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978-1-107-00267-8 - Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics

Edited by Tobias Hoffmann, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkams

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Introduction**Tobias Hoffmann, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkams*

The ethics of Thomas Aquinas should be counted among the most fruitful and influential approaches to moral philosophy. It is often seen as the medieval counterpart to the towering achievements of ancient and modern ethics produced by thinkers like Aristotle and Immanuel Kant.<sup>1</sup> But its impact cannot be measured solely in terms of its contribution to the history of philosophy. Leading proponents of contemporary virtue ethics have drawn heavily on Aquinas's ethics in their seminal works on the topic. To mention just one famous example: Alasdair MacIntyre's attempt to revitalize virtue ethics as a rival ethical paradigm to modern deontology and consequentialism culminates in his extensive treatment of Aquinas.<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre argues that the main achievement of Aquinas's approach is grounded in his successful blending of two traditions that might at first glance seem incompatible: on the one hand, Aristotle's moral philosophy, which centers on earthly happiness and its achievement by way of naturally acquired virtues like wisdom, prudence, justice, temperance, and courage; on the other hand, Augustine's moral theology, which stresses that complete happiness exists only in the afterlife and is attained by the divinely infused virtues of faith, hope and charity.

MacIntyre's claims may certainly be disputed in several respects, but at its core his thesis stands unchallenged: it is generally agreed that Aquinas developed his ethics thanks largely to a close reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*). To date, the scholarship in this area has provided no clear picture of how Aquinas deals with and depends on Aristotle's ethics. The question of how to assess his attitude toward Aristotle's moral philosophy is still highly controversial and largely influenced by preconceived ideas about the relationship between ancient and Christian ethics. For some scholars, Aquinas's use and interpretation of the *EN* is merely a

<sup>1</sup> To mention just one recent example: Irwin 2007 devotes nine chapters (about 220 pages) to Aquinas in his reconstruction of the historical development of ethics from Antiquity up to the Reformation.

<sup>2</sup> See MacIntyre 2007 (1st edn. 1981), chs. 12–13; 1988, chs. 6–11; 1990, chs. 5–6.

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piece of theology that has no value as an interpretation of Aristotle. For others, Aquinas's reading of the *EN* is a highly successful elucidation of Aristotle's own intention. Efforts to mediate between the two positions have not been able to bring the issue to rest. Thus the question remains open: Did Aquinas distort and obscure Aristotelian ethics, or did he draw out more clearly some of its deeper implications?

The present volume intends to make some progress on these issues by offering a more systematic approach than has yet been done. By way of introduction, we will now map out the major issues involved in answering the question about Aquinas's relation to Aristotle's *Ethics*. First, we will provide a rough sketch of Aristotle's influence on Aquinas's ethics, which will be refined by the essays contained in this book. Here we will devote some space to Aquinas's commentary on the *EN*, the *Sententia libri Ethicorum*; for though – as we will argue below – this work is not necessarily the best source from which to study the relation between Aquinas and the *EN*, it nevertheless has been the subject of some scholarly debate, and here is the best place to present an overview of it (Section 1.1). This section will also enumerate various problems, questions, and issues surrounding Aquinas's handling of the *EN* in his whole oeuvre, which will be addressed in our volume. The second task of this introduction is to state the specific aims and the overall structure of the project as it is instantiated in the individual contributions to the volume (Section 1.2). Lastly, we will take a glance at some key conclusions that will result from the investigations in this volume (Section 1.3).

### 1.1 A sketch of Aristotle's influence on Aquinas's *Ethics*

Aristotle's enormous influence on Aquinas's own moral thinking is well attested by the fact that the *EN* is by far the most frequently cited single work in his major systematic writings on ethics, the *Sentences* commentary (*In Sent.*) and the *Secunda Pars* of the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the definitive account of his ethics in the *ST* (especially in the *Prima Secundae*) shows significant structural parallels with Aristotle's treatment; this is most noticeable in the way he structures the whole subject matter of moral philosophy but is also evident in his treatment of some individual topics. Aquinas was well acquainted with Aristotle's ethics from the earliest stages of his academic career. As a student in Paris in 1246–47, he

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of these quotations and the different uses to which Aquinas puts them throughout his career, see Jordan 1992. For some statistics, see Chapter 3, Section 3.4, in this volume.

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probably had already become familiar with the early commentaries on the first three books of the *EN*, written by different masters in the faculty of arts.<sup>4</sup> But the quantum leap was achieved by the Latin translation of all ten books of the *EN* carried out by Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln – the so-called *translatio Lincolnensis* – at approximately this time.<sup>5</sup> When, shortly afterward, Aquinas became a student of and secretary to Albert the Great at Cologne during the years 1248–52, he was given responsibility for the editing of his teacher’s course, *Super Ethica*, the first Latin commentary on the whole of the *EN*. His intense editorial work deeply influenced Aquinas’s own view of Aristotle’s ethics, and it meant that he knew both texts, the Aristotelian source as well as Albert’s commentary on it, virtually by heart from early on.<sup>6</sup>

Aquinas composed his own commentary on the *EN*, the *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, rather late in his life, approximately 1271–72, while he was teaching at Paris for the second time in his academic career.<sup>7</sup> Aquinas must have accorded considerable importance to commenting on the *EN*, for, as a professor of theology, he had many other obligations, and commenting on philosophical texts would not have been high on the list. Therefore, the *SLE* would seem to be the natural place to look for the way in which Aquinas understood and then adopted, criticized, and/or transformed Aristotle’s ethics. But in order to see whether it actually is the best basis for assessing Aquinas’s Aristotelianism, it is important to be clear about the interest Aquinas was pursuing in composing this commentary.

A recent debate between Mark Jordan and Christopher Kaczor illustrates well one of the major hermeneutic difficulties concerning the *SLE*. Does Aquinas intend to offer his own views on the matters investigated in this commentary (as Kaczor supposes), or does he merely want to offer an adequate interpretation of Aristotle’s text (as Jordan thinks)? Put differently: Does the commentator speak in his own voice throughout, even when he

<sup>4</sup> Gauthier 1971, xv–xvii, argues for this because of the way Aquinas, even late in his career, deliberately uses earlier translations of the *EN* and reproduces some of the arts masters’ mistaken interpretations. The earlier translations are the *Ethica vetus*, i.e., the “older” translation of books 2 and 3, and the *Ethica nova*, which covered book 1; together they formed the *Liber Ethicorum*. For a good overview of the impact of the *EN* on medieval ethics see Wieland 1982, which was supplemented by recent contributions to the topic in Bejczy 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The critical edition is found in fascicles 3 and 4 of Aristoteles Latinus 26/1–3. The revised text used by Aquinas is printed at the beginning of each *lectio* in the Leonine edition of the *SLE*.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the sources of Aquinas’s study and use of the *EN* and for many other philological details relevant to our topic, see Gauthier 1969 and 1971.

<sup>7</sup> The critical edition of the *SLE* was provided by Gauthier in 1969 as volume 47 of the Editio Leonina. Bourke 1974 defends an earlier dating of the *SLE* against Gauthier (and many others). He thinks that Aquinas developed it as a draft for a course of lectures for young beginners in the Dominican order around 1261–64, but only completed the editing and had it copied later in Paris, after 1270.

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is not explicitly contradicting Aristotle:<sup>8</sup> This problem is mainly caused by the literary form of the *SLE*: it is a literal commentary that sticks very closely to the Aristotelian text, only occasionally raising difficulties or entertaining digressions in order to illuminate the subject further. (Albert, by contrast, offers much more discussion of the text, adding *quaestiones* in his first commentary and many digressions in his second one.) The controversy between Jordan and Kaczor hinges mainly on their different understandings of various “disclaimers” in the *SLE* by which Aquinas seems to distance himself from Aristotle, at least in some areas.<sup>9</sup> But on a deeper level the *SLE*’s literary form indicates a general problem concerning its nature. Three different approaches have been tried:

- (1) The *SLE* as a (crypto-)theological work: arguably still the most influential scholarly treatment of the *SLE* was presented 60 years ago by Henry Jaffa, a student of Leo Strauss, in his *Thomism and Aristotelianism*. The main thrust of his argument is that in his commentary Aquinas imputes at least six non-Aristotelian principles of revealed theology (e.g., personal immortality and divine providence) to the *EN* in an unwarranted manner and thus turns the *SLE* into a statement of his own Christian convictions.<sup>10</sup> Although there has been much criticism of Jaffa’s work, in detail as well as in general, there are still some scholars who follow his general approach.<sup>11</sup> The main difference between them and Jaffa himself concerns their respective evaluations of this model: while most of them applaud Aquinas’s approach in the *SLE* as a fruitful development of Aristotle’s moral philosophy (see, e.g., Jenkins 1996) and as a long-standing contribution to the project of a theological *ethica perennis*, Jaffa mainly views it as a deliberate distortion of Aristotle’s work.
- (2) The *SLE* as a philosophical work: James Doig, who has written the most comprehensive treatment of the commentary to date, defends

<sup>8</sup> As Chenu 1950, 177 thinks. For Aquinas’s philosophical commentaries on Aristotle in general, see Grabmann 1926, Owens 1974, Elders 1987, and Jenkins 1996.

<sup>9</sup> While Jordan 1991 thinks that these disclaimers show that Aquinas does not identify with what Aristotle writes, Kaczor 2004 argues to the contrary: exactly because Aquinas clearly indicates where he diverges from Aristotle, he subscribes to the rest of the text. In reply, Jordan emphasized that their discussion is not a purely exegetical one, but rather a dispute “about whether Thomas can be drafted into the service of certain modern projects” (Jordan 2004, 379).

<sup>10</sup> See Jaffa 1952, especially 186–8 for the six principles.

<sup>11</sup> For a powerful criticism of Jaffa’s whole project, see the short but venomous review by Gauthier 1954, 56, who considers Jaffa’s study an “amateur work” (“non pas . . . un livre de science, mais . . . les réflexions d’un amateur,” 159). As a matter of fact, Jaffa’s book offers more of an essay in intellectual history than a thorough philosophical analysis of Aquinas’s texts. Furthermore, it is clearly outdated in scholarly terms.

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Aquinas against Jaffa's accusations and claims that Aquinas in his commentary elaborated and adopted precisely what he views as the basic philosophical content of the *EN*, without any illicit importation of theological doctrine. Doig emphasizes the crucial junctures where Aquinas tacitly or overtly departs from previous philosophical readings of the *EN* in the commentaries of Averroes, Albert the Great, and the Arts Masters. The focus here is mainly on historical points and therefore bypasses some crucial philosophical issues. Nonetheless Doig considers the *SLE* to be "philosophical in nature" (Doig 2001, xvi) and sees it as the most important contribution to Aquinas's statement of his own moral philosophy, somehow independent from the ideas worked out in the *Secunda Pars* and elsewhere in his theological works (which Doig takes into account only occasionally).<sup>12</sup>

- (3) The *SLE* as a "mere" commentary: apart from these diametrically opposed interpretations by Jaffa and Doig (which are at the same time contributions to the long-standing debate of whether there is an "autonomous" philosophical ethics in Aquinas at all),<sup>13</sup> there is a kind of "deflationary" reading that stays clear of both Scylla and Charybdis. As Ralph McNerny put it in his foreword to the reprint of C. I. Litzinger's English translation of the *SLE*, "Thomas took his first and primary task to be getting the Aristotelian text right. Far from baptizing Aristotle, Thomas as a commentator is intent on rescuing Thomas [*recte*: Aristotle] from the misreadings of Averroes and others."<sup>14</sup> In this approach, which dates back at least to the great medievalist Martin Grabmann (1926, 283), the *SLE* is regarded as a basically exegetical project in which Aquinas tries to come as close as possible to Aristotle's intention (*intentio Aristotelis*) without venturing into the perilous dichotomy of "philosophy versus theology."<sup>15</sup> This reading sensibly avoids some of the very thorny issues of the general debate in favor of concentrating on concrete analysis, but it seems to neglect what Aquinas states unequivocally in one of his commentaries on Aristotle, namely that "the study of philosophy is

<sup>12</sup> See Doig 2001, esp. ch. 6, where he offers a systematic reconstruction of the contents of the *SLE*.

<sup>13</sup> See Bradley 1997, who argues against the attempt by Kluxen 1964 (3rd edn. 1998) to extract a philosophical ethics from the theological synthesis in Aquinas. For this controversy with regard to the *SLE* in particular, see Doig 2001, ch. 4.

<sup>14</sup> McNerny 1993, x. A drawback of this reprint is the fact that the translation published by Litzinger in 1964 has not been adjusted to the critical text by Gauthier, which appeared in 1969.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Bourke 1974, Elders 1987, 77–123, Jordan 1992, and Kenny 1999.

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not for the sake of knowing what people have said but to attain to the truth.”<sup>16</sup>

These three interpretations are to a certain extent tied to another difficulty that besets the interpretation of the *SLE*: what motivated Aquinas to write this commentary? Since it most certainly did not grow out of his ordinary academic teaching at the time of its composition – it is not based on an actual course given in Paris between 1269 and 1272 – it must have been undertaken for other reasons. Was it perhaps intended as a kind of basic textbook for students in order to introduce them to the central issues of moral philosophy? One plausible and widespread assumption is that Aquinas composed this commentary, along with the simultaneous *Tabula libri Ethicorum*, as a preparation for the comprehensive account of ethics he gives in the *Secunda Pars*. This reading is mostly favored by authors who see the *SLE* as a kind of theological work, or at least as a part of a larger theological project. But Doig (2001, ch. 5) has offered some evidence that the *SLE* might postdate large portions of the *Secunda Pars*. This fact would point rather in the opposite direction; namely that the *SLE*, rather than being instrumentally subordinated to theological purposes, was instead composed as an independent contribution to philosophical ethics. This issue certainly does not affect the *SLE* alone but rather would in principle affect every philosophical commentary written by Aquinas; nevertheless, it bears further witness to the complexities at work here.

While the character of the *SLE* is the subject of lively debate, this debate takes place for the most part in journal articles and book chapters, each of which have a rather limited scope and which exemplify a tendency to unjustified generalizations. The only book-length studies available in English are by Jaffa and Doig.<sup>17</sup> The reluctance on the part of scholars to deal with the *SLE* in adequate detail may have been partly caused by the hermeneutic difficulties mentioned above. It was probably also caused by the fact that – of all people – René Antoine Gauthier, who spent a considerable amount of time on his truly outstanding edition of the *SLE*, belittled it as an “œuvre manquée,” a failed work, especially when

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *Sententia super librum De caelo et mundo* 1.22 n. 8, Editio Leonina 3:91a: “studium philosophiae non est ad hoc quod sciatur quid homines senserint, sed qualiter se habeat veritas.” That Aquinas is interested in the “truth of the matter” (*veritas rei*) and not only in the opinions of others is also attested in the *SLE* (e.g., 10.13 lines 116–22).

<sup>17</sup> There are two books available in German that focus directly on the reception of the *EN* in Aquinas’s ethics with particular emphasis on the *SLE*: Papadis 1980, which offers less of an analysis than a paraphrase of the *SLE*; Rhonheimer 1994, which is more ambitious and more thorough, but tends to read Aristotle as well as Aquinas in an idiosyncratic manner. For an excellent Italian monograph that studies the notions of practical reason, moral science, and prudence in the *SLE*, see Melina 1987.

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compared with his teacher Albert the Great's first commentary on the *EN*.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, the *SLE* has also been defended by some scholars as a serious contribution to our understanding of Aquinas's ethical views and as an insightful commentary on the *EN*,<sup>19</sup> but the overall tendency is still not in its favor: it is thought that it does not really help us to understand the Aristotelian text properly, or else that it lacks originality, especially when compared to the treatment of ethical topics in the *ST*.

**1.2 Issues, aims, and structure of this volume**

Notwithstanding the hermeneutic problems outlined above, any genuine attempt to consider the influence of Aristotle's *EN* on the formation of Aquinas's ethics will have to take the *SLE* and the interpretations offered in it seriously. But a purely internal analysis of this work runs the risk of losing the overall perspective which is needed in order properly to evaluate Aquinas's achievements. So far, not enough attention has been given to Aquinas's Aristotelianism or lack thereof in his non-commentary writings on ethics. Yet a comparison between the *SLE* and his major theological works like *In Sent.* and *ST* is especially crucial for illuminating Aquinas's appropriation of Aristotle, for in the *SLE* he is engaged specifically with commenting on Aristotle, whereas in the theological works he incorporates Aristotle's ethics more freely into his own ethical theory. The single-minded concentration on the *SLE* is a major shortcoming of both Jaffa's and Doig's treatments of the issue, and this shortcoming must be mended, especially in those topics where Aristotelian ethics seems to clash with a Christian outlook. To give just one prominent example: How does Aquinas deal with the fact that Aristotle praises magnanimity as the crowning achievement of virtue while the opposite attitude (i.e., humility) is praised in Christianity (see Gauthier 1951 and Hoffmann 2008)? Or to put it more generally: How is it possible for a Christian author like Aquinas to incorporate a catalog of pre-Christian virtues into his religious world view? The analysis of issues like these also promises to offer valuable insights into Aquinas's understanding of the relationship between reason and faith.

Consequently, Aquinas's commentary has to be compared with his systematic investigation of the corresponding ethical matters in his major

<sup>18</sup> See Gauthier and Jolif 1970, I,1:131. See also Gauthier 1971, where he calls the *SLE* in a slightly less derogatory manner an "œuvre de sagesse."

<sup>19</sup> The *SLE* was hailed by Shorey (1938, 90) as the most useful commentary on the *EN* ever written. Anthony Kenny (1999, 16) praises it as follows: "On the topic of happiness in particular he often grasps Aristotle's meaning where twentieth-century commentators have missed it."

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theological works (not only the *Secunda Pars*, though this should remain a key focal point, but also, for instance, his disputed questions on the virtues, on evil, etc.). Given the controversial views sketched above, the following questions have to be addressed in the course of a more comprehensive investigation of Aquinas's appropriation of the *EN*:

- (1) What are Aquinas's goals in commenting on the *EN*? Does he simply want to offer an adequate reading of the text or is he after the "truth of the matter"? Is the *SLE* philosophical or theological in nature – or neither?
- (2) How good an interpreter of the *EN* is Aquinas – that is, how Aristotelian are his interpretations in terms of historical accuracy? Does he try to integrate Aristotle's views into a different theological or philosophical framework (e.g., Stoicism or Neoplatonism)?
- (3) How does he fare in comparison with earlier medieval interpreters of the *EN*, especially with Albert the Great's *Super Ethica*?
- (4) How does his treatment of the *EN* in the *SLE* differ from his treatment of the *EN* in his systematic theological writings? What accounts for these differences?
- (5) In which areas does Aquinas develop insights from Aristotle's ethics in a new direction? Does he do so intentionally or not?
- (6) Does he offer convincing and fruitful clarifications of key issues from the *EN*? Does he offer persuasive solutions to problems the *EN* raises?
- (7) To what extent does the topic under discussion contribute to a Thomistic "moral philosophy" that might be of interest to contemporary virtue ethicists?

Focusing on these questions will help to refine the nature of the relationship between Aristotle's and Aquinas's ethics. Furthermore, the originality of Aquinas in his appropriation of Aristotle's *Ethics* may be measured on two different levels: first, on a historical level, especially in comparing his understanding of Aristotle with earlier interpretations of the *EN* by his contemporaries; second, on a philosophical level, that is, regarding the cogency and fruitfulness of his treatment of ethical matters.

The overall structure of this volume is designed to capture and mirror the relationship between Aquinas's and Aristotle's ethics as closely as possible by concentrating mainly on the treatment of the major topics which Aquinas inherits from the *EN*: happiness (Jörn Müller); voluntary action (Matthias Perkams); the moral virtues in general (Bonnie Kent); some of the moral virtues in particular: courage (Jennifer Herdt), truthfulness (Kevin Flannery), and justice (Jeffrey Hause); prudence (Tobias



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Hoffmann); incontinence (Martin Pickavé); friendship (Marko Fuchs); and pleasure (Kevin White).

In order to provide the volume with a unitary outlook, these authors were encouraged to pay special attention to the list of questions raised above and to structure their essays in the following way:

- (1) A summary of Aristotle's position, corroborated by contemporary Aristotelian scholarship, emphasizing aporiai and unsolved problems of interpretation;
- (2) Treatment of the relevant issue(s) by Aquinas, with attention both to the formal commentary in the *SLE* and the systematic treatments in *In Sent./ST* (and possibly elsewhere), highlighting any divergences from Aristotle (possibly including also a comparison with Albert's reading in his first *Ethics* commentary, *Super Ethica*, if this were to prove helpful for a refined understanding of Aquinas's position);
- (3) Assessment of the philosophical implications of Aquinas's account.

In addition to these contributions to specific issues, the volume is framed at both ends by chapters focusing more generally on the historical accuracy of Aquinas as a commentator on the *EN* (Terence Irwin), on the original method and structure employed in his ethics (Michael Pakaluk), and on the reception of Aquinas's approach in contemporary virtue ethics (Candace Vogler).

### 1.3 A glance at the results

It is not our intention to provide an exhaustive summary of all the results presented in the individual contributions to this volume. The issues are too complex and the contributors' inquiries are too nuanced to allow for sweeping generalizations. But it is worth highlighting some key points that emerge from the essays in this volume.

- (1) In his *SLE*, Aquinas mostly offers a charitable reading of Aristotle's text. He does not distort the text and does not try to introduce a hidden theological agenda as Jaffa suggested (Herdt, Irwin, White). Occasionally, he criticizes Aristotle and signals the need for further clarification, for example with regard to lying (Flannery), but he does not simply smuggle extraneous theological positions into his commentary under the guise of Aristotelianism. In some cases, he tries to improve on the *EN* by adding philosophical considerations that are not openly professed by Aristotle but that Aquinas takes to be implied in Aristotle's statements. A striking example is the

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difference between perfect and imperfect happiness, which, according to Aquinas, follows from the Aristotelian criteria of happiness but is not clearly stated by Aristotle himself (Müller). Thus, the *SLE* is more than just a literal exposition of Aristotle's text.

- (2) On some points, Aquinas clarifies, expands, or even corrects Aristotle's views (Flannery, Fuchs, Hause, Herdt, Pakaluk). Thus in the *SLE* Aquinas explains the structure of Aristotle's text, addresses its key aporiai and from time to time adds insights from other philosophical traditions. His most conspicuous and conscious deviations from Aristotle, however, were not introduced into his commentary but should rather be sought in his theological writings.

In Aquinas's theological writings we find what are at least in some respects elaborations of Aristotelian themes. His account of truthfulness in the *ST* contains many non-Aristotelian ideas, even though he never loses sight there of Aristotle's treatment in the *EN* (Flannery). Regarding his theory of justice, many of Aquinas's shifts are quite subtle, but Aquinas's treatment of the topic in the *ST* focuses much more on general justice than Aristotle's does (Hause). Aquinas's account of practical principles is highly indebted to Aristotle, but, in addition to "particular practical principles" that he envisions in Aristotelian fashion, he also introduces self-evident "universal practical principles" that are at most only implicit in Aristotle (Hoffmann).

His deviations from Aristotle become more radical when he replaces the Aristotelian notion of friendship with an account of love that is only in certain respects informed by Aristotle (Fuchs). Aquinas furthermore argues that true courage has to be directed by grace toward the heavenly good, as is clear from his treatment of Christian martyrdom (Herdt).

- (3) The way in which Aquinas handles Aristotle's ethics varies considerably with each topic discussed in the *EN*. Generally speaking, these variations may be due to at least two different factors. First, there is the influence of other philosophical traditions (like Stoicism and Neoplatonism) on his discussion of the issues, for instance, the significant Stoic contribution to Aquinas's understanding of willing and willed actions (Perkams). Although Aquinas sees Aristotle's *EN* as Antiquity's most valuable contribution to ethics, this does not mean that he simply dismisses other contributions from that period.

Second, there is his interaction with his contemporaries. As a university teacher Aquinas participated in several contemporary debates, which provide the background and sometimes even the framework