us about how we should live. Our study will be divided
into the following sections: (1) our last end, (2) human acts and passions,
(3) virtues and vices, and (4) the best way of life. We will revisit these topics
when discussing moral theology, which incorporates faith and revelation. In
general, we are following Aquinas’s maxim that grace perfects nature: moral
philosophy points us toward what by nature we are seeking in our quest for
happiness; moral theology shows us how what God has revealed to us provides
the grace necessary to achieve our goal. As we will come to see by the end of

1. Given the centrality of natural law to political theory, we will hold off until part 3 to more
fully discuss Aquinas’s natural law theory. Here we will simply note its centrality to moral life.
this study, there is no such thing as “an autonomous Thomistic philosophical ethics,” for those who pursue happiness within the limits of nature alone come to see how confining these limits are. Before launching into the particulars of Aquinas’s moral philosophy, a more general discussion of the workings of creation will be helpful, and we will use Aquinas’s discussion of good and evil in the third part of *Summa Contra Gentiles* to do this.

2. Called Forth to Share in God’s Goodness: Good and Evil in Creation

*Background Reading: SCG 3.1.1–4, 7, 16–20, 25*

Not only are “good” and “evil” important ethical terms, but they are fundamental aspects of creation as a whole. God is Goodness itself, creation is an image of this Goodness, and humans are that part of creation that can share uniquely in this Goodness through acts of intellect and will. This section works through these points in order to ground our discussion of moral theory on a proper understanding of the good as what all created things seek, and evil as the failure to obtain the end, union with God.

In Homer’s *Odyssey* there is an important scene early on in the story that establishes a vision of the created order as intrinsically purposive. The wicked suitors are plotting the demise of our hero, Odysseus, when suddenly a pair of eagles descends upon them, “wielding their talons, tearing cheeks and throats.” The old lord Halitherses correctly interprets this as a sign from Zeus that Odysseus will return. Yet one of the brazen suitors, Eurymakhos, shows his foolishness by declaring, “Bird life aplenty is found in the sunny air, not all of it significant.” Homer’s lesson in all of this is that everything that happens under the sun is meaningful, for the events of the natural world are signs pointing to divine realities. As the philosophers would put this point, nature does nothing in vain, for there is a reason for every action under the sun. The whole created order exhibits purpose by acting for an end, and this end the wise man knows to be the God who instills this natural order in his creatures.


3. Let us not forget the angels here. They, too, bear God’s image in a unique fashion, though this is not the place for a discussion of their important role in creation, nor of their differences from humans. See ST I.50–64 for a detailed discussion of the angels.

Every action, even that of the unthinking creature, is for an end, an example of which is the tadpole acting so as to become a frog. This may sound anthropomorphistic to us: surely the tadpole does not “seek,” “desire,” or “will” to become a frog. Every action is goal oriented, yet in the case of the tadpole this involves no conscious determination but rather a natural inclination toward that which fulfills its nature. As Aquinas puts it, using one of his favorite examples, “As far as this point is concerned, it makes no difference whether the being tending to an end is a knowing being or not. For, just as the target is the end for the archer, so is it the end for the motion of the arrow” (SCG 3.1.2). In more contemporary terms, the tadpole’s DNA dictates how it will act and directs it to the end or goal of becoming a frog. The end is that which fulfills the nature of a thing and is also its good.

We tend to think of “nature” as the beginning or as that which is prior to reason and reflection rather than as the end that a being seeks. For example, we often think of primitive humans as more natural than modern humans given that they live off the land whereas we live “away” from the land. But nature is more properly understood from the end which something seeks, from its perfected state. The frog, in this sense, reveals the nature of the tadpole; the frog explains why the tadpole does what it does.

To put this distinction between the beginning and end state of a creature somewhat differently, we could think of this in terms of “what happens” as distinct from “what things seek.” If we understand nature as “what happens,” in many cases we would be forced to say that it is more natural for tadpoles to die before becoming frogs, that becoming a frog is unnatural, for the majority of tadpoles in a given pond may get eaten or otherwise die before metamorphosis takes place. On the other hand, if we understand nature as “what things seek,” then we can always and everywhere say that it is natural for tadpoles to become frogs, for that is their end state. In this more fundamental understanding of nature, it is natural for beings to achieve their respective end, even if we must acknowledge that they do not always, or even usually, do so.

Finally, the terminus or end of natural inclination is a good: “That toward which an agent tends in a definite way must be appropriate to it, because the agent would not be inclined to it except by virtue of some agreement with it. But, what is appropriate to something is good for it. So, every agent acts for a good” (SCG 3.3.2). By nature, then, each creature seeks a proper good, and this can be described in another way as seeking perfection or the fullness of its own capacities: “Every action and movement are seen to be ordered in some way toward being, either that it may be preserved in the species or in the individual, or that it may be newly acquired. Now, the very fact of being is a good, and so all things desire to be” (SCG 3.3.4).
In seeking its good, a thing seeks being; there is a profound metaphysical
point to all of this: to be is to be good. This insight helps us to grasp the next
point: since being is good, evil is not a being but a privation or a turning away
from being. Every intention is for some good, and yet defects prevent the
achievement of the good: “That which follows from an action, as a different
result from that intended by the agent, clearly happens apart from intention.
Now, evil is different from the good which every agent intends. Therefore, evil
is a result apart from intention” (SCG 3.4.2). We do not want to think of evil,
then, as some opposing force or existing being that must be resisted. Rather,
“evil” is the term we use to designate something missing or lacking, such as the
situation of a tadpole that lacks the necessary environment in which to flourish.

Since all creatures are interrelated, the good that each creature seeks and
the evil it avoids must be coordinated with the good of other creatures. Every
nature, every act of seeking, works together into a whole that imitates the
goodness and being of God. Reason itself tells us that there must be a cause
of causality, a Goodness of which the universe’s goodness is but an image, a
Creator of creation; this Cause of causes, Goodness itself, and Creator, we
call “God.” What is the universe but God’s image? What is the diversity of
things, the multiple ways and gradations of beings, but the image of a Being
that in its simplicity and unity brings forth this wondrous variety as an ordered
approximation of Itself? As Aquinas puts it, “It pertains to divine providence
that the grades of being which are possible be fulfilled” (SCG 3.72.3); and,
again, “The large number and variety of causes stem from the order of divine
providence and control” (SCG 3.74.4). Similarly, in the Prima Pars of Summa
Theologiae, he states, “For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform,
in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together
participates [in] the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better
than any single creature whatever” (ST I.47.1). Variety and diversity, ordered
toward one and the same ultimate Good, is itself a good, for it is the way that
creation imitates its Creator.

5. It is not surprising that the entirety of Aquinas’s moral theory rests on God as the Cause
of all things. However, it is important to emphasize here that reason reaches this conclusion
independent from faith. Aquinas begins the Summa with five ways to prove that God exists,
and to the reader who does not believe in God my response is to ask him or her to read ST I.2,
which covers philosophical arguments for the existence of God. In fine, Aquinas would assume
that anyone who studies moral philosophy would have previously come to see the necessity of
a Cause of causes, and thus can here assume this knowledge.

6. All of this might lead one to ask why there is evil at all given that everything God created
is good. For a thorough Thomistic treatment of the problem of evil, see John F. X. Knasas’s
Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel: Thomistic Reflections on the Problem of Evil (Washington,
God created variety and diversity as the means by which his creation would reflect his undivided Goodness; so too he brought into being a terrestrial creature that, while merely a small part of creation, is capable of grasping its beauty, goodness, and truth. Through acts of intellect and will, the human being transcends the created order, recognizing creation as an image of the God whom he desires to know, love, and serve. Humans uniquely participate in the Good to the extent that they rule themselves in accordance with God’s providential order.

Whereas most created things seek their good unknowingly, the dignity of the human creature consists in its ability to rule itself via intelligence and will. Humans “are not only ruled but are also rulers of themselves, inasmuch as their own actions are directed to a fitting end” (SCG 3.1.4). While it is necessary that we seek our own good, it is up to us to determine how to achieve this; faulty reasoning and disordered acts of will prevent us from achieving our good, rendering us vicious and wounded. Through actions proper to us as free, intelligent creatures, we achieve a wondrous unity with God. We do not seek just to be like him, but to know him: “A thing is more closely united with God by the fact that it attains to his very substance in some manner, and this is accomplished when one knows something of the divine substance, rather than when one acquires some likeness of Him” (SCG 3.25.2).

Put in the ethical language that is familiar to us today, humans are willed by God for our own sake, not as slaves; we are rational and free and, in seeking our own good, simultaneously seek to enter into union with God (see SCG 3.112). Yet this yearning cannot be satisfied through reason alone, and thus, as shall be clear by the end of this chapter on moral philosophy, we need some communication and assistance from God in order for what St. Augustine called our “restless hearts” to find rest.

3. Happiness, Our Last End

Background Reading: ST I-II.1–4

While all things seek their own proper good, humans are distinct from the elements, plants, and irrational animals in that humans seek their good via reason and will. Whereas the good of the frog consists in certain bodily satisfactions such as health and reproduction, these goods for humans are only means toward further ends such as friendship, leisure, and love. Think of a dog, for example: when its bodily needs are satisfied, it either plays or sleeps; while we humans find delight in such things as well, they do not satisfy
our desires but merely keep them at bay. As much as we love sports, we must admit that Aquinas has a point about them when he says, “If sport were an end in itself, the proper thing to do would be to play all the time, but that is not appropriate” (SCG 3.25.9). Sports are for the serious business of living, and there is something inappropriate about the life of the woman who works hard all week so that she can play soccer on Saturday and watch soccer matches on Sunday morning. Soccer should be played because it promotes health, friendship, and love toward God and neighbor. The term “happiness” is used to indicate this human good that goes beyond health and amusement. If happiness is the good that we are seeking, before we set sail on the journey of ethical living, it is important for us to answer an initial question: “In what does happiness consist?”

We have already established that bodily goods and play or amusement will not suffice for happiness. More systematically, let us turn to Aquinas’s own answer to this question. In ST I-II.2, Aquinas works through the many contenders, and, in addition to bodily goods and pleasures, rules out (1) wealth, for this is not an end but a means to an end; (2) honor, for we give this to people as a sign of their excellence, and yet happiness is not a sign of excellence but the excellence itself; (3) fame or glory, for this too we give to people because we consider them to be happy, and, in addition, happiness should depend on us, not on the fleeting opinions of others; (4) power, for this, like wealth, is a means to an end, and also can be used for evil, whereas happiness is always a good; (5) any created good whatsoever, for our desires cannot be satisfied by anything less than the unrestricted, eternal good-in-itself which we call “God.”

Humans are rightly called “dissatisfied animals” in that we always want more, for neither bodily goods or pleasures, wealth, honor, fame, power, nor any other created good can truly satisfy us. Infinite are the desires of the human heart, and thus the finitude of these goods will not do. This limitless desire leads us to create art, invent an endless variety of things, and improve upon our personal, social, political, and religious lives, but it also makes us dissatisfied with anything other than God. Blaise Pascal, a sort of modern Augustine, points out that our art, technological devices, jobs, and games are just so many forms of diversion unless we root them in God; whenever we try to pursue means as if they were ends, we set them up as false gods, worshiping the creature rather than the Creator.7

7. As Pascal puts it in a passage entitled “Diversions”: “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.” Blaise Pascal, Pensées §133, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), 37.
Happiness consists in the perfection and even surpassing of our nature as knowers and lovers. J. R. R. Tolkien created a delightful creature that illustrates this, the hobbit. As he tells us in the beginning of *The Hobbit*, the hobbit-hole “means comfort,” and yet we come to discover that the greatest hobbit of all was the one who gave this up for the adventure of a lifetime, gaining thereby something much more precious than a ring of power or worldly fame: knowledge and love. To paraphrase Pope Benedict XVI, we are not satisfied with mere comfort; only greatness will do. Our highest faculties, reason and will, seek rest in knowledge and love. But to say this is to say that only God can provide us with happiness: “Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence” (*ST* I-II.3.8). As Tolkien recognized, Frodo Baggins could not be happy in the Shire, but had to end his middle-earthly adventure by sailing into the Western beyond, into a sun that never sets.8

In this life we get only a foretaste of the goodness we seek, for “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). As Aquinas points out in question 5, article 3, we can only imperfectly achieve happiness in this life, for this life is always mixed with evils such as the death of loved ones, but perfect happiness dispels any shadows. Further, the more of the good we have, the more we want; yet “the goods of the present life pass away; since life itself passes away” (*ST* I-II.5.3). Imagine a man who has lived a beautiful life and is surrounded by his loved ones on his deathbed. His granddaughter asks him if she will ever see him again; for him to answer anything other than “yes” would be to indicate either that he is not happy or that he does not desire to continue in his happiness, and if the latter, he is clearly not truly happy. There must be life beyond the grave in which the Perfect Good, God, will be known, or we cannot be perfectly happy; those are the only options.

One might respond to all of this concern about the perishability of earthly goods by arguing that, if we have God in our lives, we need nothing else. We can be happy in this valley of tears because we know that our God is “the living God” (Jer. 10:10), who gives us everything that is good. To some extent Aquinas would agree, for God alone can make us happy. What need have we to fear evils or the death of a loved one (see question 4)? Yet Aquinas points out that “God cannot be seen in His essence by a mere human being, except he be separated from this mortal life” (*ST* I.12.11). Even if God is in our hearts, he is so only imperfectly in this life. As we work through the means

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8. Even if you are not a lover of all middle-earthly things, I encourage you to read Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories,” which is readily available online, for his reflections on how a good fairy story plays upon our natural desire for happiness.
to achieving happiness, we will see how humans seek to climb the mountain of perfection, achieving thereby an imperfect happiness, and yet themselves come to see that the mists block their view of the peak.⁹


Background Reading: ST I-II.6–8, 18–20, 23, 24

When we say of a creature that it is good, what do we mean by this? Returning to the tadpole-filled pond, we would find that some get eaten by insects, fish, or other predators; some succumb to disease; some have genetic abnormalities that make development impossible; and still others end up in an inhospitable environment such as a part of the pond that dries up. A good tadpole, then, is one that, despite all of these obstacles, achieves the perfected state of the frog. More generally, we can say of any creature that its goodness consists in the perfection of its nature, the actualization of its potentials, or the fullness of its being. This general statement about goodness is true when applied to humans, though incomplete.

In some sense humans are just like any other creature in that they are good when they achieve the perfection of their species. Yet something must be added to this general notion of perfection given that their nature is both rational and free: it is not enough to perform the actions that lead to the physical perfection of the species, for a human must achieve an interior perfection that gives purpose to the physical development. The tadpole is entirely ruled by its nature, whereas the human has a nature that gives it a share in rule. For the tadpole, the good life consists in being ruled by its instincts and thereby directed to its end; for the human, the good life requires ruling over these instincts (the passions) so as to freely take up the difficult task of joining together the goods of body and soul.

Body and soul are not two separate substances (contra Descartes), nor are they natural enemies (contra Plato). We are the composite union of soul and body and must achieve our good as rational, free, bodily creatures. Further, we are naturally social and political creatures, and so our actions must be compatible with promoting the good of others, despite difficult situations where this might require sacrificing our time and talents or, as other occasions

⁹. This issue opens up a host of questions regarding the relationship between nature and grace, the natural desire to see God, etc. For a recent introduction to the history of such discussions and for understanding on just what is at stake, see Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2010).