



AQUINAS ON PRACTICAL WISDOM

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Aquinas on Practical Wisdom¹

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Abstract:

Various aspects of Aristotelian work on virtue seem to move around each other in circles—correct practical knowledge seems to be measured by right desire, and right desire seems to be measured by correct practical knowledge; having the moral virtues seems to require having practical wisdom, but having practical wisdom seems to require having the moral virtues. Aquinas's account of practical wisdom is deeply indebted to Aristotle, but Aquinas finds a kind of grounding for practical wisdom in an understanding of human nature at some remove from Aristotle's, developing a moral psychology that is, in many respects, both richer and more powerful than what we find in some contemporary neo-Aristotelian work. Aquinas devoted considerable attention to both the character of virtue and the nature of vice. He provided a special account of the way in which human beings were oriented toward human good and away from bad that allowed ample room for accounting for the many ways most of us routinely fail to lead entirely well-ordered lives. I will take us into some of the detail of Aquinas's account of practical wisdom in search of theoretical wisdom about virtue, vice, and human nature.

Introduction

I will start with what ought to be a commonplace—it is a condition on the intelligibility of animal movement that an animal moves toward what is good for an

animal of its kind and avoids what is bad for an animal of its kind. There are exceptions, of course, especially among domestic animals. While even a domestic goat knows to avoid eating tansy, this aversion seems to be beyond the capacities of domestic sheep, and cats and dogs that spend too much time as objects of intense human emotional engagement become strange. But when a non-human animal seems incapable of going for the things that it belongs to such animals to go for, or else avoiding the things that it belongs to such animals to avoid, one wants to know what has gone wrong. Is the animal sick? Are we seeing the unhappy aftermath of myopic animal husbandry practices?

That is the sort of point at issue in the commonplace. And the commonplace frames study of animals generally. For example, there will be certain things one looks for in the course of identifying a new species of animal that point to what animals generally have to seek or to avoid—how does this sort manage nutrition? how does it protect itself? how does it reproduce?—that sort of thing. In this sense, understanding living things immediately catches us up in very general and rudimentary concern over good and bad, given the kind of living thing in question.² I take it that no one engaged in serious study of, say, gray wolves, will become concerned over the possibility that she may be wrong in thinking that Wolf #355 is interested in breeding. She may be wrong in thinking that interest in breeding is what drives Wolf #355 to haunt the edges of that pack this week. He may be after food. He may be trying to join the pack even though membership rarely carries opportunities to breed. But there is no question that food, pack membership, and breeding possibilities are attractive to wolves—the sorts of things that wolves pursue, things that are, for the wolf *qua* wolf, good.

In short, if we want to understand what is going on with an animal, the framework for our investigation—the thing that sets the terms for our work—is some growing understanding of specific good—that is, what is good for that species of living thing. This is so even when we move from the level of the whole living thing in its characteristic environment to concern over detailed aspects of its biology.

Why does the chemical composition of the primate's breast milk change? The infant's need for such-and-such is communicated to the mother's body during nursing, and the production of breast milk matches the infant's need. At this level of description, it does not matter whether or not the primates are human beings.

When we turn our attention to human beings' voluntary acts, however, even though we operate within the same framework of good and bad that guides study of organic chemistry or neurobiology or vision or digestion, we start to lose our grip. What counts as a good human act? What counts as a good way for human beings to manage the reproduction of living individuals? of the species? of modes of social life and interaction?

I have some confidence that I will not be able to interact with a seriously disturbed person in a healing way unless I can see the sense in which her way of moving around in the world is meant to secure a good sort of thing for a human to secure, or else to avoid something that is a bad sort of thing for one of us. Still, the last thing I usually would say straight off when confronted with someone who avoids bathing, screams profanities when approached, and scuttles into dark places rather than make eye contact with anyone is that she is engaged in reasonable pursuit of human good. The merely formal point—living things seek what is good, given the kinds of living things that they are, and avoid what is bad for such kinds of things—may *frame* our understanding of what people are up to.

Nevertheless, what is *understandable* in humans' ways of moving around in the world dramatically exceeds the range of ways of organizing one's life that count as tending to reasonable and harmonious pursuit of human good, or avoidance of what's bad. Folly, greed, pettiness, cowardice, injustice, despair, cruelty, negligence, callousness, selfishness, and a wide range of more unusual, boutique practical orientations can be perfectly understandable in this minimal sense: they can qualify as directed toward human good, or away from things that are bad for humans. For all that, if we can make sense of these orientations in ourselves or in others, this is *because* we can see them as attempts—however benighted—to move toward good or away from bad.

Aquinas takes this bit of wisdom about species of living things from Aristotle and develops the point with reference to voluntary human acts in ways that draw from other sources—notably from Augustine, but also from Ambrose, from some strands of Stoic thought, from saints, from scripture, from his teacher, his contemporaries, and others. Aquinas provides a fairly rich and strangely elegant map of human moral psychology. Our choices and actions are all inflected by reason in the sense at issue in treating us as going toward real or apparent human good, away from what is or seems to be bad. This is how what we are up to is potentially understandable even when we are acting in ways that are recognizably unpleasant, short-sighted, or foolish so that human appear, as my youngest sister once put it, to "lack the sense that God gave to mammals."³

On Aquinas's schema, we are the animals with intellect. This is, for him, a metaphysical point rather than just an observation about the relative complexity or range of our sort of thinking, feeling, and wanting as contrasted, say, with the sort we think that we find in other species. And part of what is interesting about us, as we find ourselves, is

that reasonable and harmonious pursuit of human good is a problem for us. Acquired virtues are cultivated, learned ways of coping with that trouble. And acquired practical wisdom is, for Aquinas, a cardinal virtue.

For obvious reasons, *acquired* virtues—strengths developed through education, acculturation, practice, and such, the nascent forms of which may begin in dense and complex attachment to caretakers very early in life—are the strengths of interest to most people in my line of work, to educators, and to social scientists. The other sort of virtue important for Aquinas is *infused* virtue—strength that comes from God and orients us to a supernatural end. I am among those fans of Aquinas who think that we ignore infused virtue at our peril if we are interested in his account of human life, human nature, and the place of substantive good in understanding how things go for human beings.

Nevertheless, in what follows by *virtue* I will mean acquired virtue.

I will begin by giving a quick and crude sketch of Aquinas's understanding of human moral psychology, by way of introducing his diagnosis of how it is that acting well can be such a problem for us. Moral virtue will come into the story to help us begin to address the problem, without entirely solving it, and practical wisdom—an intellectual strength—will help steady and steer the vessel whose patches and ongoing repair have been the work of moral virtue.

Moral Psychology as we Know and Suffer It

Something as abstract as a condition on the intelligibility of animal movement does not tell us what individual members of any species will go for or avoid. All it does is

suggest that in order to understand some sort of movement on the part of some sort of creature, we will need to operate with the prior understanding that the thing in question is going for something that might be good for such a kind of creature, or else away from something that might be bad for it. I have couched the point in vaguely epistemic terms—we understand or investigate or research species of living things by seeing the processes we investigate as doing some good for the kind of creature we want to understand. For a Thomist, if I understand us, the epistemological point has a metaphysical root. It is not just that we happen to isolate and investigate processes large and small characteristic of various kinds of living thing by treating the changes as end-directed, where the ends serve the good of the kind of organism in question. This way of understanding creatures, their doings, their parts, and the processes characteristic of their lives captures how things are, and how things go, for species of organism. How we understand—our mode of apprehending how things are with the living—tends to lead to proper knowledge about how things *are* with the living. If you are nervous about the implied metaphysics, you could retreat to the more modest position: what we can know about the processes characteristic of kinds of living thing is what we can know in this framework.

As I mentioned, we are unlikely to be alarmed at this suggestion if we are studying mitosis, say, as an aspect of the reproduction of the living individual in multicellular organisms, or else as reproduction of the species in single-cell kinds of organism. We study how things are *supposed to go* in these processes, given the reproductive ends in question. Similarly, if we are researching seed-production in some kinds of grasses on the mighty savannah, the hunting techniques of hyenas, dolphin communication, or the

ways in which male feral cats mark territory in the streets of Berlin we operate with an implicit grasp of the point/end/good of the kind of process or behavior in question. But when it comes to what humans are up to—to human voluntary acts, deliberate omissions, and tendencies to neglect this or that aspect of life—we are likely to throw up our hands. Even if we are willing to side with the idea that we are animals with intellect—for Aristotle, in a slightly different vein, *rational* animals, where the sort of rationality in question is the chatty sort, and the medium of the chat that permeates and shapes the psychology is natural language—whatever happens when an animal has the sort of intellect that an animal can have, and an intellect operates in the way that an embodied animal intellect can operate, looks to make trouble for any smooth, clean, uncontroversial claims about the character of human good.

We might agree that clean air, pure water, adequate nutrition and shelter, and some sort of reasonably peaceful and orderly social life are good for people—the kinds of things that it makes sense for people to go for or work to protect or promote. But this is very far from a substantive code of conduct, much less a source of clear guidance in the business of figuring out what to do, or what, exactly, to avoid.

How does Aquinas see the moral psychology of the animals who have to figure out such things, for whom even near consensus on some points about what is good for people falls wretchedly short of determining policy or action?

On Aquinas's schema, some aspects of moral psychology are directly responsive to good or bad in our experience of ourselves in our circumstances—things as simple as the warmth of the fireside on a cold night, the welcoming embrace of a loved one, the discomfort of a rock in one's shoe, or the bad smell that spells trouble.⁴ Some aspects are

responsive to the difficulty in pursuing or protecting or promoting good, or the difficulty in avoiding bad.⁵ These aspects of psychological life, however immediate, can be complex—they frequently involve memory and culturally developed tendencies, and may even reflect expert knowledge. The seasoned detective walking the scene of a murder will have a very different sense of the crime than I could get, even if I was working hard to try to understand what I was seeing, hearing, and smelling. On my reading, it is helpful to note three things about our immediate, sensory responses to our circumstances:

1. First, they are geared to tracking good and alerting us to what might impede, block, or damage, or otherwise get in the way of something good. The principle that good is to be sought and done, bad avoided, shapes our responses at root—for Aquinas, this is the first principle of practical reason and the first precept of natural law, on his understanding of natural law.⁶
2. Second, our responses to our immediate circumstances can help to incline us to do or to keep from doing various things that we might do under the circumstances.
3. Third, given the first two points, these impressions are not only cognitively inflected and capable of grabbing explicit attention, they are sources of motivation primed for guidance by reason—they have, as philosophers might put it, *content*. It is not content of some sort that could be exhausted by an arbitrarily large list of statements or propositions, mind you, and it may not be content that could be articulated by the subject moving around in the world, alive to her circumstances.

Here is what I mean: how any of us goes about responding to the world that engages her is the sort of thing that can be shaped by her reason. She can go for something, or enjoy something, *as* good in such-and-such respect. She can avoid something *as* bad in such-

and-such. And she can do better or worse at any stage in her active response to the circumstances in which she finds herself. She can make mistakes about what is in her interest. She can do a good job of identifying things worth pursuing and fail to pursue those things effectively or well. She can become distracted. She can be held back by fear or pushed forward too quickly by anger or need or impatience. In short, the kind of animal that needs to work out its engagement with its world is also the kind of animal that can mess up, sometimes in simple ways, often in ways complicated enough to be the stuff of modern film and literature.

The trouble that the intellectual animal faces is that even though it is drawn toward specifically good things or possibilities, averse to bad, these tendencies can clash with each other. The various bits of engaged human moral psychology—designed to work together—need not line up automatically, need not provide a clear sense of the individual's circumstances, and need not lead one in a single direction. We are often conflicted.

Worse, sometimes various aspects of human moral psychology work together in truly unfortunate ways. Consider: my sadness at the death of a beloved dog, my anger at a colleague's decision to retire, unrequited love toward one person, unwanted affection from another, a mountain of debt, a pile of paperwork, the fact that nothing in the refrigerator looks appetizing, and the fact that I have a lot of pain medication on hand all can line up in a single direction that presents itself as offering me a kind of relief that people in my circumstances might find desirable. Relief from misery is desirable. But my growing sense of direction is not leading me closer to participation in shared pursuit of common good.

However conflicted, however pleasingly or miserably single-minded she is, the human being operates within an understanding of the kinds of things that are good for humans generally—the framework that allows her to provide for herself *and* for others.⁷ Partly because of the grasp of general human good back behind even lavishly idiosyncratic fancy, our sociality frames our basic experience as we move around in the world, even if we often find one another inconvenient or frightening.

On Aquinas's view, on my reading, at any rate, a virtue is a cultivated strength that fosters cooperation and coordination among and across various regions of our psychological life for the sake of helping us pursue good and avoid bad smoothly and reasonably. Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas writes in detail, with considerable acuity and candor about the senses in which even obviously strange or bad acts, or cultivated vicious habits, aim at as such desirable things in human life.⁸ And, for Aquinas, virtue is directed to common good even when it is a virtue like temperance that seems mostly to concern the good of its bearer. Moral virtues help us to have more ordered psychological lives so that we are better able to contribute to and participate in sound social life. Moral virtues help each of us to regulate her emotions and to direct herself to appropriate goals. The sphere of moral virtue, then, like the sphere of natural law in Aquinas's view, gives specifically human substantive content to the formal injunction to pursue good and avoid bad.

In short, my beautiful character—if I have such a thing—is beautiful because I allows me to participate appropriately in collective work for common good. If I am not made a more fit companion in pursuit of common good by my efforts at moral self-improvement, then these efforts have failed. Of course, I could find myself in circumstances so

depraved that I have very few opportunities to share in my fellows' efforts to promote common good. But even in deeply ethically hostile circumstances, the virtuous person's character is only beautiful because it equips her to act well *with* her fellow human beings to protect, promote, secure, and otherwise further common good.

In this sense, as I read him, Aquinas's understanding of virtue does not leave open the possibility that cultivation of virtue could be self-centered, solipsistic, wildly methodologically individualistic, or, in any other sense you care to mention, the stuff of the lone human being trying to perfect herself morally with no regard for her fellows.

It is by giving specifically human content to the formal injunction to pursue good and avoid bad that moral virtues are a source of ends for us.

Gradations of Moral Virtue

Now, what falls under the rubric of "virtues" for we contemporary Anglophone neo-Aristotelians involve various learned or cultivated tendencies. Our use of the term obscures distinctions that are important for Aquinas. Aquinas recognizes distinct gradations of virtue—of strengths that help us to pursue good and avoid bad reasonably.

First, we can have virtuous inclinations (by temperament or through education and cultivation). Depending upon how one understands "natural virtue" in Aristotle, these may correspond to Aristotelian natural virtues. On standard readings of Aristotle, however, the naturalness of natural virtue in Aristotle makes it a matter of temperament rather than cultivation. For Aquinas, the crucial point is that mere virtuous inclination—got by nature or by nurture and practice—need not work in concert with other such inclinations. Mere virtuous inclination is not connected with the work of other admirable

qualities or dispositions. For example, I may have strong tendencies to loyalty toward my family, my comrades in arms, my employer, or the members of my club. Loyalty is an important aspect of varieties of social solidarity crucial to many aspects of shared life. Obviously, there are such tendencies as misplaced loyalties—I have pledged allegiance, say, to a band of thieves or to a tyrant. But even without having thrown in my lot with unsavory company, appropriate loyalties to my family, say, or friends who have stood by me in times of great distress—can inspire pretty bad acts on my part, depending upon what my intimates have been up to. Without a connected inclination toward justice, even my rightly placed loyalties can as easily be moral weaknesses as moral strengths. Virtue proper is supposed to be a moral strength. It is because practical tendencies like my loyalties need not operate in concert with other virtuous inclinations that mere virtuous inclinations fall short of counting as virtues proper for Aquinas.

Practical wisdom helps to remedy this problem. Isolated virtuous inclinations, whether or not they have been cultivated, are imperfect—"incomplete" or "unfinished"—virtues.⁹ It is the connection to justice and honesty, for example, that could complete or perfect my tendencies to loyalty, making my loyalty a moral strength rather than a point of moral weakness. In the second, higher gradation, practical wisdom operates to connect the virtues. Here, Aquinas is very close to Aristotle.

Anselm Müller has this to say about Aristotle's treatment of the topic (with natural virtue in the place of Aquinas's imperfect virtues):

What the natural variant of V shares with V is the characteristic response. What distinguishes it from V is the fact that it is not shaped by wisdom.... So the second aspect of an ethical virtue V is what right reason brings to it, namely its

taking account of 'circumstances' in a wide sense of this word. I mean its taking account of a) the point of practicing V anyway (i.e., what V contributes to humans' living well), and b) the various respects in which it may, in consequence, be appropriate or inappropriate to exhibit V's characteristic response here and now. It is by bringing to bear on any given situation this knowledge of when and how to respond in this way, *and when and how not to*, that any ethical virtue is *unqualifiedly* good.¹⁰

Müller argues that the point of the virtues—that virtues are strengths meant to enable a human being to live well—sheds light both on Aristotle's perplexing insistence that virtue directs us to the mean and his faintly demoralizing suggestion that one cannot have any virtue without having them all. Müller writes:

...we relate the various virtues to a *common dimension of assessment* generally called *morality*. This does not, of course, prove that the pursuit of any one virtue *cannot* ever be inconsistent with the pursuit of another. It does, however, show that such inconsistency would detract from what morality achieves as an ultimate practical standard. The concepts of courage and of justice do not point to independent criteria of assessment in the way that the concepts of morality and of etiquette or the concepts of lawfulness and of political correctness do. There is no inconsistency in the rules of etiquette requiring you to do what morality rules out. Genuine inconsistency does, however, seem to obtain if what you do agrees with the common (moral) standard of *acting well*, because it is courageous, and fails to agree, because it is unjust. The demands of the many virtues are, in this respect,

like the many rules of football (that all must be kept at the same time), not like alternative recipes for producing a cake.¹¹

Aquinas has this to say about natural virtue in Aristotle's account:

That there is a natural virtue, presupposed to moral [virtue], is obvious from the fact that individual virtuous or vicious practices seem to exist in some people naturally....¹²

He continues by assimilating the "nature" in Aristotle's natural virtue to his own understanding of human nature. For Aquinas, the formal injunction to do and seek good, and avoid what is bad, is given some specifically human content in the basic structure and operation of practical reason, operating together with and through the pre-dispositions, dispositions, inclinations or desires or tendencies toward, for example, shared social life. Aquinas treats the tendencies as belonging to *synderesis*—the aspect of our moral psychology that provides direction to the animal that has to figure out what to seek, what to avoid, and how to go about seeking and avoiding. Aquinas writes:

...on the part of reason...the first principles of human conduct are implanted by nature, for instance, that no one should be injured, and the like; next, on the part of the will, which of itself is naturally moved by the good apprehended as its proper object; last, on the part of the sensitive appetite according as, by natural temperament...[although individual human beings have different temperaments] the first two are common to all men.¹³

Virtuous tendencies become proper virtues when shaped and guided by discretion/discrimination (*discretio intellectus*). Virtues proper, guided by practical wisdom (itself moved by *synderesis*) have the dynamic unity we see when individuals

and groups of people act well. Unlike mere good inclinations, virtues operating with discretion make me a good human being. They make me a good person by helping me suit me to participate in the daily production and reproduction of sound social life, where the soundness of the sort of social life in question is partly produced by the good tendencies of the participants.

Angela McKay [Knobel] traces the work of prudence in connecting the virtues this way:

Some people have, from birth, inclinations towards fortitude, temperance, or mercy. Habits such as these give one an aptitude for performing certain kinds of actions, but they do not make one good in an unqualified sense because they are not guided by prudence. Hence, unlike genuine virtues, these dispositions can as easily be put to the service of bad ends as of good.¹⁴

Acquired practical wisdom directs action in accordance with the standards of morality. The order I enjoy from practical wisdom is not the highest sort of order that a human life can have. For Aquinas, infused virtue—a gift from God—orders me to a supernatural end higher than the end at issue in the work of acquired virtue.

Practical Wisdom—Pronesis/prudence

I started with an Aristotelian commonplace about the intelligibility of animal movement which can extend to a commonplace about the intelligibility of biological processes generally. I stressed that this commonplace was abstract and formal—it doesn't tell you what is supposed to happen in organisms or what organisms are supposed to do. All it tells you is that understanding how things are supposed to go with organisms

catches us up in an understanding of what is good or bad for a kind of living thing. I mentioned that when the animal movements of interest are voluntary human acts, the distance between the formal commonplace and how it is that a human being ought to go about providing for herself and for others can seem very great, even though both theory and practice will be rooted in some thought about the sorts of things that it makes sense for a human being to seek and to do, or to shun and to flee.

I have found Aquinas an especially good teacher on these points. Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas devotes considerable attention to explaining what sorts of things are amiss when individuals and groups of people do wrong. It is unsurprising that we do wrong, notice, because human beings have to figure things out that our fellow creatures seem to get right. Worse yet, humans have to to *keep having to work out* what to go for, what to avoid, and how to seek their good and shun what is bad for them. Early training is usually enough to get other animals off on the right foot. Human beings are still sorting things out for themselves as adults. The need to figure out how to move toward good or away from bad does not seem to vanish with practice for most of us. And Aquinas seems to have operated with the firm understanding that the business of moral self-improvement is ongoing in human life. This is one of the respects in which Aquinas parts company with Aristotle.

Three other aspects of Aquinas's work go to the distinction between Aquinas and Aristotle on practical wisdom. First, Aquinas offers an account of natural law, which I smuggled in discussion of the abstract, formal point. The first precept of natural law directs the human being to pursue good and avoid bad. The work on natural law is only indirectly Aristotelian.

Second, as I mentioned in discussion of how practical wisdom connects virtuous dispositions or pre-dispositions, Aquinas appeals to something called *synderesis*—*synteresis*, if one wanted to push the language a bit. *Synderesis* provides additional specifically human direction to the abstract injunction to pursue good and avoid bad. Again, this aspect of Aquinas's moral psychology has no direct counterpart in Aristotle.

Thirdly, Aquinas devotes considerable attention to the sense in which acquired virtues operate as cultivated strengths that help to foster psychological and practical harmony as we go about providing for ourselves and for others. For example, courage does not merely help me stand my ground for something it is worth taking a stand about, it prevents me from taking foolish risks, it helps me direct fear to things worth fearing, and helps me moderate my fear of things that do not much matter. The kind of discrimination and discretion involved in allowing even my fears to help me do and seek genuine good, and avoid genuine bad is the sort that can be supplied by the operation of practical wisdom.

Robert Miner argues that Aquinas's account of practical wisdom diverges from Aristotle's in two crucial respects. Miner takes it that significant strands of Aquinas's work on practical wisdom have strong resonances with Aristotle's account of *phronesis*, and that none of Aquinas's claims about *prudentia* need be logically inconsistent with Aristotle's teaching about *phronesis*.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Aquinas's discussion takes place in a larger theological context involving both considerations of providence and considerations of human directedness to a supernatural end. That context separates Aquinas's treatment of practical wisdom from Aristotle's. Beyond this, Miner takes it that Aquinas's willingness to discuss practical wisdom as a moral virtue—rather than just an

intellectual virtue—underscores the degree to which Aquinas treats other sources as authoritative for work on practical wisdom. Miner writes:

As long as we are careful not to derationalize it, or otherwise eliminate its directorial capacity, we may regard prudence as if it were a moral virtue. Doing so, in fact, manifests some of its properties and relations that are concealed by the Aristotelian division [between moral and intellectual virtues].¹⁶

On Miner's reading, part of the point of emphasizing the moral face of practical wisdom rests in work by Ambrose and others on the cardinal virtues as moral virtues.

There are other places where Aquinas diverges from Aristotle. For example, Aristotle, on Aquinas's reading and on the readings of many Thomistically-inclined neo-Aristotelians, discusses practical principles without distinguishing the very general and abstract principles from the specific ones. Aquinas distinguishes the perfectly general principles like "no evil is to be done"—which we understand naturally in the sense I meant to suggest in talking about the formal condition on intelligibility—from the more specific principles.¹⁷ Specific principles will include such things as one ought not to lie, cheat, steal, or address our need for expanded agricultural production by genocidal means. Practical wisdom understands these as specifications of the more general.

Building from this point, Tobias Hoffmann reads Aquinas's treatment of the relation between the moral virtues and practical wisdom this way:

[Practical wisdom], governing what promotes the virtuous end [basically, living a good human life], realizes the moral virtues, while synderesis [natural reason aligned with natural inclination for human good] moves practical wisdom.... [B]y

anchoring practical wisdom in natural reason rather than in the moral virtues,
Aquinas avoids the circular causal relationship of desire and reason.¹⁸

I am not entirely content with either Hoffmann or Miner on these points. I share their sense that the places to look when thinking about the ways that Aquinas and Aristotle diverge is to Aquinas's account the work of both nature and grace in the leading of one and the same good human life. Practical wisdom traffics in both for Aquinas.

A Concluding Remark

On my reading, Aquinas's picture of the intellectual animal and its struggles provides a tremendously subtle and compelling starting point for thought about virtues generally and practical wisdom in particular. Virtues are cultivated strengths that we seek to nurture in our children and develop in ourselves because they help the fragmentary and broken aspects of human moral psychology cooperate for the sake of acting and living well. The kind of unity practical wisdom gives to our efforts is the dynamic unity of dispositions and pre-dispositions, variously activated and quieted as we move through our days, all ordered to the end of the wholeness of individual human persons living reasonably well-ordered lives with and among their fellows.

These strengths should not be thought of as blocky, fixed traits dictating one perfectly determinate fixed act or omission after another and then another. To treat cultivating virtue on the model of building such strengths would be rather like mistaking weight-lifting regimes for targeted muscle groups with building a strong body. One doesn't get a strong body by working first on one's biceps, then on triceps, and then, and then and then. Rather, a strong body charged with, say, moving a big rock from one place to the next, or

climbing a hill, or playing golf, or walking to school involves the coordinated and smooth exercise of the whole body. On my reading of Aquinas, the interaction and coordination of virtues in the human personality is like the exercise of the strong body at work or at play. My practical wisdom, if I have any, anchored in natural reason and synderesis, taking its ends from such moral virtues as I have, stops me from doing some things—as bodily strength can help me to stop at an appropriate point when running to the edge of the cliff. Practical wisdom can help me to access wider regions of my practical repertoire than I have in the past when I need to figure out how to cope with a novel problem (as experience climbing and jumping might help me get over a fallen tree on the trail). And throughout, practical wisdom helps me to bring what I have to bear on the challenge of acting well—of working with and among my fellow human beings in pursuit of human good and avoidance of what is bad.

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² The best work on this topic in contemporary philosophy is by Michael Thompson. For his most concise treatment, see "Apprehending Human Form," in Anthony O'Hear, editor, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), pp.47-74.

³ Lisa Winans in conversation.

⁴ See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* ['ST'] I, q. 81; ST I-II, q. 30;

⁵ See, for example, ST I, q. 81; ST I-II, q. 40.

⁶ See, for example, ST I-II, q. 94; *Sententia libri Ethicorum (Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics)* ['SLE'], 1.1.

⁷ See, for example, ST I-II, q. 91, a.2.

⁸ The most detailed treatment of these topics can be found in his disputed questions on evil, *De malo*.

⁹ See, e.g., *Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus Cardinalibus (Disputed Questions on the Cardinal Virtues)* ['QDV'], a. 2.

¹⁰ Anselm Winfried Müller, "Aristotle's Conception of Ethical and Natural Virtue: How the Unity Thesis sheds light on the Doctrine of the Mean," in Jan Szaif and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, editors, *Was ist das für den Menschen Gute?* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), p. 26.

¹¹ Anselm Winfried Müller, "Aristotle's Conception of Ethical and Natural Virtue: How the Unity Thesis sheds light on the Doctrine of the Mean," p. 51.

¹² SLE 6.11, 1276.

¹³ SLE 6.11, 1277.

¹⁴ Angela McKay, "Prudence and Acquired Moral Virtue," *The Thomist*, vol. 69 (2005), p. 540.

¹⁵ Robert Miner, "Non-Aristotelian Prudence in the *Prima Secundae*," *The Thomist*, vol. 64 (2000): 401-422.

¹⁶ Robert Miner, "Non-Aristotelian Prudence in the *Prima Secundae*," p. 411.

¹⁷ See, e.g., ST I-II, q. 58.

¹⁸ Tobias Hoffmann, "Prudence and Practical Principles," in Tobias Hoffmann, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkams, editors, *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2013), p. 174.