

Ralph McInerny

ETHICA
THOMISTICA

The Moral Philosophy
of Thomas Aquinas

REVISED EDITION



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Preface

This little book has been out of print for several years, and it is pleasant to hear that it has been missed. It is about as elementary as a book on ethics can ethically be, but for all that it is true, although not the whole truth. By which I mean that much more could be said, not that what is said here would need to be unsaid.

As the Preface to the original edition explains, this book arose from an assignment to lay before a summer institute the way Thomas Aquinas did moral philosophy, in its broad lines. My effort was well-received and, when it eventually became a book, many found it useful as a capsule statement of Thomistic Ethics. I am delighted that it is to be granted a new lease on life.

It should be said that Thomas had no sense that he was doing ethics, or indeed philosophy, in a personal way, or in one way as opposed to others, at least if such pluralism were taken to be radical. Thomas did philosophy, not Thomistic philosophy, just as Aristotle did philosophy and was not intent on fabricating an unusual and personal system.

Modern philosophy sometimes looks like one effort after another to be original, to be different, to go where no man has gone before. Greek philosophy began as verse and became prose; modern philosophy began in Latin and then turned to the various vernaculars and to the nationalism they often involved. Once there had been simply philosophy, and a lingua franca in which to express it; now there was French Philosophy, German Philosophy, British Philosophy, and so on. And within each of these philoso-

phies, every philosopher seemed intent on fashioning a *patois* quite different from ordinary French or German or English.

Poets, it is thought, are under obligation to be original and difficult; their readers must submit to them and see the world as they do. One can argue this assumption, or at least modify it, as T. S. Eliot did in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," but we now see this assumption being openly applied to philosophers, who are urged to become "strong poets." Self-assertive, that is, there being nothing else to assert, it seems.

The seeds for such nonsense were present at the beginning, when Descartes fashioned what he called Methodic Doubt. Doubt was necessary if Descartes was to know that he knew anything for sure. Whatever passed successfully through the fire of doubt could lay claim to being an item of knowledge. This is a familiar story, but notice a fundamental assumption of it. Until and unless I subject my views to methodic doubt, I have no right to say I know anything. Now, methodic doubt is something philosophers do—apparently not before Descartes, however, which is not insignificant—and this means that people who do not have time or talent for philosophy cannot be numbered among those who know.

It is doubtful whether Descartes, by all accounts a nice fellow, a good Catholic who attended a Jesuit college, intended this elitist consequence. But there it is. What the mass of mankind say is of no epistemic value in the quest for truth.

On the other hand, the assumption of a Thomas Aquinas or an Aristotle is that everybody already knows things for sure about the world and himself. There are truths common to everyone insofar as they are human. These truths are not deliverances of philosophy but are naturally known and presupposed by philosophy. Philosophy starts from these naturally known truths and tries to push beyond them, not to call them into question but to place its anchor in them. When the philosopher can no longer explain what he means in terms of what everybody already knows, it is the philosopher who loses, not the mass of mankind.

A good deal of the strangeness of philosophy since Descartes can be traced to this elitist conception of philosophy and its implicit disdain for your Uncle George. On the classical assumption, philosophers will have their distinctive voices, their differing styles, but their addressee is in principle anyone, and their subject is reality, not the lint to be found in their navels.

Such reflections influence what one thinks he is doing when asked to give a summary of Thomistic Ethics. The way to read this book is to ask whether it jibes with what everyone knows. If it does not, I have failed to present Thomas faithfully, and you should burn this book and turn to Thomas. Such revisions as have been made are aimed at staving off this failure. Chapter Three has received the most reshaping. Previously, I criticized the views of Germain Grisez and John Finnis *et sequaces eorum*, but I have come to think that this is not the place to do that. As those two admirable gentlemen understand, this is not a recantation.

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Ethica Thomistica

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I. Morality and Human Life

When St. Thomas says that the subject matter of moral philosophy is human action—human actions are moral actions and vice versa—he captures our sense that the moral or ethical pervades human life, but he also leaves us wondering how something so broad can constitute the object of a particular inquiry. Some light is cast on this problem when we consider his conception of human action. A human act is one that is conscious, deliberate, and free, something for which we are answerable. “Why did you do that?” “What should I do?” But surely there are answers to such questions—“There was a man on third” and “Try an eight iron,” say—that we would hesitate to call moral or assign to the province of ethics.

Reed Armstrong making a statue is engaged in responsible action, yet we would distinguish both the knowledge embodied in his activity and the reflection on such activity by himself and others from moral philosophy. The sculptor, the engineer, the angler, the scholar, the shortstop are all engaged in human action, yet it would be odd to call reflection on their deeds moral philosophy. Has Thomas cast too wide a net?

A human action is undertaken for a purpose, with an end in view. Its appraisal will take into account the means employed to achieve the end. An attempt to open a lock with a paper key will usually be regarded as a bad way to go about achieving the end in view. Means are ill or well adapted to the purpose for which one acts. Another appraisal of action bears on the end, goal or purpose itself. Ends themselves, and not just the means of attaining them, can be assessed as good or bad.

St. Thomas, like his philosophical mentor Aristotle, seems at the outset to deprive himself of any basis for discriminating between good and bad ends. He says that every action is undertaken with a view to some end *and* that the end has the character of the good. But if every action has a purpose or end and every end is good, it looks as if every action must be a good one, if good action is action which aims at the good.

“Good” here means perfective of or fulfilling of the agent. I want something I do not have because having it is preferable to not having it. Hence I pursue it. Latent in any action is the belief that its end is perfective or fulfilling of the one acting. That the pursuit achieves its end is the good the agent seeks. But how in this perspective can there be bad actions? Thomas and Aristotle provide an answer by distinguishing between real and apparent goods.

A real good is something I pursue as perfective or fulfilling of me and that really would perfect or fulfill me if I had it. An apparent good, by contrast, is an end pursued as perfective or fulfilling of me that, if had, really would not perfect or fulfill me. Let us say that you come upon me seated at table. Before me is a heaping bowl of carpet tacks. I pour low fat milk over them, sprinkle them with a sugar substitute, and bring a spoonful toward my mouth. Orad, as they say in crossword puzzles. You give a cry and stay my hand. “Why would you want to eat carpet tacks?” you reasonably inquire. “I have been told that I need more iron in my diet,” say I. You, in your role of tacks assessor, explain to me that eating tacks is not the way to achieve my goal. Your assumption is that I want more iron in my diet in order to regain my health and restore roses to my cheeks. Unquestioned in your intervention would be that health is good and that iron is a constituent of health. The end is thus left untouched by your criticism. Of course I might have responded to your question with a sigh, given you an abbreviated account of my recent travails and said that I wanted to shuffle off this mortal coil. The internal hemorrhaging promised by the consumption of a bowl of carpet

tacks seemed to my troubled mind an effective way to achieve my end. What would you say to that?

Obviously if my end is my end, so to say, I will be in logical difficulty in maintaining that my fulfillment or perfection consists in my not being at all and in the internal bleeding that will bring this about. The nonexistence of the human agent can scarcely qualify as the good, perfection, or fulfillment of the human agent. Let us say that I am surprised in the act of persuading or even forcing a fellow diner to consume the bowl of tacks. My end now is the extermination of another, perhaps the pushy fellow who stayed my hand and asked me why I had not eschewed a tacks free lunch. I am proceeding on the assumption that his ceasing to be will be better for me than his continuance in existence. Can reducing the number of my tablemates by one in this way really be perfective or fulfilling of me? That I can have such a goal and pursue it as good is surely possible, but could my pursuit and achievement of that goal really be good? As we shall see, one of the tasks of the moral philosopher, according to Thomas, is to discover the criteria that will enable him to show that such an end is only apparently, not really, good.

But what of all those human actions that do not seem to be moral ones at all and whose appraisal appeals to scientific, aesthetic, culinary, and other criteria? If not all human actions are susceptible of a moral appraisal, how can Thomas maintain an equivalence between human action and moral action? Let us take a case.

Thaddeus Skillen is engaged in research aimed at making lung cancer a mere memory for the race. We come upon him in his lab thoughtfully smoking a mentholated cigarette as he inspects the cloudy contents of a beaker. Mice scamper in the cages behind him. There is the fetid smell we associate with creativity. A massive apparatus covers an entire table, and there is the muted and, to Thaddeus, musical murmur of bubbling liquids, the faint hiss of escaping gases, an ambience which appeals to the thwarted Madame Curie in the observer. Skillen has infected mice with the

substance he now contemplates. A wondrous, not quite triumphant smile disturbs his bearded countenance. The reports are in. An assistant has just told him that a previously cancerous mouse has achieved a clean bill of health as the result of injections of this fluid. Thaddeus Skillen has perfected a cure for lung cancer.

Good for him? Of course. May he receive a Nobel prize. Let us be the first to congratulate the potential laureate. But is our praise of Skillen moral praise? Is our appraisal of what he has done appraisal of moral action? Not necessarily. We might be taken to be saying simply that he has performed his scientific work well. Surely that can be disengaged from a moral appraisal of his acts. This would be quite clear if we were to widen our perspective and add a negative moral appraisal to our positive appraisal of his work as a scientist.

Imagine Frau Skillen and all the little Skillens reduced to skin and bones by the singlemindedness with which the eponymous Skillen has pursued a cure for lung cancer. The cupboard is bare, the house is unheated, shoeless little Skillens wander unloved and morose through the cheerless rooms. Viewed in this wider perspective, Skillen comes under another appraisal that conflicts with our praise for his research. This prompts us to take a closer look around the lab. To our alarm, we notice that some of the cages contain human beings and they are treated no better than germ-free mice. Our eye is drawn to a pair of white-knuckled hands on the window sill, and we find one of Skillen's assistants clinging there, about to fall, crying for help, his plight ignored by our scientist.

Such everyday examples suggest that human actions can be appraised in several ways—internally, as we might say, and externally or, better, comprehensively, that is, morally. The non-moral appraisal of human action will thus seem to be a foreshortened perspective. Of course, we can assess the deeds of a golfer, cook, accountant by appealing to the criteria of golf, cooking, and accountancy. But all such acts can also be appraised morally. Are they, in the round, comprehensively, conducive to the good of

the agent, his private good, and the good he shares with others of his kind? No human action can escape this wider appraisal although any human action can also be appraised non-morally. To be sure, no set of non-moral criteria will have the comprehensive range of the moral. There are some who do not golf or cook and, while we may pity them, we do not blame them.

The pervasiveness of the moral, the fact that human action and moral action are identical, has obvious implications for the question frequently asked, and not only by philosophers: Why should I be moral? The question may seem to suggest that a person may or may not choose to act from a moral point of view. For St. Thomas this would mean that a person may or may not choose to perform moral actions. But if human actions are just as such moral and if one cannot not act, then, simply by dint of being a human agent, one is a moral agent. It is necessarily the case that a human person who acts is engaged in moral action and thus subject to moral appraisal.

Needless to say, one does not necessarily perform human actions well, and if the question were taken to mean: Why should I act well?, then of course it points to a basic option. One is free to act either well or badly, and to choose to act well is something one may or may not do. Has one who chooses not to act well rejected morality and rendered moral appraisal of what he does impertinent and irrelevant? Would not moral appraisals of his deeds be alien, since they embody an outlook that others may accept but he has rejected? Not quite. If human acts are just as such moral, they are as such either good or bad. Let us speak of moral₁ to cover human acts both good and bad. Then moral₂ can be taken to mean those human acts which are performed well, i.e. good human acts. Every human act is necessarily moral₁, but not necessarily moral₂. It is a matter of necessity, not choice, that any act I perform is moral₁. It is a matter of choice, not necessity, that an action of mine is moral₂. The question "Why should I be moral?" can only mean, as far as Thomas is concerned, "Why should I be moral₂?"

We will not immediately seek an answer to that question. Let us rather return to considering whether someone who chooses not to act well, whether episodically or as a matter of policy, can regard the question only as someone else's question, posed from a viewpoint other than his own. I think Thomas would rightly reject this interpretation as unreal. The commitment or intention to act well is embodied in each and every action anyone performs. If human action is purposive, undertaken with an end in view, and the end has the character of good, then no matter what I do, I do it with the intention of doing what is perfective or fulfilling of me. This is as true when I act badly as it is when I act well. When I act badly I am pursuing something which is only apparently good, perhaps because it is a real good pursued in the wrong way, at the wrong time, etc. But I can only pursue it as what is perfective of me. Perfective does not, of course, mean heroic virtue or the perfection of which Jesus speaks. (*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*) If I am mistaken about what I pursue, if it really isn't fulfilling of me, that latent, implicit intention provides an intrinsic criterion according to which my action can be appraised. Thus the question, "Why should I be moral₂?" can be answered: Because that is already the intention with which you act. The question does not arise from an alien viewpoint; it is the rock bottom assumption of my acting at all.

The human agent cannot not act. This does not mean that I am compelled to do this action or that, but rather that I must perform some action or other. (Imagine deciding not to act for the rest of the week.) Any action that I perform is just as such moral₁. Actions can be appraised from a number, a countless number, of viewpoints other than the moral, but each and every human act can be appraised morally, that is, as done because it is thought to be conducive to what is truly perfective and fulfilling of the agent. Some acts can be appraised as those of a golfer; some as those of an accountant; some as those of a scientist. And on and on. But all these acts can also be appraised morally. That is, all the things that a human person consciously, purposely, and

freely does are moral acts. Thus, while a human agent is just as such a moral agent, his actions are susceptible to appraisals that appeal both to intrinsic or narrow criteria and to comprehensive moral criteria. The moral order is as broad as the scope of human action itself, encompassing theoretical and practical matters insofar as the human agent freely and accountably addresses himself to them.

This conception of human action and of the scope of morality can give rise to a bad picture of human life broadly taken, and Thomas is intent on avoiding that bad picture. It has been said that human life is a book in which we set out to write one story and end by writing another. This does not simply mean that earlier I set out to do such-and-such and later changed my mind and decided instead to do this-or-that. The observation has a far deeper significance.

The story of a human life always involves far more than a person's responsible moral actions. By the time a person is capable of an interest in moral philosophy, he has already acquired a complex personal history. When you look back upon your past life, you will doubtless find it impossible to see it as just a chain of actions of the kind we have been discussing. Of course, you intended A and then you intended B. You chose, decided, thought about the future, did this and that, and all these things count as free, conscious and responsible deeds. They are the things you set out to do. But every human life is a very complicated mixture of the intended and unintended, and it is not possible to sort them out in such a way that all the intended acts would make up a set completely independent of what just happened to me.

Take a simple instance. Imagine that going to see the Cubs play in Wrigley Field is a rational thing to do, at least in the sense that a person can deliberately do such a thing. Let us say that I decide to go to Chicago and take in a game. On the Indiana Toll Road I have a flat tire, and a car pulls over to give me aid. Behind the wheel is a very attractive young lady whose name, I quickly

learn, is Fifi LaRue, perhaps a stage name. She offers to take me to the next oasis. I accept. As we drive away her tawny tresses are tossed by the errant breeze. I experience pleasant palpitations of the kind associated with infatuation along with concupiscent complications. At the oasis, prior to arranging for the wrecker to go for my car, I ask Fifi to have a cup of coffee with me. When we enter the restaurant, a siren goes off, bells ring, bright lights turn on, and cameras roll. With Fifi on my arm I am the fifteen millionth customer to patronize the tollway restaurant. The story is carried on national television. My wife turns on the evening news and sees footage of me making my historic entry with a radiant Fifi on my arm. Among the prizes that I win is a trip to Bermuda, and it is there, on the golden sands, bronzing in the sunshine, that my wife and I are finally reconciled. My arm is healing nicely, the swelling around my eyes is going down, the future looks bright. The child who is the fruit of our reconciliation. . . . But enough. Such a story can go on and on. That's life. Indeed it is. The Cubs lose 11-1.

In any such account as this, we can discern actions of the kind Thomas calls moral, but we also recognize events that, while connected with my choices, were not intended by me. I decided to go to Chicago, and I happened to have a flat tire. I accepted a lift from Fifi with no idea of what lay ahead. I invited her for a cup of coffee, but I did not intend to be on national TV. I intended to enter the restaurant, but I did not intend to be the winner of all those prizes. When I acted, I acted in a set of circumstances that were in part a result of previous choices and in part the unintended consequences of those choices. Human action, defined as purposive, undertaken with an end in view, is always open to fortuitous consequences, and for those I am not held accountable, though, of course, as my wife explains, I am responsible for what I next do in the circumstances that then present themselves.

Thomas defines a fortuitous effect of my purposive actions as unlooked-for, rare, and significant. The human agent is always prey to luck, good and bad, but one gets neither credit nor blame

for such effects of his decisions. The story of a life can hardly be told without mention of the adventitious, of what *happened* to me when I acted. If I am the cause of the unintended as well as the intended effects of my choices, I am clearly not the cause of each kind of effect in the same way. If I drive a golf ball and suddenly a cart darts into the fairway and my ball strikes the driver on the head and kills him, I can say that the ball went an uninterrupted two hundred yards because I intended that it should, and I can say that the imprudent driver died because I drove my ball, but I am not the cause of his death in the same way that I am the cause of my ball's going a certain distance. If I had foreseen my ball striking him, I would have refrained from driving when I did. But this has never happened to me before. I have never killed a fellow golfer in all my checkered career. My opponent would reasonably regard me as eccentric if I said that I would not drive just now because of a number of logically possible consequences of my doing so. A low-flying aircraft, say a stealth bomber, might be brought down by my Spalding 3. There are many reasons why I ought not golf, perhaps, but this is scarcely one of them. A certain amount of prudent caution is advisable before teeing up and swinging away, but no amount of caution can forestall the unforeseeable. For that matter, if I should dally on the tee because I am oppressed by thoughts of what unimaginable consequences might follow from my hitting the ball, I should be made aware that my decision not to act is itself fraught with possible menace. A robin kicks from its nest on an overhanging branch an unhatched egg. the egg strikes my partner on the nose and, in his surprise and consternation, he lurches wildly, swinging his club and catching me behind the ear. In a quince, I lie bloody and inert upon the greensward.

Life is like that. Human agents are always cause of more than they intend and often of consequences that are significantly good or evil. Such results are related to moral decision, but they are not per se the consequences of it. Of course, if a pattern emerges, I must take it into account. If every time I hit a golf ball someone