

“Bonum humanæ animæ est secundum rationem esse”¹

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One of the major questions in contemporary ethics concerns the criterion of the morality of our actions. As is well known several answers have been proposed as to what makes our human acts good or bad. For some pleasure, convenience or usefulness are decisive for their goodness, others consider duty, conformity with moral law or the well-being of the greatest number of people the true measure of right conduct. Others again prefer to resort to an evaluation of the effects of our actions. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (= *E.N.*) Aristotle mentions the mean between excess and deficiency as a criterion of whether actions are good or bad, but he also insists on our actions having to be conform to reason and nature. According to Aristotle right reason depends on experience.² It is anything but a subjective factor, for it implies knowledge of objective data; it has authority and it commands³. Reason looks at an aim which is the norm⁴. Aristotle stresses the importance of the virtues for reason in order to carry out its task correctly. Just and prudent actions are those of a virtuous person.⁵

¹ *S.Th.* II-II 47,6. Cfr. *De veritate* q.13, a.1: «Bonum hominis est secundum rationem vivere».

² *E.N.* 1106^b36ss.

³ *E.N.* 1114^b29; 1125^b34.

⁴ *E.N.* 1138^b25.

⁵ *E.N.* 1105^b5. See our *The Criteria of the Moral Act according to Aristotle and their Criticism by St. Thomas Aquinas*, in *Autour de Saint Thomas. Recueil d'études sur sa pensée philosophique et théologique*, II, Paris/Bruges 1987, pp. 47-60.

1. THE ROLE OF THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

St. Thomas Aquinas is in full agreement with Aristotle inasmuch as he also stresses the role of reason in establishing the norms of conduct. However, he notices a problem here. Reason does not become right reason just by itself. Related to this question is that of how a virtuous person becomes virtuous given that nothing can reduce itself from potency to act. The solution Thomas gives of this dilemma allows him at the same time to indicate the ultimate basis for all moral judgments. His answer is as follows: moral virtue reaches its perfection when the appetite is governed according to reason. Reason judges with the help of a set of first principles of the moral order, which nature places in us, as it also give us the first principles of the speculative order. A person makes himself virtuous by acting in conformity with these principles.⁶

Throughout his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* as well as in the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas confirms the existence and the necessity of such a set of first principles of the practical intellect.⁷ These principles have a role similar to that of the axioms in geometry, which are not elaborated by reason but are accepted immediately by the intellect on inspection of certain representations of the imagination. Likewise, the principles in the field of action, which are the goals of virtuous acts, do not result from a process of reasoning but are consecutive on the basic experience of oneself and of the persons or the world one is in contact with. Acting in conformity to these principles, - such as «one must look after one's own health», «one must respect other people's property» - , yields the habit of the virtues, of which the germs are present in us by nature.⁸ When we live according to the virtues we are able to judge correctly about the means which will allow us to reach the end of each virtue. Elsewhere Thomas speaks of «the primary right or just» (*primum iustum*), sc. what is naturally known as right and cannot be ignored because it is naturally impressed on the mind.⁹ This *iustum naturale* are the ends toward which nature moves man. Aquinas speaks of a *natural inclination* to the end which is connatural to us.

As nothing is firmly established in speculative reason except by reduction to the first indemonstrable principles, nothing is firmly established by practical reason except by its ordination to the last end which is the common good.¹⁰ Thus there

⁶ *In II Ethic.*, lesson 4, p. 88 (Leonine edition), p. 97ff.

⁷ Cfr. *In II Ethic.* 4, 88 (Leonine), 101; *In V Ethic.* 12, 304, 31; 15, 319, 77: «Primum iustum, scilicet naturale, quod non potest ignorari quia naturaliter est menti humanæ impressum» (*S.Th.* I-II 94).

⁸ *In VII Ethic.*, lesson 8, p.415, 123 ff.: «Sicut enim in mathematicis principia non docentur per rationem, sic neque in operabilibus finis docetur per rationem. Sed homo per habitum virtutis, sive naturalis sive per assuetudinem acquisitæ, consequitur rectam æstimationem circa principium agibilium, quod est finis». Cfr. *Q.d. de virtutibus*, 1, 8 ad 10: «Homines nati sunt pervenire ad perfectum bonum secundum virtutem et ideo oportet quod habeant inclinationes ad omnes actus virtutum; quod cum non possit esse secundum naturam, oportet quod sit secundum rationem in qua existunt semina omnium virtutum».

⁹ *In V Ethic.*, lesson 15, p. 319, 69 ff.: «Primum iustum, scilicet naturale, quod non potest ignorari quia naturaliter est menti humanæ impressum».

¹⁰ *S.Th.* I-II 90, 2 ad 3.

are the first principles of the moral order in our intellect and, in the second place, there is also in our will a natural tendency toward the good of reason.¹¹ Since the rational soul is the substantial form proper to man, there is in each human individual a natural inclination to act according to reason, sc. to act according to virtue.¹² Time and again Aquinas stresses that man's basic natural inclination is to act in conformity with right reason. Since reason must direct man's life, the natural inclinations of man's other faculties must be regulated by reason.¹³ St. Thomas sets his doctrine of our duty to live in accordance with right reason in the broader context of the order established by God: «Since what is according to nature has been given this order by God's wisdom which man's reason must imitate, whatever is done by human reason against the common order found in natural things, is a deviation and is sinful».¹⁴

2. REASON AND NATURE

However, as Aquinas explains, man's nature shows a certain duality. Man has animal nature in common with the other animals. But he also possesses reason which enables him to discern what is right (*honestum*) and what is bad (*turpe*).¹⁵ When a young person grows up, he must learn to disentangle himself from a variety of emotions and strivings and to regulate them by reason. In a virtuous person intellectual and sensitive nature are welded into a unity: the sensitive part is entirely subject to his reason. The opposite may also happen. Reason can be totally overwhelmed by passion, although there usually is some leeway left for the exercise of free decision.¹⁶ Instead of directing his feelings according to reason, man sometimes uses his reason to live according to his inordinate feelings.¹⁷ If human nature in us would still be in the state of integrity, the rule of reason would dominate, but in fallen nature the inclinations proceeding from concupiscence prevail.¹⁸ In fact in his original condition man followed reason, but after he sinned he very easily deflects from it.¹⁹ When this inclination to seek the gratification of our sensitive nature runs out of the control by reason, it must no longer be considered

¹¹ *S.Th.* I-II 62, 3: «Secundo, per rectitudinem voluntatis naturaliter tendentis in bonum rationis».

¹² I-II 94, 3: «Cum anima rationalis sit propria forma hominis, naturalis inclinatio inest cuilibet homini ad hoc quod agat secundum rationem, et hoc est agere secundum virtutem».

¹³ I-II 94, 4 ad 3.

¹⁴ II-II 30, 1: «Cum ea quæ sunt secundum naturam sint ordinata ratione divina quam humana ratio debet imitari, quicquid secundum rationem humanam fit quod est contra ordinem communiter in rebus naturalibus inventum, est vitiosum et peccatum».

¹⁵ *In V Ethic.*, lesson 12, p. 337, 116.

¹⁶ *S.Th.* I-II 10, 3.

¹⁷ *S.Th.* I, 35, 1 ad 2.

¹⁸ *S.Th.* II-II 163, 3 ad 1: «In natura humana si esset integra prævaleret inclinatio rationis, sed in natura corrupta prævalet inclinatio concupiscentiæ quæ in homine dominatur...».

¹⁹ I-II 91, 6.

a natural inclination, for man's natural inclinations never move him to evil²⁰ and they make themselves felt without forcing his reason.²¹

In addition to distinguishing man's rational nature from his animal nature, Aquinas introduces also the distinction between "universal nature" and "particular nature", meaning the exigencies consecutive on the human body in its entirety or the whole of society, and what is required by part of the body or by man as an individual member of society.²² An act against the good of man's particular nature may sometimes be conducive to the good of universal nature in us. A surgeon will remove a sick tissue or organ to protect the entire body and criminals are deprived of their freedom in order to uphold order and law. Aquinas mentions another subordination proper to human nature: exterior goods are ordered to the good of the body, those of the body to the good of the soul and the goods proper to active life are subordinated to contemplation.²³

The various *habitus* are distinguished not only according to their objects but also according to whether they are in agreement or in disagreement with our nature. A good *habitus* disposes us to act in conformity with our nature, whereas vices are a disposition to act against the requirements of our nature. Aquinas adds the observation that some *habitus* dispose to acts agreeing with our lower nature, while other *habitus* do so with regard to acts which are conform to what is higher by nature. He refers to the supernatural order and to heroic virtue which disposes us to patterns of behaviour conform to what is above us.²⁴

In this connection St. Thomas explains in what sense vices are against human nature, sc. they are against reason («cum sint contra rationem»). On the other hand, virtuous acts agree with human nature because they are in accordance with reason. Therefore, Thomas states succinctly: «Moral virtue is defined by its being conform to right reason». ²⁵ Furthermore, it is the task of the virtues to bring about that man himself and what he does are in accordance with reason.²⁶ Since the acts of vices are against reason, they are in disagreement with human nature.²⁷ We also find the following statement in which the order is different: «Concupiscence which transcends the limits of reason is against human nature». ²⁸ In fact Aquinas seldom uses *according to nature* or *against nature* to qualify morally good or bad actions and, as we shall see, prefers the expression *secundum rationem* and *præter rationem*.²⁹ Human reason, indeed, knows the good of man and formulates what is conform to it or in disagreement with it.³⁰ Aquinas adds the following

²⁰ *In VII Ethic.*, lesson 13, p. 432, 133.

²¹ *In X Ethic.*, lesson 8, p. 577, 11.

²² *S.Th.* II-II 65, 1.

²³ *S.Th.* II-II 152, 2.

²⁴ II-II 154, 3.

²⁵ II-II 23, 3: «Virtus moralis definitur per hoc quod est secundum rationem rectam».

²⁶ II-II 123, 1: «Ad virtutem humanam pertinet ut faciat hominem et opus eius secundum rationem esse».

²⁷ I-II 54, 3.

²⁸ I-II 82, 3 ad 1: «Concupiscentia quæ transcendit limites rationis, est homini contra naturam».

²⁹ I-II 18, 5 ad 1.

³⁰ I-II 19, 3.

consideration: the rational soul is man's substantial form, so that man has a natural inclination to act according to reason.³¹ In acting in this way man is in agreement with his specific nature. Therefore, what is in accordance with reason, is in accordance with human nature, in so far as it is rational and proper to man.³² What is contrary to reason is against his nature.³³ In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* St. Thomas expresses himself as follows: The good of any being whatever consists in its operations being in agreement with its form. Man's proper form is that by which he is a rational animal. Therefore, man's operations will be good if in agreement with right reason. Deviating from reason conflicts with the nature of reason.³⁴ St. Thomas uses the expression *against nature* above all to qualify certain acts, such as sodomy, which are against man's animal nature.³⁵

As we have seen human nature becomes the source of the morality of our acts by the basic natural inclinations. Man perceives as good all those things and actions to which he has a natural inclination.³⁶ These inclinations, which all men have in common, concern our basic needs. On the other hand, for those activities which go beyond these immediate needs reason must establish what agrees with nature and what does not. Since human nature is created by God Aquinas can say that whatever falls under the order of reason, falls under the order of God himself.³⁷

3. THE ROLE OF REASON

In view of this predominant place assigned to reason it is worthwhile to examine in detail the more important texts in which Thomas states and explains the role of reason. On several occasions he places his doctrine under the authority of a saying of Dionysius: «The good of man is to live and act in conformity to reason».³⁸ We shall first consider a number of statements in the *Commentary on the Ethics*, to turn next to the *Summa theologiae* and some other works, taking in stride some repetitions which will have the advantage of bringing out better the enormous importance of the theme. Dealing first with the *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* allows us to see the Aristotelian roots of this doctrine.

The morally good (*honestum*) is what is good according to reason, whereas the pleasant is pleasant according to the senses.³⁹ A life according to reason is proper to

³¹ I-II 94, 3.

³² I-II 71, 2: «Quod est secundum rationem est secundum naturam hominis in quantum est homo».

³³ *Ibidem*, ad 2.

³⁴ *In II Ethic.*, lesson 2, p.80, 44: «... perversitas enim rationis repugnat naturæ rationis».

³⁵ II-II 154, 9.

³⁶ I-II 94, 2: «Omnia illa ad quæ homo habet naturaliter inclinationem ratio naturaliter apprehendit ut bona».

³⁷ I-II 72, 4: «Quæcumque continentur sub ordine rationis, continentur sub ordine ipsius Dei».

³⁸ *De divinis nominibus*, c. 4: «Bonum autem hominis est secundum rationem esse». The wording of the original text is negative: (PG 3, 733).

³⁹ *In I Ethic.*, lesson 5.

man, because man's specific nature is to be rational. Now *rational* is twofold, sc. in one sense by participation insofar as one lets oneself be persuaded and ruled by reason, in a second sense as signifying the rational mind which thinks and reasons by itself.⁴⁰ Man's task consists in acting according to reason. Therefore, the good man will act well according to reason, and the best man does so in the best possible manner.⁴¹ Virtues are in agreement with our nature. So they are in unison with reason and provide pleasure.⁴² Thomas even writes that the good and bad for man depends on their relationship with reason («...attenditur secundum rationem»)⁴³ The virtues enable him to carry out his tasks in conformity with reason.⁴⁴ To put it very concisely, moral virtues operate according to right reason.⁴⁵ Precisely because man has reason, he has a natural inclination to virtue, because virtue makes him act in accordance with reason.⁴⁶

In the Second Book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle examines the role of the virtues. When one acts repeatedly according to reason, the "form of reason" is impressed in the appetite, in other words, the moral virtues come about.⁴⁷ Indeed, acting in conformity with right reason leads to the birth of the virtues. This is because the goodness of a thing consists in its operation fitting in with its form. The form proper to man is that which makes him a rational animal. Therefore, when his acts are conform to right reason they cannot but be good⁴⁸ and so they create a habitus in the appetite through which one acts with ease and pleasure in view of the right end. In this connection Aristotle introduces the criterion of the mean: virtues make us seek in our actions the mean between excess and deficiency.

Aquinas points out that the mean is not determined by quantitative considerations but according to right reason.⁴⁹ One is not praised or blamed because one is afraid or angry, but because of being so in conformity with reason or in opposition to it.⁵⁰ Thus reason must determine what is right and confirm the soul in dispositions conform to reason: when reason itself is correct the virtue of prudence results. When one practises equity in one's dealings, the virtue of justice takes shape. Fortitude comes about when

⁴⁰ Lesson 10.

⁴¹ Lesson 11.

⁴² Lesson 13.

⁴³ Lesson 16.

⁴⁴ Lesson 20.

⁴⁵ *S.Th.* I-II 56, 2.

⁴⁶ I-II 85, 2 : «Naturalis inclinatio ad virtutem, quæ convenit homini ex hoc ipso quod rationalis est, ex hoc enim habet quod secundum rationem operetur».

⁴⁷ *In II Ethic.*, lesson 1: «Eo quod multoties agimus secundum rationem imprimitur forma rationis in vi appetitiva, quæ quidem impressio nihil aliud est quam virtus moralis».

⁴⁸ Lesson 2: «Unde oportet quod operatio hominis sit bona ex hoc quod est secundum rationem rectam. Perversitas enim rationis repugnat naturæ rationis».

⁴⁹ Cfr. also *In VI Ethic.*, lesson 1. However, the mean as determined by reason has a certain latitude and extends beyond too narrowly defined limits (*Q.d. de virtutibus*, 1, 13 ad 18: «Medium virtutis secundum rationem aliquam latitudinem habet»).

⁵⁰ *In II Ethic.*, lesson 5. Cfr. *S.Th.* I-II 24, 1 ad 3 : «Vituperatur aut laudatur qui timet aut irascitur secundum rationem vel præter rationem».

reason strengthens the mind and one behaves in dangerous situations as is befitting to reason and avoids dangers which reason tells us to avoid.⁵¹ Temperance takes hold of those who refrain or repress their passions according to right reason.⁵² The liberal man uses his money according to what reason tells him to do.⁵³ In conclusion we may say that the habitus of a moral virtue is defined by the fact of its being in accordance with reason.⁵⁴ A moral virtue is a habitus accompanied by right reason.

The entire treatise of the moral virtues in the *Secunda Secundæ* is dominated by the idea that we must determine what, in the different fields of human activity, is according to right reason. However, the presence of correct thinking as the basis of a virtue is not enough; acting according to a virtue must also be accompanied by reason: «Virtutes sunt secundum rationem et cum ratione».⁵⁵ Man's real good is what is becoming to him according to reason.⁵⁶ This implies, as we shall see, a careful consideration of the circumstances under which a virtue is to operate. In short, virtuous actions must always be accompanied by prudence.

Thus far we have discussed some texts on the relationship between virtue and reason in the *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. Right reason appeared to have a dominant role. The same doctrine is stressed also throughout the *Summa theologiae*. As we have seen, according to Aquinas man has, in a certain sense, a dual nature: his sensitive nature must become totally subject to reason and he should avoid by all means that his reason becomes overwhelmed by the passions, which distort his judgment.⁵⁷ In the operations of reason one may distinguish between *higher reason* (*ratio superior*) and *lower reason* (*ratio inferior*). The former evaluates actions and situations in the light of God's plan and law. Somewhat similar is the distinction between universal and particular reason. A course of action or an event may be considered from different points of view: the wife of a condemned murderer on death row and the judge may make a different appraisal of what the punishment should be. However, reason is not right when it considers only a particular aspect of a situation without taking into account the common good. Aquinas corroborates his argument by pointing to what happens in nature where the natural inclination of any part whatever of a whole is ordained to the common good of the whole.⁵⁸

⁵¹ *In III Ethic.*, lesson 15; *S.Th.* II-II 125, 1 («... fugere mala quæ sunt secundum rationem fugienda»). However, when one affronts the greatest dangers according to the judgement of reason, he does not act against virtue (*ibid.*, 123, 4 ad 3).

⁵² Lesson 8.

⁵³ *In IV Ethic.*, lesson 3.

⁵⁴ *In III Ethic.*, lesson 10 («habitus virtutis moalis definitur ex hoc quod est secundum rationem»); IV 8 («virtus operatur secundum rectam rationem») et passim.

⁵⁵ *In VI Ethic.*, lesson 11. Cfr. *S.Th.* I-II 58, 4 ad 3: «Virtus non solum est secundum rectam rationem in quantum inclinat ad id quod est secundum rectam rationem, ut platonici posuerunt, sed etiam oportet quod sit cum ratione recta, ut Aristoteles dicit in *VI Ethicorum*».

⁵⁶ *In VIII Ethic.*, lesson 2.

⁵⁷ I-II, 10, 3.

⁵⁸ I-II 19, 10: «... Non est autem recta voluntas alicuius hominis volentis aliquod bonum particulare nisi referat illud in bonum commune sicut in finem, cum etiam naturalis appetitus cuiuslibet partis ordinetur in bonum commune totius. Ex fine autem sumitur formalis ratio volendi illud quod ad finem ordinatur».

Explaining why reason is the basic criterion of morality St. Thomas recalls that it is proper to reason to bring about order. It is natural for man to live and to act in accordance with reason, since reason is man's nature.⁵⁹ Therefore, when an act proceeding from deliberate reason is not directed to the proper end (*debitum finem*), it will be opposed to reason and by this very fact become bad.⁶⁰ The *finis debitus* is the order of nature as it expresses itself in man's basic inclinations. It is what promotes the real good of man. In general we are inclined to what is good: natural pleasures are those which agree with us according to reason.⁶¹ However, the appetite may sometimes tend toward what is not convenient to reason. This being so not everything pleasurable is morally good.⁶² It may happen, though, that the use of reason is impeded: apart from the effect of a perverse choice of the will there is also the influence of the sensitive part of our being. This occurs because reason, in order to function, needs the assistance of some of the sense faculties. Now, when the body is in a disorderly state, the senses also are, and so, if this is the case, reason will be hampered in its judgments.⁶³

The same doctrine is proposed in the *Secunda Secundæ*. We shall come back later to the role of the virtue of prudence, which is dealt with in Question 47, but we must first mention some important texts about reason (*ratio*) in the remainder of the *Second Part*. As Aquinas argued in the *Prima Secundæ*, reason must determine the mean of the virtues. For instance, in the field of justice reason considers what is due and equitable and which are the circumstances.⁶⁴ The virtue of justice helps us to reach the right appraisal on how to develop our interpersonal relations. Self-control sees to it that not even by the prospect of very great pleasures one deviates from right reason but that one regulates the desire of pleasure according to reason⁶⁵, even if, as St. Thomas writes, of all passions pleasure is most difficult to control by reason.⁶⁶ The role of the virtues is to bring about that man himself and his actions are conform to reason.⁶⁷ Indeed, the good of the moral virtues consists primarily in the order of reason. The order of reason, however, is that things are directed to the end of man.⁶⁸ The good of reason consists above all in this order.⁶⁹ All natural inclinations must be regu-

⁵⁹ I-II 63, 1. It follows that the virtues exist in us in an inchoative way («per quamdam inchoationem»), as seeds which must further develop. However, not all human beings are equally well disposed (I-II 66, 1).

⁶⁰ I-II 18, 9: «Cum enim rationis sit ordinare, actus a ratione deliberativa procedens, si non sit ad debitum finem ordinatus, ex hoc ipso repugnat rationi, et habet rationem mali. Si vero ordinetur ad debitum finem, convenit cum ordine rationis, unde habet rationem boni».

⁶¹ I-II 31, 7.

⁶² I-II 34, 2 ad 1.

⁶³ I-II 48, 3; 34, 1 ad 3.

⁶⁴ II-II 61, 2.

⁶⁵ *Q.d. de virtutibus*, 5, 4.

⁶⁶ *Q.d. de malo*, 14, 1.

⁶⁷ II-II 123, 1: «Ad virtutem humanam pertinet ut faciat hominem et opus eius secundum rationem esse».

⁶⁸ II-II 161, 5: «Bonum humanæ virtutis in ordine rationis consistit. Qui quidem principaliter attenditur respectu finis».

⁶⁹ II-II 141, 6.

lated by reason which has the highest commanding position in human nature.⁷⁰ In its task reason presupposes the principles which are given by nature and it disposes the other things as is convenient in view of this end. It is worse to act against these fundamental principles than to act against the means leading to the end.⁷¹ Certain inclinations are basically good, such as seeking to be honoured, working for material prosperity, but even with regard to these inclinations reason must prescribe the correct manner (*modus rationis*).⁷² This applies even more to such passions as anger and fear. Indeed, the sensitive appetite must be subject to reason and subdued or, as Aquinas writes, domesticated by it.⁷³

In the *Quæstio disputata de virtutibus* Thomas proposes the same doctrine adding some important observations: the good of the passions consists in their being in conformity with reason. By its very nature the will tends to what is good according to reason, in a way analogous to the concupiscible appetite which tends to what is agreeable to the senses.⁷⁴ The mean in the field of moral virtues is determined according to right reason. Because of this determination the various habitus of the appetitive faculties obtain the character of virtues. In this way prudence which helps us to determine the correct mean, is the cause of all these virtues.⁷⁵ By the institution of nature the irascible and concupiscible faculties are intended to follow reason. This implies that by their very nature they can receive the virtues and be determined by them. They reach their accomplishment in so far as they are now in a disposition to pursue the good of reason.⁷⁶

As the good of man consists in a life according to right reason, moral evil is a deviation from reason.⁷⁷ Whatever is against reason, is against man's nature.⁷⁸ Reason is the measure of the morality of our actions.⁷⁹

As we have seen above, we must act in accordance with right reason but our actions must also be accompanied throughout by reason. This means that when we are going to act according to an inclination to a good end, say, to be generous, - a course of conduct which is made easy because of the presence of the virtue of generosity -, we must nevertheless be cautious and ponder the circumstances. We do so with the

⁷⁰ II-II 118, 1 ad 3.

⁷¹ II-II 154, 12.

⁷² II-II 156, 2. The *Q.d. de virtutibus*, q.1, a.13, calls this *modus rationis* the measure and rule of all passions and human actions. Because man is man by having reason, man's good must consist in that he acts according to reason.

⁷³ II-II 155, 4: «Plus autem viget bonum rationis in eo qui est temperatus, in quo etiam ipse appetitus sensitivus est subiectus rationi et quasi a ratione edomitus».

⁷⁴ *De virtutibus* 1, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 1, 6.

⁷⁶ 1, 8: «Irascibilis et concupiscibilis naturaliter sunt obaudibiles rationi. Unde naturaliter sunt susceptivæ virtutis, quæ in eis perficitur secundum quod disponuntur ad bonum rationis sequendum».

⁷⁷ *Q.d. de malo*, q. 14, a.1: «Malum animæ est præter rationem esse».

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 14, 2 ad 8: «Ratio hominis est natura. Unde quicquid est contra rationem, est contra hominis naturam».

⁷⁹ *Summa contra gentiles* III, 3: «Moralium autem mensura est ratio».

help of the virtue of prudence. Because of the enormous variety of situations with which we have to cope, careful deliberation is called for before we act. Thus the axiom that man must live according to reason, implies that he acts prudently.

4. THE VERTUE OF PRUDENCE AS REASON IN ACTION

At the beginning of his treatise on prudence in the *Summa theologiae* II-II, question 47, St. Thomas first deals with the question whether prudence has its seat in the intellect or in the will. First he gives a general description of prudence: by prudence we mean a frame of mind which, on the basis of what is now, makes us foresee what may happen in the future. This involves a certain comparison between what is now and what will be later. But comparing is the work of reason. If this is correct, prudence makes us deliberate about the end we pursue in a particular action, and also about what will take us to the end and it implies showing us how to apply ourselves to this action.

This consideration leads Aquinas to define prudence as the *recta ratio agibilium*, that is the correct way of deliberating about what must be done to reach the end. Deliberating in view of the end is precisely the task of practical reason. Since there is a highest end for man, to which his other goals are subordinated and subservient, prudence is concerned with considering the common end of the entire human life. A person who deliberates correctly with regard to the whole of the good life (*vivere bene*) is called *prudent*. Thus prudence makes us reason correctly (with *ratio recta*) concerning the things we deliberate about.⁸⁰

Our actions take place at the level of the individual and the concrete. It is the task of prudence to apply general principles to individual acts. To give an example, a principle says that we should return what belongs to the owner, but a prudent deliberation may show that it is advisable not to do so for the time being in this particular case. Although we can never know and foresee all possible aspects, circumstances and consequences of a decision, we can nevertheless succeed in knowing what happens generally in similar cases.⁸¹

When discussing the role of prudence we must first ascertain whether we have to do with a form of knowledge or with a moral virtue. A virtue renders the person good who possesses it and makes that what he does is good. Prudence not only concerns reason so that it deliberates correctly, but also our basic strivings and, finally, it invites us to act. Therefore it is a moral virtue.⁸² It has an object which is proper to it, sc. man's actions and undertakings (the *agibilia*), in so far as they are both the object of reason and of the appetite. Prudence is distinguished from the other moral virtues

⁸⁰ II-II 47, 2.

⁸¹ II-II 47, 3.

⁸² II-II 47, 4.

in that its object belongs to the intellect; it is associated with them in so far as its object concerns the appetite and it seeks to bring about the good.⁸³ In the following article St. Thomas describes the way in which prudence directs the other virtues. One might suppose that it assigns the end to each of them, for it directs them. However, Aquinas goes beyond this answer and delves deeper into the structure of moral acts. His argument runs as follows: the end of the moral virtues is the human good. Now the human good is to be in agreement with reason (*«bonum autem humanum est secundum rationem esse»*). Therefore, the ends or what each moral virtue is aiming at must already pre-exist in man's reason. These ends preexist as the first principles of the moral order.

Aquinas's argument rests on the analogy with the speculative order, in which all arguments are based on first principles of speculative intellect. In the case of the virtues these principles are those of the practical intellect, that is the intellect in so far as, together with the will, it directs our actions. These principles are naturally known and are the starting points of practical syllogisms leading to a decision to act. The virtue of prudence makes us apply these principles to particular situations and so allows us to reach a conclusion about what should be done. Prudence does not propose the end itself but orders actions concerning the things which are conducive to the end. Therefore, these first principles of the practical intellect (called *synderesis*) direct prudence, which in its turn moves the moral virtues assisting them to reach their end. It prepares the way (*parat viam*) by determining what conduces to the end (*«ea quæ sunt ad finem»*).⁸⁴ An example will illustrate how prudence functions. The virtue of piety makes us want to assist our aging parents. Prudence helps us to find the best way to do so by considering the situation of our parents and the resources at our disposal.

According to Aristotle's wellknown doctrine virtues tend to establish the mean between excess and deficiency in our actions. In this connection one wonders whether prudence determines in each case what is the mean or whether virtues are by themselves directed to it. Aquinas argues that the proper end of each virtue is to conform itself to right reason. To give an example, courage and temperance make that one does not abandon or suppress the correct judgment of reason (*iudicium rectum*) because of emotions or passions. As Aquinas writes, natural reason dictates to everyone of us to follow reason in our actions.⁸⁵ However, it is the task of prudence to determine how and by which means we can reach the mean of reason. The natural inclination of the moral virtues to the mean in our actions is not sufficient, because it always moves in the same way, whereas the mean is not the same in every case.

The acts proper to prudence are deliberation, evaluation and the application of the faculties to action. Moving to act is nearest to the proper end of the virtue of prudence and, for this reason, it is its most proper act.⁸⁶

⁸³ II-II 47, 5.

⁸⁴ II-II 47, 6.

⁸⁵ I I-II 47, 7: «Naturalis enim ratio dictat unicuique ut secundum rationem operetur».

⁸⁶ II-II 47, 8.

Solicitude belongs also to what is implied by prudence in so far as a prudent person is eager to do what must be done and careful in his actions. We should be slow in our deliberations but fast in executing what we have concluded that must be done. When necessary, deliberations may be protracted and decisions postponed, but they must always be conducted carefully. We must, however, realize that the level at which prudence operates does not allow to reach total certitude, for it concerns particular cases and contingent circumstances.⁸⁷

5. THE SPECIES OF PRUDENCE

When we speak of prudence we usually think of prudent personal behaviour, that is of deliberating about what is best for us to do under the varying circumstances of our life. However, we are not just human individuals, but we also live in a family and are members of a political society. The common good of society is of greater value than the good of the individual person. Prudence is the virtue which counsels us on how to reach our good. Since our personal well-being depends on the common good of society, as the good condition of a part depends on its relation to the whole. Hence it is also the task of prudence to deliberate on the means to promote the good of the community.⁸⁸ Since the common good differs from the good of the family as well as from the well-being of the individual person, the virtue of prudence is specifically different according to the good it seeks to attain.⁸⁹ It is tempting to think that prudence in the political field is reserved to those who govern, for it would seem that as subject to political authority the individual person has no need to direct others. Nevertheless St. Thomas stresses our individual responsibility for the exercise of reason even in the field of public life. Every human person must deliberate about his actions in so far as he is a reasonable being. Now he participates to a certain extent in the direction of the community or in the execution of common enterprises and must use his judgment. St. Thomas gives the example of construction workers who, while executing the plans of the architect, must nevertheless use their judgment in applying them.⁹⁰

A most interesting development is found in question 54, article 4 of the *Secunda Secundae*. Thomas argues that there is a special branch of prudence in the field of military matters. He explains his view as follows: What we do by art and by reason must be conform to what we find in nature since nature has been established by divine reason. Nature aims at two ends: in the first place, at directing each thing in itself; in the second place, at opposing outside agents which attack and corrode beings. For this reason nature has endowed animals not only with an appetite by which they are

⁸⁷ II-II 47, 9.

⁸⁸ II-II 47, 10.

⁸⁹ II-II 47, 11.

⁹⁰ II-II 47, 12.

moved to those things which are adapted or good to their health, but also with the irascible appetite by which they resist aggressive agents. Therefore, in the field of reason there must be not only political prudence, which orders whatever actions concern the common good, but also military prudence which indicates how to repel the attacks of enemies.⁹¹

6. SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT PRUDENCE

Virtues are mutually connected and move us to act in view of our good. So the question arises whether a sinful person who pursues a goal which deviates from his real end can nevertheless have the virtue of prudence. The answer is that there is a spurious prudence of which the acts outwardly look somewhat similar to real prudence, but which in reality deliberates about the means needed to attain a wrong end. The authentic virtue of prudence, on the other hand, discovers the course of actions which lead to man's true end. Prudence attains its perfect state when it tells us how to reach the true end of our entire life.⁹²

One must distinguish between the acquired virtue of prudence and infused prudence which is given with sanctifying grace. Grace confers charity. Since the virtues are mutually connected supernatural prudence is consecutive on charity. On the other hand, acquired prudence necessitates experience and careful deliberation, which are ordinarily not found in the young. One can develop them through practice.⁹³ This seems to suggest that one needs time and experience to become prudent («experimento eget et tempore»).

In his answer Aquinas distinguishes between the first principles of moral life and later principles or rules of conduct. The former are known naturally, the latter are acquired later through experience or through instruction. With regard to the knowledge of the individual things one has to deal with, a distinction must be made. While certain acts concern the end, others deal with the means leading to the end. The ends of the different virtues are determined by nature and so one can speak of a natural inclination toward the end. The means, on the other hand, are not determined beforehand but must be sought and evaluated. Their knowledge does not come naturally to man, who consequently is not naturally equipped with prudence, even if one person may be better disposed by nature to acquire it than another.⁹⁴ The exercise of prudence is not so much endangered or hampered by forgetfulness as by the disturbances the passions bring about. Experience shows how easily our judgment is warped by desire, fear, jealousy and hatred.

⁹¹ II-II 54, 4.

⁹² II-II 47, 13.

⁹³ II-II 47, 14.

⁹⁴ II-II 47, 15.

7. THE STAGES IN REACHING A PRUDENT DECISION AND THE ASSISTING VIRTUES

Question 47 gives the basic indications about how the virtue of prudence helps us to live according to reason. Its interventions always aim at enabling us to choose the most reasonable course of action under the circumstances and make us select the best means to reach the end. This process of deliberation and decision making is more complex than one would suspect at a first sight. In the work of prudence Aquinas distinguishes between several stages or assisting qualifications which may be involved. They are seven in number.

In the first place, we **remember** past actions and events from which we derive a certain experience. So we come to know what happens usually in similar cases and resort to this knowledge when we deliberate about a course of action (*memoria*).⁹⁵ In the second place, we must start our deliberation from a correct **appraisal of a principle** which is known by itself as right (*intelligentia*). All our reasoning about a course of action should start from such a general principle and a particular proposition. By this remark Aquinas stresses once more the importance of the first principles of the practical intellect. He holds that in ethics we proceed *more composito* (as we do in all productive arts) by applying general principles to particular and concrete cases, using a syllogism.⁹⁶ This particular proposition is a judgment about some particular end. An example of such a syllogism is the following: as a child I must respect and help my parents when they are in need. At this moment they are in a difficult situation. So it is a moral good for me to help them.⁹⁷

Our personal experience alone is not enough to help us reach the right decision. Concrete circumstances present an almost endless variety of possibilities, and therefore we must be **intent on learning from others** (*docilitas*). Our frame of mind must be willingness to learn.⁹⁸ In addition one must also be intent on learning by one's own experience, an attitude called **keenness** (*solertia*).⁹⁹ Given these prerequisites **reason must be ready to carry out its task** (*ratio*) and consider the options and the available means.¹⁰⁰ Reason must in particular be able to determine how to direct one's actions to the end of human life, a task which Aquinas calls **exercising foresight** (*providentia*).¹⁰¹ It happens that an action considered by itself is good and conform to the end but becomes bad because of concomitating factors. For this reason **caution** (*cautio*) is required. Because of the variety of concrete actions in which the good is often infected by what is bad and what is bad presents itself with the appearance of what is good¹⁰² one needs **circumspection** (*circumspectio*).

⁹⁵ II-II 49, 1: «quid autem in pluribus est verum oportet per experimentum considerare».

⁹⁶ In *I Ethic.*, lesson 3. Cfr. W.A. Wallace, *The Role of Demonstration in Moral Theology*, The Thomist Press, Washington D.C. 1962.

⁹⁷ II-II 49, 2: «Conclusio singularis syllogizatur ex universali et singulari propositione. Primum singulare est aliquis singularis finis».

⁹⁸ II-II 49, 3: «In particularibus sunt quasi infinitae varietates... Indiget homo ab aliis erudiri».

⁹⁹ II-II 49, 4.

¹⁰⁰ II-II 49, 5.

¹⁰¹ II-II 49, 6.

¹⁰² II-II 49, 7. St. Thomas speaks of *circumspectio* and *cautio*.

The dispositions we have just enumerated are parts of prudence and stages in the way it should function. They also are conditions the mind must satisfy so that it can exercise prudence. If, on the other hand, one considers the different fields in which prudence is active the following branches of prudence must be distinguished according to the special type of virtue called for: (a) the prudence of those who govern; (b) the prudence of those who are subject to authority, a form of prudence which disposes to conduct oneself in the proper way with regard to those in authority; (c) another form of prudence enables to conduct the affairs of one's family and comprises the prudence needed to create a viable way of married and family life; (d) finally, as we have seen, there is a branch of prudence concerning military matters. In St. Thomas's mind these four forms or *subjective* parts of prudence are based on natural structures, sc. the natural communities and the fact that we live in a world where there are forces at work which threaten our life, as is the case in the physical world where the animal organism is exposed to disintegrating influences from the environment.

For this reason it would seem that for other types of behaviour, such as the prudence required to conduct a scientific career or to invest one's money in stocks, there appears not to be a sufficient basis to speak of special forms of prudence.¹⁰³ Aquinas says so when explaining how to establish the correct mean in consuming food. Here the rule depends on the constitution of the body, and so it can be determined better by the art of medicine than by prudence. However, it is up to prudence to judge whether the desire for food is reasonable or immoderate.¹⁰⁴

Finally, Aquinas mentions three auxiliary virtues, sc. *eubulia*, which as he explains is a virtue which makes us carry out a careful investigation. Question 49 considered the dispositions practical reason must be equipped with so that it can proceed with the exercise of prudence. We are now dealing with the actual work of prudence. A first stage is called *eubulia* which is the careful consideration of whatever is involved in our actions. The second stage is called *synesis*, that is the correct judgment about what things are¹⁰⁵. Finally, the virtue called *gnome* allows us to consider actions in the light of reason or of higher principles. It happens that something seems to be all right according to ordinary principles, but is not when considered in the light of higher principles. An example is perhaps that of a defensive war which, while justifiable as such, may not be morally acceptable in view of the consequences.

St. Thomas's doctrine of right reason as the criterion of the morality of our actions is the centre of his ethics. Even if Aristotle and, to a certain extent, Plato prepared this theory, Thomas elaborated it in a unique way. Human reason becomes the determinating factor of the morality of our actions. However, it is not self-sufficient or arrogant reason, for it depends on the order of nature: on the basis of man's basic

¹⁰³ II-II 50, 1. 2. 3. 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Q.d. de malo*, 14, 1 ad 1.

¹⁰⁵ II-II 51, 2: «Iudicium rectum secundum communes regulas... Apprehendere aliquam rem secundum quod in se est».

inclinations reason establishes the first principles which are the commandments of natural law.

It must determine also the means which allow us to reach the ends of the different sectors of activity. When we act in view of these ends and in keeping with the first principles, the virtues are generated. It is our task to place any course of action in the light of these ends, to evaluate it accordingly and to consider how to best reach the end. In doing so and in determining the means to be used reason relies on prudence. Prudence in its turn uses the other virtues, acquired by personal efforts and education, and it avails of one's own and other people's experiences. Therefore, right reason as the criterion of the morality of our actions is not cold, objective reason, dissecting actions with a surgeon's scalpel. It is the practical intellect, collaborating with the will and the virtues, using one's own previous experience and listening to the advice of others. It is an expression of the human person in his rational nature.

Summary

St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of right reason as the basis and norm of the morality of our actions is at the center of his ethics. This paper attempts to show the implications of the principle *Bonum hominis est secundum rationem vivere*. St. Thomas means that the source of correct behavior are the first principles of the practical intellect, which the mind grasps on the basis of our fundamental inclinations to the human good at the various levels of our being. In the second place, the principle indicates that our reason must determine which acts are in conformity with our nature and what is contrary to it. Moreover, reason must establish the mean of the virtues which make our acts conform to reason. Finally, through prudence, reason shows which are the proper means to reach our goals.

Riassunto

La dottrina tomista della retta ragione come base e norma della moralità delle nostre azioni è il cuore della sua etica. Questo articolo punta a mostrare le implicazioni del principio *bene dell'essere umano è vivere secondo ragione*. San Tommaso indica che fonte di una retta condotta di vita sono i principi primi dell'intelletto pratico, che la mente coglie sulla base delle nostre inclinazioni fondamentali al bene umano secondo i differenti livelli del nostro essere. In secondo luogo, il principio indica che la nostra ragione deve stabilire quali atti siano conformi alla nostra natura e quali contrari ad essa. Inoltre, la ragione deve fissare il significato delle virtù che rendono i nostri atti conformi alla ragione. Infine, la ragione, tramite la prudenza, mostra quali siano i mezzi adatti a perseguire i nostri obiettivi.