Aquinas's Ethics

1 Introduction

Thomas Aquinas’s ethical theory is difficult to classify according to the standard contemporary philosophical criteria. Even though his work partially inspired the late twentieth-century revival of virtue ethics as an alternative to Kantian deontology and utilitarianism or consequentialism, his philosophy shares or prefigures features of these two systems (MacIntyre 1992). For instance, along with philosophers who are influenced by Kant, Aquinas emphasizes that moral rules are necessary for our moral reasoning and that humans are free to follow or depart from such rules. On the other hand, Aquinas resembles the consequentialists and utilitarians in his emphasis on the end in his account of moral goodness. Rules should be followed not for their own sake but because they indicate how the good is attained. I will show that Aquinas brings together three elements of moral theories that are often kept apart by modern and contemporary philosophers – namely, 1) the intrinsic connection between happiness and the human good, 2) the central role of human virtue in achieving this good, and 3) the importance of moral rules, including certain rules that apply to every act or in every relevant situation.

There are special difficulties that must be overcome when discussing Aquinas’s moral philosophy, and perhaps to some extent the moral philosophy of any medieval theologian. This Introduction addresses perhaps the three greatest difficulties, which are his indebtedness to previous authors, his theological context, and his understanding of moral philosophy as a distinct science of human action. Aquinas does not pretend to develop an original ethical system. Like much of his philosophy in general, Aquinas’s ethics is rooted in a variety of earlier philosophical traditions and is worked out primarily in the context of his theology, which is part of the wider scholastic attempt to develop a theological science that qualifies as an Aristotelian science. Although many modern and contemporary philosophers write works that purport to be comprehensible apart from a historical or religious tradition, or even a social context, Aquinas and other medieval theologians do not pretend to write such completely original secular philosophy. Aquinas cannot be understood in isolation from previous Christian writers and the ancient philosophy that is found in their works. However, Aquinas also knows Latin pagan writers such as Cicero and Seneca, and the then growing body of work that was translated into Latin from Greek and Arabic. In such an intellectual context, ethics is a distinct branch of moral science about human action. Aquinas does not develop his own completely original science but uses previous writers to provide what he thinks is an adequate account of such a topic.
Aquinas’s understanding of the scientific nature of moral philosophy and theology also needs explanation. Aquinas’s academic work was carried out largely in universities that taught all branches of the sciences that were then known or thought to be known, including the science of theology, as well as in religious houses of study that taught many of the same subjects. Contemporary readers might be confused by his use of the Latin word *scientia* to describe theology and moral philosophy. We are using the common but potentially misleading translation of this word as “science.” According to Aristotle and his followers, a science is generally speaking a habit of knowing conclusions that are demonstrated from better-known explanatory principles. Theology is a science in this sense. The principles of theology are the articles of faith, which are in the Bible and passed down through the Christian tradition. These are known only through revelation. But in order to defend and more fully understand revelation, Aquinas uses the philosophical sciences, which are based on principles that are known to human reason apart from revelation. Moral philosophy is one of many philosophical sciences.

In the thirteenth century, the philosophical sciences were taught in a separate and preparatory arts faculty at the University of Paris or in other institutional settings. Only some students continued to study theology under such teachers as Aquinas, who generally were the best philosophers of the period, even though they were primarily theologians. Their theology presupposes philosophy. Additionally, it rests on and develops philosophical principles and arguments. Even though the theologians were skilled philosophers, it should be kept in mind that by interest and occupation their acquisition of philosophical science was subordinated to theology.

The historical background to Aquinas sheds light on how and why he integrates material from a wide variety of philosophical sources. His era is distinctive not only for its religious context but also for the way in which it was influenced by a variety of intellectual currents (Torrell 2005, 63–85). Aquinas, alongside many of his contemporaries, drew on pagan, Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thinkers. His generation was the first in the Latin West to have access to virtually all of Aristotle’s complete works in Latin translation. Theologians who worked in Latin had to integrate this new knowledge into an already well-developed theological tradition. Previous generations had relied on a Christian intellectual tradition that was rooted in the writings of earlier Christians such as Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo. These early Latin Christian writers were influenced philosophically primarily by Neoplatonic and Stoic philosophers rather than by Aristotelianism. Augustine was not only the most important theologian for Latin Christianity but a philosopher of the highest order. However, he had only a scanty knowledge of Aristotle’s works.
A more logically rigorous theological approach developed in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Before the early thirteenth century, Western theologians had little direct access to Aristotle’s works, pagan commentaries on it, and the later Arabic Aristotelian tradition. They knew the pagan philosophy that could be found in the Church Fathers, some more philosophical Roman writers such as Cicero and Seneca, and a few Latin translations by figures such as Boethius. In particular, Cicero’s work was central part of the education of Aquinas and his predecessors, and the moral philosophy of Cicero’s more or less Stoic De Officiis was absorbed by many Christian authors. Consequently, Christian theologians learned and developed a moral philosophy that, under the influence of Stoicism, emphasized right reason, living in accordance with nature, and the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance.

Aquinas’s teacher Albert the Great was among the first to take into account the newly translated works of Aristotle and, in particular, his Nicomachean Ethics, which previously had been available only in the first three books. One of Aquinas’s earliest professional tasks was to put in order Albert’s remarks on the Nicomachean Ethics, and in his last years he wrote his own detailed commentary on it, which has become one of the most successful attempts to explain Aristotle’s moral philosophy. There are differences between Aquinas’s reading of Aristotle and that of many contemporary scholars. Aquinas inherited a living tradition of commentary on, and reception of, Aristotle’s works. Consequently, his reading of Aristotle, although often historically plausible, is enriched by that of later pagan, Christian, and Arabic-language philosophical traditions. Aristotelian philosophy was in some ways an effort of many individuals who worked in different cultural and historical settings.

In his own work, Aquinas incorporates Aristotle’s moral thought into what he thinks the Christian philosophical and theological tradition has accomplished. Even though the Bible, early Christian Fathers, and indeed other philosophical traditions determine or at least influence his wider outlook, in some way his approach is recognizably Aristotelian. For instance, the second part of Aquinas’s unfinished three-part masterpiece, the Summa Theologiae, largely follows the order of the Nicomachean Ethics. This second part is itself divided into two parts (Torrell 2005, 17–48; Porro 2016, 281–304). In the first part of the second part, Aquinas first considers happiness, human action, and the virtues in general. Its topics include what is discussed in the Nicomachean Ethics, Books I-III.6. In the second part of the second part, Aquinas discusses the distinct virtues, and then the different states of life, such as the episcopacy, and the distinction between active and contemplative religious orders. The material on the virtues is divided between the cardinal virtues and the theological virtues. The section on the cardinal virtues includes but is not
limited to most of the material treated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books III.6–X.5. Aquinas’s discussion of the different states of life, and in particular the active and contemplative, recalls Aristotle’s comparison of the different kinds of happiness in Book X, 6–8. Overall, Aquinas’s second part includes much of what is discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in generally the same order. But it brings in much else and only partially because it is enriched or expanded by accounts of specifically theological virtues, such as faith, hope, and charity, as well as theological concerns with sin, grace, and law.

Aquinas’s moral philosophy is not simply that of Aristotle, or one among many versions of Aristotelianism. Aquinas’s developed account of virtue draws also on such non-Aristotelian figures as Cicero and Macrobius and on Pseudo-Andronicus of Rhodes, who was perhaps an Aristotelian with heavy Stoic influences (Pinckaers 1992, 3–25). Aquinas incorporates them into a coherent whole that makes it difficult to extract the distinct strands upon which he works. Aquinas’s concern is for truth rather than for originality or for a merely historically accurate account of his predecessors. Even though he does not aim for originality, his synthesis of such disparate strands gives rise to an original account that can put him at odds with other and subsequent members of the philosophical and religious traditions to which he belongs.

Aquinas shows a special interest in philosophical ethics, which he understands to be a particular branch of moral philosophy, which is a practical science. The practical sciences differ from the speculative sciences because they are about what humans can do. For instance, the movement of the stars is known by speculative science, but shipbuilding is a practical science. Moral philosophy differs from technical skills, such as shipbuilding or horsemanship, because it is about human actions themselves and not about what humans make. Technical skill is about what can be produced. Moral philosophy is about what can be done. Aquinas writes, “The subject of moral philosophy is human operation ordered to an end, or even a human being insofar as he is acting voluntarily for the sake of an end.”1 The end in this context corresponds to the Greek *telos* and is a goal for action. This difference between moral philosophy and technical skill can be seen in the different ends of a shipbuilder. By making a seaworthy ship, the shipbuilder exercises his skill. The end is the ship. By charging the just amount, he acts morally. The end is being a just and happy human. If he involuntarily makes defective ships, he fails with respect to shipbuilding. If he charges too much for even seaworthy ships, he acts unjustly and is a defective human.

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1 “Subiectum moralis philosophiae est operatio humana ordinata in finem vel etiam homo prout est voluntarie agens propter finem.” SLE, lib. 1, lect. 1.
Aquinas understands “moral philosophy” to cover three distinct species of moral philosophy, or moral science. Only one corresponds to what we would today count as ethics, which is the consideration of the good individual. The *Nicomachean Ethics* belongs to this branch of moral philosophy. The other two kinds of philosophy correspond to the other natural units of human life—namely, the household and the political community. Aristotle wrote distinct works about these parts of moral philosophy. Although Aquinas thinks that the human, the household, and the political community are studied by distinct kinds of moral philosophy, he also thinks that there is a necessary connection between them. In order to achieve one’s own good, it is necessary to recognize that one is good in the context of a household and a political community. Nevertheless, he thinks that the *Nicomachean Ethics* belongs to its own kind of moral science—namely, that which is concerned with the individual, although it considers the individual in the wider context of the family and the political community. In this book we will follow contemporary usage of the term *moral* as applying primarily to the study of an individual’s good, although it should be kept in mind that Aquinas thinks that this science of the individual’s good belongs alongside the two other moral sciences.

Aquinas’s use of *moral* also conflicts with commonly found attempts to account for moral obligation as only about duties to others and as entirely distinct or even divorced from other practical obligations. For Aquinas, moral philosophy is about what ultimately explains and justifies all human acts and practical reasoning—namely, the human end or good. It is not about a particular kind of action, such as shipbuilding, oratory, or even the rules of polite behavior. Moral philosophy considers what makes an act reasonable or not, which ultimately is about whether the human act is good and makes the agent good. No human act escapes moral evaluation.

This short work is about the central elements of Aquinas’s moral philosophy, and not about his theology or more speculative parts of his thought. The purpose of this book is to explain how Aquinas understands the connection between three elements of human action. First, human acts are rationally justifiable and morally good because of their goal or end—namely, human happiness. Second, moral virtues are the qualities whereby this end is attained. They are “moral” virtues because they perfect the appetite, whereas the intellectual virtues perfect the intellect. They are “habits” in his technical terminology, although they are distinct from what we would ordinarily describe as habits. In this life such moral virtue is a necessary but not sufficient condition for happiness. Third, the moral virtues presuppose the intellectual virtue of prudence, which applies the rule of

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2 *SLE*, lib. 1, lect. 1.
reason to acts. Moral goodness principally belongs to good acts, insofar as they are measured by the rule of reason. The moral virtues exist to produce such acts. Without revelation, we can know only that a happy life is achieved through the exercise of such virtue. It should be clear now that it is impossible to address adequately Aquinas’s presentation of this position without mentioning a variety of earlier thinkers, such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine, as well as some theological claims.

2 Part One: Happiness, the Ultimate End

Aquinas largely agrees with what he takes to be Aristotle’s account of ends, reasons, and action, even though he adds significant precision. There is a way in which the end is the most important moral feature. The end justifies, motivates, and even specifies good actions. The ultimate or final end is the most important motive for action, and in some way it justifies the most general principles of action. Like Aristotle, Aquinas holds that humans by nature have an end to which they are directed and concerning which they do not deliberate – namely, happiness. Ethics is about acting so as to achieve such happiness.

This focus on the agent’s own happiness might seem egocentric or even hedonistic. Earlier utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill had a similar view of happiness’s importance, but they were concerned with the greatest happiness of the greatest number of persons, and they were unclear about how to describe this happiness. More recent utilitarians and their compatriots generally set aside the very notion of happiness for that of preference-satisfaction. On the other hand, Kant and many of those influenced by him mostly separate moral obligation from happiness. But a misreading of Aquinas as an egoist or even as a hedonist would overlook key elements of his thought. Aquinas, like Aristotle and members of other premodern moral traditions such as Stoicism, connects happiness with the human good and not primarily with the subject’s own feelings and individual desires. Moreover, philosophers such as Aristotle and Aquinas subordinate the individual’s good to that of the political community and the way in which Christians think that happiness involves willing God’s good more than one’s own. Consequently, Aquinas’s focus on human happiness does not entail egoism in the sense that someone must or should will his own good against or above any other good.

This first part will consider the way in which Aquinas understands happiness to be the human good. First, he thinks that everything is ordered to its own perfection, but most of all to the perfection of the universe and to God’s own separate goodness. Second, he holds that humans become good by participating in such an order. In making these points Aquinas combines material from Aristotle, other philosophers, and Christian writers. He develops
these sources in ways that can seem innovative, even though he does not explicitly depart from the essential elements of Aristotle’s philosophy or the Christian tradition.

According to Aquinas, the end-directedness of humans is to some extent an instance of the end-directedness of all substances. Aquinas accepts Aristotle’s account of final causality, according to which every agent or efficient cause acts for an end.3 This final causality is found even in agents that lack reason, or consciousness, or even life. In these cases, the final cause is the end term of a natural process, as when a mammal grows to its proper size and does not continue to grow. According to Aquinas, such an end-directedness is needed to account for the difference between one kind of action and another. For example, water can cool hot metal, but fire applied to a pot of water will make the water itself hot. The difference between the two actions is in their ends – namely, the cold metal and the hot water. Aquinas and his contemporaries think that without such final causality there would be no regularity or intelligibility in nature. In a world that lacks final causality, water might melt iron and fire might freeze water. Many of Aquinas’s statements about particular instances of natural causation are imprecise or even false. But the thesis that substances have capacities and ends for action was widely accepted in his time and has at least some intrinsic plausibility.

According to both Aristotle and Aquinas, there is some essential connection between the nature of the good and that of the final cause.4 William Wallace writes that in this sense the end “is somehow a perfection or good attained through the process” (Wallace 1996, 17). The good can be described as the end insofar as the end itself is an object of a desire or an inclination. This notion of an end or good includes but is not limited to moral goodness. Since all substances have ends, all substances are inclined to some goods, even if such substances are not subject to moral evaluation. In this manner of speaking, heat is the good to which fire tends. As the good, it explains what the fire is achieving through acting on something else. According to Aquinas and Aristotle, heavy objects naturally tend toward the center of the earth as a place of rest. The earth’s center is the end of the motion. A heavy object naturally moves toward the center of the earth when an obstacle to its motion is removed; it moves against its inclination when it is thrown upward. Such inclinations are toward ends or goods, and indicate that there is a kind of nonrational and nonmoral goodness.

Such nonmoral goodness is more easily seen in the inclinations and appetites of living substances. For instance, we might discuss the way in which nutrition,

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3 SCG 3.1–3; STI-II, q. 1, art. 1. Wallace (1996), 15–18. 4 SCG 3.16; STI, q. 5, art. 4.
growth, and reproduction are abilities of plants to act for what is good for them. A tree has roots in order to draw minerals and water from the soil and leaves to carry out photosynthesis, which in turn allows it to grow and reproduce. It is bad for it to have leaves that fall off or roots that fail to convey water. We easily distinguish between trees that are doing very poorly, such as severely diseased trees, and those that are healthy and doing well. There is something wrong with such a plant when it does not act in a way that is appropriate to its species. Furthermore, under appropriate conditions we describe water, fertilizer, and sunlight as good for the plant insofar as they contribute to its perfection.

Animals not only share the basic inclinations of the plants for growth and reproduction, they also have conscious inclinations or appetites. Animals, including humans, desire goods or ends that they know in some way. A dog not only eats but desires and moves toward food, and it pursues a mate in heat. We can describe its food or mate as good or bad for it, depending on the contribution to its survival and reproduction. Similarly, it is good for a dolphin to hunt as part of a pod and for a deer to run from predators. Such activities result from inclinations that follow from the animal’s perception of its environment. Generally, these inclinations direct the animal to the good that perfects it. For instance, it would be bad for a deer to run toward predators or for a whale to cast itself ashore.

As can be seen, for Aquinas the term *good* is the kind of term which has a variety of different and yet interrelated meanings (McInerny, 1997, 12–34). In the language of medieval scholasticism, it is an “analogous term.” The world consists of many kinds of substances, each with its own distinct kind of goodness and badness, as well as good and bad activities. Moreover, other substances can be related to it in good or bad ways. For instance, smell is more important for a wolf than for an eagle, and the ability to dig is good for a mole and not for a dolphin. Aquinas thinks that the term *good* has a more robust content when applied to higher beings – namely, those with more unity, perfection, and, among bodily creatures, more complexity. For instance, water is a relatively simple substance that has an inclination to flow downward and to cool, but it does not have distinct parts that work together and form a unity. We can pour the water of one glass into two distinct glasses without qualitatively or substantially altering it. In contrast, a tree has roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves that cooperate for the good of the whole tree. We cannot easily divide it in the way that we divide water, although we might cut off a branch from one tree in order to graft it onto another. Some individual trees are obviously better than other members of their species in that they can flourish amid inclement weather or adverse soil conditions. Consequently, the inclinations of a tree are higher and more complex than are those of an inanimate substance such as water.
An animal such as a wolf or a dolphin has an even higher level of unity and complexity and a more complicated good. It is a subject of thought or desire. According to Aquinas, psychological predicates such as perceiving and desiring can be predicated of organs such as the eye but are most properly predicated of the whole living substance. The wolf or the dolphin is the primary subject of such activities. Although wolves hunt in packs and dolphins in pods, an individual dolphin or wolf is numerically distinct from another individual of the same species and has a correspondingly distinct set of desires and perceptions. One wolf might want the same food or mate that another wolf wants or be afraid of the same fire. He cooperates with other wolves by hunting in packs, but the packs do not have the same kind of unity that the individual wolf does. Similarly, the dolphin hunts as part of a pod, but the pod does not have the same kind of unity as the dolphin does. Different behaviors and objects are good or bad for the individual dolphin or wolf, both as an individual and in relation to the pod or pack and ultimately to the whole species. Dolphins, wolves, and other animals act to attain what they perceive as good for them and flee what they perceive as evil. Their natural inclinations and appetites mostly direct them toward their flourishing as individuals and as a species.

What connects the different meanings of goodness in the above cases? Different substances have different inclinations and ends. Aristotle and Aquinas connect goodness with function. For instance, a good knife is sharp and a good hammer has a flat face. Similarly, being a good dolphin depends on swimming more than being a good wolf does. “Goodness” does not indicate just any quality or activity of a substance, but rather is relative to the proper functioning of the thing. For example, wolves and dolphins have a tendency to fall toward the earth, like water or stones. But we do not consider the goodness of a wolf or a dolphin to consist primarily in what it shares with stones.

This consideration of natural goodness sheds light on the goodness that is most relevant to moral philosophy, or what we might call “moral goodness.” Humans intellectually apprehend the good and can consequently will it. The human good depends on what is proper to human nature – namely, reason. It involves acting reasonably, which is the function of the whole human being. We can consider separately the functions of organs, such as eyes and ears, or the function that humans might perform as part of the community, such as being a leather maker or a boat builder. But moral philosophy, or ethics, is primarily concerned with the function of the whole human being and not human parts or

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5 *NE*, I.7; *SLE*, lib. 1, lect. 9–11.
partial roles. Moral goodness is consequently a kind of goodness that is achieved when humans act in accordance with their inclination toward a good as part of or leading to the ultimate end. By nature humans are directed toward an ultimate end. By using reason humans act for the ultimate end.

Sometimes Christian ethics is thought of as merely about God or God’s commands. Since Aquinas is primarily a moral theologian and not only a philosopher, we might be surprised at his emphasis on particularly human goodness. But following Aristotle, he rejects the Platonic emphasis on a separate “Form of the Good” in favor of what is properly human. Even though both Aristotle and Aquinas agree that there is a separate good of the universe, they reject the Platonic account of its relevance for ordinary moral reasoning. They hold that the separate good is the immaterial Prime Mover, which is the final cause of the whole universe, existing separately from the universe in a way that a general exists apart from his army. This separate good of the universe keeps everything in motion as one end of the universe. Nevertheless, its activity as a final cause does not take away from the intrinsic goodness that creatures possess, nor the different roles they play in the perfection of the universe. This separate good is sought by the immaterial beings that rule the universe as well as the apparently unconscious celestial spheres that move around the earth.

Even though Plato was incorrect in holding that knowledge of the separate Good is necessary and sufficient for yielding fully practical conclusions, he was perhaps correct to recognize its special place in moral philosophy. For both Aquinas and Aristotle, the immaterial Prime Mover, which is the separate good, is the ultimate end of both the universe and of particular humans. Consequently, it plays a central role in accounting for the human good. According to Aristotle, the Prime Mover seems to be important for ethics primarily because the best human life consists in contemplating it. The last book of the Nicomachean Ethics dissatisfies many readers because Aristotle seems to exalt the intellectual virtue of the philosopher who contemplates the Prime Mover over ordinary moral virtues, such as justice and courage. He is unclear about the relationship between the happiness of the contemplative life and the moral life, and he seems unconcerned with conventional religious duties.

Aquinas and the preceding philosophical tradition identify Aristotle’s Prime Mover with the God of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures. Aquinas thinks that God and religion are central to moral philosophy. In this respect he differs from most post-Enlightenment philosophers and perhaps even from

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6 NE 1.6; SLE, lib. 1, lect. 6–8. 7 Met. 12.10; In Met., lib. 12, lec. 12; ST I, q. 6, art. 4. 8 NE 10.7–8; SLE, lib. 10, lect. 10–13.