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978-0-521-15342-3 - Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics

John Bowlin

Excerpt

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Introduction

The contemporary legacy of Aquinas's account of the moral life is perplexing. Irony abounds. Consider the following.

In recent years many moral philosophers and moral theologians have looked to Aristotle to help them bypass the sterile debate between Kantians and consequentialists. Since Aquinas is one of the more able interpreters of the Aristotelian moral tradition we might expect them to consider his efforts a resource for theirs. Some, of course, do, principally Alasdair MacIntyre, and yet most do not. In fact, many of these reformers in moral philosophy and theology suspect that Aquinas is the theological ancestor of their contemporary rationalist and rule-obsessed opponents.¹ Others insist that his desire to deduce concrete moral guidance from abstract principles of natural law obscures those features of praiseworthy practical judgment that in fact deserve accent: its flexibility, its attention to particulars, and thus its resistance to simple characterization, to descriptions that resort to legal generalities.² Others still conclude that rationalism in morals, whether Aquinas's variety or some other, prevents us from acknowledging a feature of the moral life most of us consider obvious and ordinary: its intractable conflicts, its tragic dilemmas.³

These are textbook distortions, false charges. This much is obvious. But then why have they remained so prominent, so easy for so many to accept? Perhaps because too many of Aquinas's defenders offer interpretations of his account of the moral life that either goad his detractors or confirm the caricature. The ironies here are delicious. Those who wish to convince us that Aquinas's treatment of practical judgment, for example, is more attentive to particulars, complexity, and conflict than most suspect, have, more often than not, transformed him into a

¹ Baier (1985a, 232–236). ² Nussbaum (1978, 168–169).

³ Williams (1973) lodges this complaint against moral rationalism in general.

consequentialist of one kind or another.⁴ Dismayed by this conclusion, still other friends and exegetes dash in to rescue Aquinas from his rescuers, hoping to restore that law-obsessed and rationalist moral theorist his contemporary critics love to loathe. They don't find him. Or, rather, the most prominent among the anti-consequentialist rescuers – John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle – concede that Aquinas's treatment of the natural law must be supplemented with Kantian arguments, alien to Aquinas, in order to advance an account of the moral life that the critics consider stereotypically Thomistic. Defending Aquinas against his defenders, Finnis, Grisez, and Boyle insist they can succeed only as they regard his own treatment of the moral life as inchoate and incomplete Kantian rationalism, thus inadvertently perpetuating the erroneous image.

Much of the confusion here follows from the inordinate attention all parties give to Aquinas's remarks about the natural law in the *prima secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*. In this Aquinas's foes merely follow the lead of his friends, many of whom regard his remarks on the first precepts of the natural law as the centerpiece of his efforts, and, as we have noted, too many find there either some variation on Kant's ethics, where the demands of practical reason specify the morally obligatory, or some variety of consequentialism, where prescriptions, prohibitions, and exceptions to each are derived from the basic features of the natural human good. The problem with this approach is two-fold. First, it is unlikely that Aquinas offers a medieval antecedent to this or that position in the modern metaethical debate. Indeed, both friends and foes of modern moral philosophy have noted that its largely secular sources and its consistent attention to doubts about the origins of obligation mark a significant departure from the sources and concerns of the moral theology that came before.⁵ Here the irony is obvious. Those contemporary interpreters who fail to take note of this difference cannot say why Aquinas's account of the moral life deserves attention. If his concerns and conclusions are roughly equivalent to those found in this or that modern view, then he reproduces what we already know while providing few resources for understanding what we do not, few challenges to our settled convictions. Second, the vast majority of Aquinas's remarks about the moral life in the *secunda pars* regard human actions and passions, and the virtues that perfect them. Remarks about the natural law are scant; one question (*ST* 1–11.94) amid only eighteen

⁴ For a good example of this effort and outcome see Fuchs (1983).

⁵ See Schneewind (1993) and Anscombe (1981).

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on law as a whole (*ST* I-II.90–108).⁶ By contrast, the remarks about action, passion, and virtue in general require eighty-nine questions (*ST* I-II.1–89). Those about specific virtues and vices require many more (*ST* II-II.1–189). Once again the irony is obvious. Interpreters who regard the treatise on law as the main event have in fact been concentrating on a side show. They contend that Aquinas's treatment of the natural law deserves our careful consideration, and yet our attention is directed to that which he considers only briefly. There are, of course, dissenters, exegetes who resist unproductive comparisons between medieval and modern morals and who look beyond Aquinas's treatment of the natural law to his remarks about other matters,⁷ and yet few of them have been able to show how the preponderance of his efforts – those that regard action, passion, and virtue – hang together with his discussion of the natural law in a more or less coherent view.⁸ Indeed, if it is a mistake to think that Aquinas's remarks about the first precepts of the natural law represent a medieval antecedent to this or that position in modern moral philosophy, then what exactly does he hope to accomplish with those remarks, and how do the intentions that motivate his efforts in the opening questions of *de Legibus* line up with those that motivate his remarks about action and virtue?

These questions press upon us all the more once we notice that still others give special attention to Aquinas's remarks about the natural law in order to muster critical leverage against certain social and political arrangements in the modern period. Dissatisfied with this or that aspect of modern life, dismayed by institutions and practices that refuse to provide moral guidance, and appalled by the inability of modern moral philosophy to offer stable foundations and compelling warrants for those institutions and practices that deserve to be sustained, friends on both the left and the right look to Aquinas for aid, hoping his appeal to nature can yield the prohibitions and prescriptions that these troubled times need. Still, it is not at all clear that Aquinas's remarks about the first precepts of the natural law can bear this burden, largely because (as I shall argue in chapter three) he has something else in mind as he discusses the *principiis exterioribus actuum* (*ST* I-II.90.prologue), something other than providing moral guidance for humanity as such, something

⁶ Unless discussion is required, reference to Aquinas's works will be included in the body of text. For the most part I have made use of the available English translations. When I have not, this is so indicated.

⁷ Recent efforts include: Cessario (1991), Harak (1993), Hibbs (1990), Wadell (1992), and Westberg (1994).

⁸ Notable exceptions include: Nelson (1990), MacIntyre (1988b), McInerney (1982), Pinckaers (1995).

other than securing legitimacy for some institutions and practices but not others.

We are left wondering what kind of resource Aquinas might be for our own reflections on good and evil in human action and on the virtues and vices of modernity. If he is to help us make sense of the moral life we lead, then we will have to determine how his efforts compare with ours, how his puzzles and concerns line up with our own. This is not simply a matter of specifying his contemporary relevance and justifying our interest, but of necessity. There is no activity called "understanding Aquinas's account of the moral life" that does not include mapping the relations, the identities and differences, between his views and ours and assessing the truth-value of each. In fact, there is nothing we can know about that account apart from those relations and assessments. It follows that anachronism *per se* is not an exegetical vice.⁹ Nor is it a charge that sticks to those interpreters who regard Aquinas's efforts in the treatise on law as a resource for our contemporary metaethical debates. Rather, the complaint must be that they have not determined how his interests and concerns can be usefully related to ours. They have not made the right comparisons across time. This is, of course, a moral judgment about the interests and concerns worth having, the comparisons worth making, and it is confirmed retrospectively. If we assume that our inquiries into the character of the moral life are best motivated by a certain collection of interests and concerns, and if we assume that Aquinas's efforts can be a resource for our own precisely because he shares many of those interests and concerns, then our assumptions will be confirmed only if we in fact make better sense of his account, and only if the interpretation that results in fact provides useful resources for our own inquiries.

Every effort to understand Aquinas's account of the moral life will begin with assumptions of this kind. Let me make mine plain. I do not believe that doubts about the content of our most basic moral obligations should motivate our inquiries into the character of the moral life. Nor should doubts about the warrants that justify acting in accord with the basic obligations we do accept. Why? Because in each instance the doubt is more apparent than real. I am not suggesting that skepticism is unimaginable here. Nor am I implying that there is perfect agreement among us about the content of obligation. However, I am convinced that skepticism about fundamental moral matters is not a real option, at

⁹ For a fuller treatment of the irrelevance of anachronism see Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner (1984, 8–11).

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least not for most of us. For the most part, we do not need to be told what our most basic obligations are or how they are justified. Most of us consider moral guidance of this kind unnecessary, if not insulting, and most of us regard with suspicion those whose doubts about obligation are such that they welcome the aid that action-guiding moral theories provide.¹⁰ Of course, we may not be able to say much about the origin of the obligations we do recognize, but no matter. This inability prevents few of us from thinking that there are some things we should do, others we should not. By contrast, we can be genuinely confused about what our basic obligations require of us in concrete circumstances. Basic obligation aside, we can be puzzled about the character of the good and the best in some particular instance. Knowing it is difficult, and willing it because of that knowledge is no less so. It is my assumption that these difficulties generate our most fundamental puzzles about the moral life. Why is it that the good that obliges (i.e., the best) is difficult to know? How is it that the will at times fails to desire the good that is known to oblige? And notice, these are not questions motivated by puzzlement about what we should do, at least not principally. They are, rather, questions about the causes of our everyday moral difficulties, questions that will be answered only as the arduous character of knowing and doing the good is explained. I also assume that Aquinas can be a resource for our contemporary efforts to address these questions, in part because I find no evidence that he intends his inquiries in the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* to dissolve basic doubt about good and evil in human action or to provide rules that guide conduct in the particular, in part because I believe that his efforts there are, in large measure, designed to address our more ordinary puzzles about the causes of moral perplexity and weakness. Since the vast majority of his remarks in the *secunda pars* regard human agency and virtue I also assume that he addresses these puzzles as he treats these topics.

His reply can be put simply. The good is difficult to know in particular, and difficult to will even when it is known, because of contingencies of various kinds, within ourselves and in the circumstances of choice. It follows that the moral life described in the *secunda pars* receives much of its character and content from the ability of the virtues to confront these

¹⁰ If I know what I am obliged to do, wouldn't we regard my effort to locate reasons for acting as I know I should as senseless? If I continue to press the inquiry, wouldn't we suspect that I am trying to avoid acting in accord with the obligation? My hunch is that most of us would, and for good reason. For the best explication of these reasons see Davis (1992). For evidence that most moral philosophers in the modern period have disregarded them see Darwall (1995).

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contingencies.¹¹ By “moral life” I mean what Aquinas does (*ST* I-II.1.3): the life of human action, its causes, both intrinsic (intellect, will, and virtue) and extrinsic (law and grace), and its character, either good or evil. By “contingency” I mean the states of affairs in the world and in ourselves that fortune can alter.¹² Restated with clarifications: Aquinas's account of our agency – caused by intellect and will, made distinctively human by the natural law, corrupted by sin, and perfected by virtue and grace – is best understood in light of his remarks about the contingencies, the difficulties, in the world and in ourselves.

It follows that Aquinas's treatment of the moral virtues is largely functional. Their significance, he insists, lies in their ability to cope with those contingencies that hinder our achievement of the good and the best. Indeed, above all, the virtues work. This is what they do, this is what distinguishes them, and this, according to Aquinas, is why we praise them. Their intelligibility and their goodness follow from their efforts, and their efforts are needed precisely because our pursuit of the good is hounded on all sides by contingencies of all kinds, difficulties great and small. This is my principal exegetical conclusion, and it is not the one found in most treatments of Aquinas's remarks about the virtues. A number of reasons account for this, and first among them must be the fact that Aquinas leaves the conceptual connections between the virtues, various contingencies, and the fortuitous events that generate them largely undeveloped. What he does say he locates in remarks about other matters, scattered throughout a variety of questions and articles. Perhaps more to the point, even when gathered together it is not at all clear that they can be used to make sense of his account of the virtues. Indeed, there are at least two reasons for thinking that they cannot.

First, Aquinas says very little about those things that happen by chance or fortune and what he does say comes largely in his discussion of Providence (*ST* I.116). Little mention is made in his discussion of the moral life's general features, even less in his treatment of the virtues. Second, it appears that Aquinas uses his brief remarks about chance and Providence in order to dismiss the very idea of the former. He argues that what happens here by accident, both in the natural world and in human affairs, can be reduced to a preordaining cause, to divine

¹¹ I will also discuss passages from the *prima pars*, as well as from the smaller *summa*, the commentaries, and the disputations, as needed, in order to fill out my findings.

¹² Thus my topic is *not* the centerpiece of Thomistic metaphysics: the contingent being of all things created. See *De ente*, especially chapter 5 and *SCG* II.30–31.

Providence (*ST* I.116.1). Thus, fortune, it seems, can be explained away, both as event and as object of interest, by referring to God's command over how things go. How can we reply?

To the objection that Aquinas says very little about virtue and fortune, we can note that he does, nevertheless, say quite a bit about contingency as he develops his account of the moral virtues. The moral virtues perfect choice (*ST* I-II.58.4; 65.1), choice is normally preceded by deliberation about what is to be done, and deliberation regards those singular and contingent things that make choice difficult (*ST* I-II.14.1). Contingent things are, therefore, the matter that the moral virtues regard (*ST* I-II.60.1.1), and, following Aristotle, Aquinas insists that chance and fortune make contingency possible (*In Perih.* I.13.9). That is, all events would be necessary, happening always and unavoidably when their sufficient conditions were in place, if the causes of at least some events – call them contingent – were not periodically subject to accidental disruption. Chance and fortune, according to this view, divide the contingent from the necessary, creating that part of the world – contingent happenings – that is virtue's concern.

Both Aristotle's remarks (*Int.* 18a34–18b16) and Aquinas's commentary indicate that what is at stake here is the character of the concepts and the relations among them, with defeatability and frequency setting the terms of each. The causes of necessary events cannot be defeated and thus always produce their effects. The causes of contingent events can be defeated. Disruptions by chance or fortune can prevent them from producing their effects. And yet, because these disruptions happen infrequently, contingent events happen for the most part. Thus, it is that which happens rarely – the disruptions of chance and fortune – that distinguishes that which happens always from that which happens for the most part. Turning gray, for example, comes with age, and for the most part most do. But there is no necessity here. With good fortune, this fate can be escaped (*In Perih.* I.13.9; cf. *Ph.* 196b10–196b17, and *In Phys.* II.8.209–210), and indeed, it is by showing us how this can be so, how seemingly uninterrupted causal chains can be interrupted, that Aristotle displays what chance and fortune are and how they generate contingent events.¹³ We speak of an event of chance or fortune when,

¹³ Fate is the right word, for it is the causal necessity the Stoics feared that Aristotle addresses in *Metaph.* 1027a28–1027b16; 1065a6–14 and *Ph.* 196b10–198a13. There is no vicious anachronism here. Aristotle has something to say about a worry that gained greater prominence later on, and there is no harm in saying with Aquinas (*In Perih.* I.14.10) and Sorabji (1980, 70–88) that Aristotle's arguments respond to the Stoics' worries about fate. I am indebted to both commentaries for my understanding of Aristotle's arguments and conclusions.

apart from the intention of any agent, two causal chains collide, disrupting the course of each. I go to the market and run into a debtor. I neither intended nor expected to meet him there. He is equally surprised. Our meeting was an accidental coincidence, good fortune for me, bad for him. From examples of this sort (*Ph.*196a2–5) Aristotle draws two conclusions: chance events of every kind have no cause, and, as a result, we can speak of contingent events, events that are caused without necessity. Aquinas concurs (*In Perih.*1.14.11; *In Metaph.*vi.3.1191–1202; *ST* 1.115.6; II–II.95.5).

The argument turns on an assumption about causation. Both Aristotle and Aquinas insist that when we ask for the cause of a thing we are asking for reasons that explain its occurrence and character (*Ph.*194b16–195a26; *In Phys.*II.5.176–181).¹⁴ In fact, both contend that causation has more to do with rational explanation than with constant conjunction, antecedent necessitating conditions, or exceptionless regularity. Aristotle's phrasing captures it best. Understanding the primary cause of a thing is equivalent to "grasping the 'why' of it" (*Ph.*194b19–20; cf. *In Phys.*II.5.176), and of course, why questions are answered when compelling explanations are offered.

What then is the "why" of our meeting at the market? It is precisely that which explains why this fortuitous coincidence occurred, and it is not at all clear what that could be. One might be tempted to reply that a combination of decisions, my own and my debtor's, does the explanatory work, but this would be a mistake. These decisions explain why each of us went to market; they do not explain why we went to market *at the same time*. And of course, this latter coincidence is what we want explained when we ask for the cause of our meeting.¹⁵

With Aquinas in step (*In Metaph.*vi.3.1201; *In Perih.*1.14.11; *ST* 1.115.6), Aristotle concludes (*Metaph.*1027b12–14) that it is a mistake to say that all things that happen have a cause. Fortuitous happenings do not. Our meeting in the market did not, and thus the world is not as the Stoics imagine. It is not an uninterrupted causal nexus. Causes produce effects that converge for no reason and when they do the web of causal connections is broken. It follows that a cause located, even a sufficient cause, does not necessarily yield its effect, since most can be interrupted by coincidence with another (*Metaph.*1027a30–2; *In Metaph.*vi.3.1192–

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of the relation between causation and explanation in Aristotle and others see Sorabji (1980, 10–12, 26–44). The relation is difficult for us to imagine, largely because we assume that causes must be active. They must do something to produce an effect. For the historical origins of our assumptions see Frede (1980). ¹⁵ Sorabji (1980, 10–11).

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1193,1200; *In Perih.*1.14.11). My ship and crew may in fact be sufficiently readied to make the voyage from A to B, and yet it is surely possible for a storm to happen upon us and interrupt our progress. Interruptions, of course, are infrequent, and yet insofar as they are possible – insofar as the movement from cause to effect can be thwarted in this accidental way – we are justified in speaking of contingent causes, those that produce their effects for the most part but not always (*In Perih.*1.14.12; *ST* 1.115.6).¹⁶

It is this possibility that, above all, permits Aquinas to develop an account of the moral virtues that highlights our relation to contingencies, to things subject to fortune. Aquinas distinguishes chance and fortune as Aristotle does (*Ph.*196b10–198a12). A chance event is any happening that affects the character of something else by accident. A fortuitous event affects the happiness of rational agents alone. Thus when an aged satellite falls from the sky striking and killing a tree we say that its death was by chance, in part because satellites are not made for the sake of killing trees, in part because a tree is not a rational agent. However, if it turns out that the tree is my prize-winning walnut, and if in sorrow and anger I exhaust my health and my bank account seeking compensation, bringing misery to myself and to my family, then we would say this event was also my misfortune. It affected my happiness by transforming my agency. And since the happiness that fortune affects is largely a consequence of acting well – that is, a consequence of acting in a manner that is both virtuous and successful – “it follows that fortune pertains to the actions in which one happens to act well or is impeded from acting well” (*In Phys.*11.10.229). That is, fortune pertains to accidental happenings that affect the character of one’s virtue.

But of course it is one thing to notice that Aquinas brings together virtue and fortune as he accounts for each, quite another to insist that these conceptual connections make sense once we assume, as he does, a world governed to the ground by Providence. Indeed, Aquinas insists that while there are no proximate causes of fortuitous events, there is an ultimate cause. When I encounter my debtor at the market we assume

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12–13, Sorabji makes note of the obvious: at some point in every causal chain the effect becomes necessary, its cause uninterrupted by others. Happily, nothing of much significance follows. Some causes are necessary, some are not. Aristotle and Aquinas, I suspect, would contend that most are not, if only because in most instances it is difficult to distinguish the necessitating conditions of some effect from the effect itself. If we bracket the possibility of intentional reversals, at what point are conditions such that my ship must reach its destination? At what point have I escaped fortune’s reach? Most probably when the voyage is over and I am safe in port. In that event, the cause of my getting to port was contingent all along, or very nearly so.

that our meeting was accidental insofar as it occurred apart from any intention we can locate. However, we must also assume that the Divine intellect that orders all things brought our paths to cross. Like two servants sent to the same place by their master, we must consider our meeting fortuitous, “but as compared to the master, who had ordered it, it is directly intended” (*ST* 1.116.1). Should we conclude, then, that Aquinas considers fortune and contingency mere appearances, mere phantoms of our ignorance?

No. Despite appearances to the contrary, Aquinas does not consider fortune and Providential certitude incompatible, precisely because he regards the assumption about divine knowledge that generates the worry false. By his lights we cannot assume that God's mode of knowing is equivalent to ours, and thus we cannot conclude that God knows contingent things – those things subject to fortune – as we do (*In Perih.* 1.14.18). We know them “successively, as they are in their own being” (*ST* 1.14.13). They have a future when they are not yet actual, a present when they are, and a past when they are no more, and our knowledge of them follows this historical progression. If God knows in this mode, then contingencies seem to vanish in the necessity of God's knowledge. God knows all things, not only the past and present, but also the future, and since God's knowledge is necessary, if God knows that some contingent event will be, then it will be (*ST* 1.14.13.obj.2). However, God does not know as we do, as a creature in time, but rather as the eternal Creator who transcends time. As such, all things that have been and will be are simultaneously present to God all at once, in one simple intuition (*In Perih.* 1.14.20). From this angle of vision contingent things are known, not successively according to their mode of being, but simultaneously according to the mode of the eternal knower (*ST* 1.14.13). As such, it is misleading to speak of God knowing the contingent future, for God does not know in this historical mode. There are no future events that can be foreknown from God's perspective, just as there are no past events to remember. It follows that we cannot fear that God's knowledge of the future fixes its character. Rather, we can only say that God knows what we know as future contingents, together with all other things past and present, in a glance, in a flash, in a timeless instant (*In Perih.* 1.14.20).¹⁷

¹⁷ The secondary literature on Aquinas's treatment of these matters is vast. A representative sampling includes: Burrell (1984a; 1986, 92–113; 1988; 1993, esp. 95–139); Incandela (1986); Verbeke (1974); and Wippel (1988). For doubts about the necessity of God's knowledge that generates the problem in the first places see Mavrodes (1984). For doubts about the incompatibility of God's certain knowledge of the future with certain kinds of contingencies, see Zagzebski (1985).