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Ralph McInerny. Aquinas on Human Action. A Theory of Practice. The Catholic University of America. Washington 1992. 246 pp.

This book tries to "set before the reader the theory of moral action found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, particularly in the *Summa theologiae*". This attempt of reading is followed by some discussions on several points of theory, from its real aristotelianism to the discussion on human rights. These two subjects are respectively the first and second part of the book.

McInerny's "first principle" is that human acts are the primary vehicles of moral goodness and badness. This is set down following Aquinas' description of its subject: "moral acts and human acts are the same" (I-II, q. 1, a. 3 c.; cfr. p. 9). Therefore, there is not just a psychological or sociological research, but a moral theory, i.e. Ethics. An example: "Betsy King golfs well, and she is therefore a good golfer; Ann Miller dances well and is a good dancer... A good dancer is not as such a good person, a morally good person. But dancing is a human act, and all human acts were said to be just as such moral, that is, morally good or bad..." (p. 11).

Human actions are not human because they are performed by a human, but if they are good or bad.

McInerny follows Aquinas and sets how a good action's perfection depends from its order to the good of man. That is the moral dimension of acting. "Human acts proceed from deliberate will. Will is the faculty whereby we seek the end or good. Human acts, proceeding from deliberate will, are for the sake of an end" (p. 13; cfr. I-II, q. 1, a. 3, c). We recognize a human act when we find in it a *deliberate will* in order to an end.

McInerny follows Aquinas' argumentation on the *ultimo fine hominis*, for he wants to determine what kind of end is related to human acts. A human act is not good or bad for its own end. The ball in the hole is the golfer's end, not as a human being, but as a golfer. It must be a proper end of human beings. And it is found by searching the proper end of its will.

"The object of will, the human appetite, is universal good" (I-II, q. 2, a. 8). What we want in happiness is "an object which will realize completely the formality of goodness. No created good can do this, since any created good shares in and is not identical with goodness itself [...] God is goodness itself, not just another good thing. God, then, is man's ultimate end" (p. 33). McInerny should say, hence, that acts are human because through them we search God.

After this discussion, McInerny

analyzes the structure of moral action, and distinguishes, following Aquinas, the desire of end and desire of *media* as *terminus motionis voluntatis* and *ea quae sunt ad finem*. In both of them intelligence appears: showing the end or delivering on *ea quae sunt ad finem*. Human moral action requires both of intelligence and will.

On following end there are three acts of will: *voluntas, fruitio et intentio*; the tendency to good, its enjoyment and the end itself as *terminus quaedam motio*. On desiring the *media*, are *electio, consentio et usus*; choice is made when will selects an end to be pursued, consent is made when will accepts the means, and *usus* is made when will commands the other forces to obtain the end (McInerny includes a short discussion on *usus* in Part II).

Apprehension of good is made by intelligence, desiring (*voluntas*) by will. And when a good is considered good-to-me-now, it becomes an *intentio*. *Electio et consentio* are made by will with help of intelligence. *Usus et fruitio* are properly acts of will. At the beginning of a voluntary act there is an act of intelligence (showing the good as desirable, checking its convenience, searching the means to obtain it), and perfection of human acts is made by will (desiring the end, consenting on seeking it and on the means, moving the executive

powers and, finally, enjoying it). And the most relevant assertion: the principal acts of will (*intentio et consentio*) appear after the acts of intelligence. We have no blind will, but a reasonable will.

The parameters to determine goodness or badness are *obiectum, finis et circumstantiae* (cfr. pp. 79-83). McInerny states explicitly that goodness is not related only to "good will"; there are bad actions in themselves. Moral goodness depends of proportion between the object (the act) and its effect. Stealing to give money to the poor is not valid. End and circumstances only modify the act itself, and accidentally can turn a good action into bad, but never a bad action into a good one. It does not matter that the action was not successful: its *intentio* is sufficient (cfr. p. 81). And if the action itself were not moral (e.g. taking a walk), it becomes moral by the end or circumstances (cfr. p. 89). Every time we do something willing it, there is a human act; and therefore, there must to be a proportion.

This rational proportion is contained in natural law. The hardest explanation of the book appears now. If goodness is some kind of proportion there must be a measure to calculate it. This measure is God's reason, because God's reason, since He is *creator*, determines the proper end of everything; he determines the natural order. If man

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wants to obtain his own good, his own end, he *must* follow that divine order: insofar as the will loves according to the natural inclination "*Quod autem ratio humana sit regula voluntatis humanae, ex qua eius bonitas mensuretur, habet ex lege eterna, quae est ratio divina*" (I-II, q. 19, a. 4; cfr. p. 107). "*Lex naturalis nihil aliud est quam participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura*" (I-II, q. 91, a. 2; cfr. p. 110). Therefore, if there is no God, no natural law can be found, and no measure exists.

Aquinas says that measure of good is given in our nature, and we discover it in ourselves. McInerny repeats frequently an analogy between principles of theoretical and practical knowledge.

In this analogy, McInerny compares theoretical principles as non contradiction principle or *tertium exclusum* with the ultimate end. Everyone of them is *per se notae*, they do not admit a demonstration, they are self-evident (p. 110). In order to theory, they are called *intellectus*, and are principles of knowledge and demonstration; in order to practice, *synderesis*, and rational principles of moral action, and this is the place of natural law: "*synderesis dicitur lex intellectus nostri, in quantum est habitus continens praecepta legis naturalis, quae sunt prima principia operum humanorum*" (I-II, q. 94, a. 2, ad 2;

p. 113). First principles of *synderesis* are related to our ultimate good and how to attain it, and they are *in us*.

Therefore, there is no demonstration of principles of action. They are self-evident and, in any way or another, everybody knows and follows them. Everybody has good will. The fail or mistake appears when these first principles are not properly adequate to the concrete action, when there is not an order. As in theoretical principles, there is not any exhaustive listing of practical principles (cfr. p. 123). Natural law has only common instructions which cannot be reduced to a few, because moral actions are infinite in possibility (cfr. II-II, q. 140, a. 1 ad 2; cfr. p. 122). This principles are implicit in all our intentions and elections, and only through a large tough investigation we can *explain* them.

Moral actions are those which are conjunction of will, reason and executive powers. Will is good when intents and elects the "*good deeds for the right reasons*", i.e., good ends respecting order as it is shown by reason following natural inclinations. Human happiness is not obtained through an abstract code of moral commandments, through a rational order of the ends desired by all our potencies. If we respect that order, we satisfy all our desirings and obtain our proper

good. Human passions, like sex or hunger, are not obstacles, but certain guides to our action.

McInerny defends Aquinas on three important points. First, saying that Aquinas is a real theologian making real Moral Philosophy, following Aristotle and completing him. In Thomas' ultimate end the aristotelian happiness is subsumed. God is the *objective* ultimate end; *happiness*, its possession. In this life, attainment of God is imperfect, so it can be pursued in a relative sense through the other ends in an eternal life, as Christian conceive it, it can be more perfectly achieved (cfr. p. 174-177).

Second: moral principles derive from theoretical knowledge. McInerny discusses naturalistic fallacy and shows how Aquinas avoids it. Moral principles do not proceed from *de facto* situations, as naturalistic fallacy says, (or *ad consensum* like sophists, or *a priori* like Kant) but from intellectual principles like first principles of theoretical knowledge.

Contradiction principle, although it has logical or epistemological formulations (p. 199), is properly a metaphysical principle because it derives from the first theoretical conception of mind: *ens* (cfr. In IV Met., lect. VI n. 605; cfr. p. 202). First moral principles as *synderesis* derives from *ens*, because *ratio boni* adds nothing real to

ens, but only *secundum rationem*, as it is object of appetite. Objective foundations of morals are *principles*, not *facts*.

Third: McInerny quotes Maritain's statement: "*The philosophical foundations of Rights of Man is Natural Law*" (p. 210; cfr. Maritain, J.: *Man and the State*, p. 80). While mediaeval age Natural Law could be seen as principle of duties of man, the 18th century could see it as principle of rights of man. "*A genuine end and comprehensive view would pay attention both to the obligations and the rights involved in the requirements of natural law*" (p. 211; cfr. Maritain, p. 94). Finally, McInerny appeals to jurist Michel Villey ("*Critique des droits de l'homme*", *Anales de la cátedra Francisco Suárez*, n. 12, fasc. 2 (1972), pp. 9-16), showing how difficult this claim is in "*an era of juridical positivism*", when "*human rights must seem necessary as as claims to be made against the state*" (p. 219). McInerny's attempt has the same virtues and weaknesses than Aristotle's or Thomas'. They accept an original *faktum*: there are praise and blame on some actions, and therefore it must be a transcendent difference between these and other actions that have no moral qualification. Research only seeks that transcendent difference. But if we do not accept this *faktum* (we say no

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action is properly good or bad) the whole speech is nonsense. If disjunction "Aristotle or Nietzsche" is set down, we can select just one. It is clear how McInerney shows how thomistic moral theory can be useful to solve many contemporary problems both practical and theoretical, as situations like abortion or sexual/marriage morals (cfr. pp. 141-148; see also p. 80 or 93) or objections like naturalistic fallacy (cfr. pp. 193-194), or formalism *a priori* and consequentialism (cfr. pp. 80-81), although he has clearly no intention to discuss with some adversaries (cfr. p. 194), and maybe no purpose to give a definite answer to all questions.

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