

Concerning the Person and the Common Good

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A. Introduction

Our theme is the relation of the person to the common good. When one hears these words, the expectation is that the discussion will be of things political, even if at a philosophical level. And certainly my original interest in preparing the present paper was quite political, viz the duty one has to put one's own life at risk for the good of the political society in which one lives. My aim has been to place this duty properly within the context of the sapiential vision proposed to us by St. Thomas Aquinas. In so doing, I must confess to having been taken somewhat by surprise by the heights of spirituality which St. Thomas has obliged me to scale in my quest. In order to grasp adequately the situation of the good citizen in the life before death, it has been necessary to consider the human being as meant for life beyond the grave. In the end, you may be surprised too, by the extent to which a most profoundly social doctrine finds its roots in the immediacy of each human person to God, i.e. to the Divine Personal Being.

A further word of forewarning. Those familiar with St. Thomas rightly insist on his doctrine of the unity of the human being. If one takes the doctrine of Plato in the Phaedo as a foremost example of the dualism which not merely

distinguishes soul and body within the human being, but views the body as a prison, an 'unfriendly' environment as regards the life most appropriate to the soul, then Thomas Aquinas is no dualist. The soul is in the body as in a most friendly milieu for its, the soul's, proper development (though, in so saying, I leave to one side the entire issue of the effects of original sin). Nay, more: the soul and the body together constitute one being. This is so true that, while the human soul is held to be immortal, and thus after the death of a human being the soul remains in existence, nevertheless, because it is incomplete as regards the fullness of human nature, it is not properly a person (by which Thomas, in agreement with Boethius, means an individual substance of a rational nature). As is well known, though for St. Thomas the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is not within the range of strict philosophical proof ("demonstration"), still, his philosophy of man is such as to find in resurrection the entirely appropriate outcome of our spiritual journey. - I say all this by way of preface to my forewarning you that, even though our topic is the person and the common good, still, I will be speaking of the human being in a way which sets off sharply soul from body, and which gives priority, and almost exclusivity, to the soul. In so doing, I am not inventing -- I am presenting Thomas Aquinas' own doctrine. Indeed, I am taking care lest I distort, or introduce an imbalance. The texts I use are not hidden in

corners, nor are they mere remnants of someone else's thought. They are surely Thomas' own approach.

St. Thomas begins his thinking by consideration of sensible changeable things, corporeal things. He finds in them, not merely mathematical intelligibilities, or even physical intelligibilities, i.e. laws of movement, rest, predictable change. He finds in them laws pertaining to reality in its entirety. He reads in physical events intelligible necessities which hold true for whatever is. However, one quickly finds that his own interest is to exploit the grasp of these "laws of being" with a view to exploring and understanding incorporeal, spiritual reality. This interest is not to be explained only by his role as a "theologian", i.e. a theoretician in the domain of Christian revelation. It also relate. to his being occupied with philosophical wisdom, i.e. with a sapiential or metaphysical grasp of reality. While Thomas (unlike thinkers in the Platonic tradition) attributes to corporeal reality the status of authentic being, nevertheless it is true that such being is regarded as extremely secondary, "minimal." Its existence is not fully intelligible except as a theatre and environment for mind (or spirit), albeit the lowest grade of mind, the human mind.

St. Thomas has a great deal to say about angels. This, again, is not surprising, since his primary task is the exploration of Biblical revelation. However, Thomas found in

the existence of these superhuman creatures a truth particularly satisfying to the trend of his metaphysical investigations. The existence of God, an incorporeal being, is strictly provable. The existence of the human soul is evident to us, while the truths that that soul is incorporeal and immortal are strictly provable. I would say that the existence of angels, i.e. created spirits of a higher nature than the human spirit, is not regarded by St. Thomas as susceptible of strict philosophical proof. It is merely reasonable, highly probable. Thomas thinks there are good reasons to propose their existence, and their existence in number and variety such as to surpass incomparably any number of corporeal beings.¹ The created universe, as St. Thomas conceives it, is overwhelmingly spiritual as to its ontological status, an assembly of spiritual substances or persons. "The universe" is primarily a group of persons.

While it is important to have this picture of St. Thomas's view of things, in which human spirits, human persons, are so low in the "mainstream" of even created reality as to be regarded as "the bottom of the barrel",² nevertheless it remains true that our only philosophical gateway to spirit is through our experience of the human mind and will. Also, in the last analysis, the important doctrine is not that created spirit is numerically the overwhelming part of reality. Rather, it should be realized that, as to quality of being, as to ontological importance, any human

spirit is incomparably superior to the entirety of corporeal reality.³ Thus, with or without angels it would be right to say: "the universe is a group of persons."

What do we mean by "a person"? Thomas uses the definition provided by Boethius: "an individual substance of a rational nature". Thomas' presentation of this definition takes the form of explaining why individuals possessing the rational nature are the occasion for providing a special word, a distinctive vocabulary, viz "person." What Thomas insists upon (and what is not in Boethius) is that the individual is that to which action is attributed, and that, by virtue of its rationality, a being is preeminently an agent, an origin of action, whereas sub-rational individuals are more "done to" than "doing." I.e., Thomas is seeing individuality as an ontological wealth, an intrinsically perfect feature of reality, one which is found not uniformly or homogeneously in all things, but is found (in all things) according to priority and posteriority. Corporeal things are individual, but their individuality is surpassed by the individuality of the spirit, which is "rated" by being seen as source of its own actions. This higher individuality is personality. Personality and liberty are indissociable.⁴

This means that every person has a story ("narratio").⁵ Moral effort or history is the proper fulfillment of each human spirit, each person.⁶ Thomas envisages these efforts as orchestrated by Divine Justice so as to result in a

perfect outcome, the "order of the universe" as regards "voluntary matters."⁷

B. Love in the Universe of Persons: Its Nature and Priorities

All reality flows from the Divine Will, and so all reality itself exhibits its own inclination, its own tendency, its own love. The various levels of created being exhibit various levels of love: those which have no knowledge having inclination of the lowest sort, those which have sense knowledge having inclination of a higher sort, while those creatures which have mind or intellect, and so possess the knowledge of the nature of goodness, are most perfectly inclined, i.e. pursue the good because they themselves see its goodness. This is the level of love proper to "will," proper to persons.⁸

St. Thomas distinguishes within the life of the human will two levels called "natural love" and "elective love."⁹ Morally virtuous operation pertains to election, choice, but it preexists, we might say, in natural love. Our moral task, indeed, consists in making choices which accord with the natural inclination or natural love which is present in the will. Thus, the presentation of moral priorities, i.e. the order to love, consists largely in the discernment of the order of natural inclination. This order is presented by Thomas in various places, but in most detail in the treatise

of the Summa theologiae on charity. We will look at that in a moment.

First, however, I wish to make two points. The first concerns the nature of love, and is of the greatest importance for the view I wish to put before you this evening. Thomas teaches that the word "love" has two distinct (though related) senses. Love relates to the good: we love what is good (or seems to us to be good). Now, "the good" and "that which is" are really two ways of conceiving what is altogether the same reality; and since, moreover, there is a distinction of two grades of being (or of "that which is"), viz the concrete thing or subsisting thing, on the one hand, and the inherent thing, on the other hand; and since, also, it is the concrete or subsisting thing which "is", in the unqualified sense of "is", as having being as its own, while what merely inheres is said to "be" in a qualified sense only: so also, we must distinguish between "the good", unqualifiedly, and "the good" in a qualified sense. It is the subsisting thing which is good, unqualifiedly, while the inherent is good in a qualified sense. Accordingly, we must distinguish two senses of "love". One "loves," unqualifiedly, what is "something good" unqualifiedly, while one "loves," in a qualified sense, what is a "good" qualifiedly. Now, what is it to love something as a subsisting good thing? It is to wish good things for that thing: thus, for example, when I love a friend, I wish

good things, e.g. comfort, safety, fair treatment, for that friend. The friend, the one for whom the "good things" are attachments or perfections, is the subsisting good thing. On the other hand, those "attached items," i.e. the "good things" I wish for the friend, are only "good" in the qualified sense. And when we say (as we do say) that we "love" such goods, this is "love" in a qualified sense. When, e.g., I say I "love the taste of salmon," this is a secondary sense of "love." What I primarily and unqualifiedly "love" in that case is myself eating salmon: I am the subsisting or concrete good thing. Let us call unqualified love "friendly love" and qualified love "desirous love."¹⁰

Now for my second point, which is Thomas' teaching that by natural inclination we love God, with friendly love, even more than we love ourselves. Thomas notes that some people hold that we love God by desirous love more than ourselves, in that we wish for ourselves the divine good even more than some good of our own. Again, these people are willing to admit that, in a way, we have more of the friendly sort of love for God than for ourselves, in that we wish for God a greater good than we wish for ourselves: we wish God to be God while we wish for ourselves our own proper nature. However, these people say that, speaking unqualifiedly, we love ourselves more than we love God, since we love ourselves more intensely and more principally. Arguing that this is

false, St. Thomas takes his cue from what we can observe in beings which do not have the power of reason. What we find is this:

"Each thing, among natural things, which naturally as to its very being belongs to another is more principally and more (intensely) inclined towards that to which it belongs than to itself. And this natural inclination is shown from those things which are naturally done, because each things, as it naturally acts, just so is it naturally suited to (or inclined to) act... Now, we see that the part naturally exposes itself for the preservation of the whole body: as the hand is exposed to the spear-point, without deliberation, for the conservation of the whole body."¹¹

Basing himself on this phenomenon, as revealing a law of being, Thomas goes on to argue that every creature whatsoever, as to its very being, belongs to God, and thus by natural love man loves God more than he loves his very own self. The idea is clearly that the human will is more intensely inclined to wish good things for God than for one's own self. God is more loved, as a subsisting good thing, i.e. as a personal being. The ontological proportion between creatures and God is what is being exploited. The part-to-whole proportion within created being is used to appreciate the nature of the relation of the entirety of created being to God. Created being and good finds its entire raison d'etre in the Divine Being, to an extent quite surpassing the way a part finds its raison d'etre in the whole. In this same context, Thomas calls God "a common good" and "the universal good," and sees everything as

inclined towards Him. Clearly, God is common good precisely as the supreme Personal being.

Let us now come to the question can one naturally love one's neighbor more than, or eve. as much as, oneself? St. Thomas will answer: no. One must naturally love oneself (as to one's spiritual nature) more than one loves one's neighbor (as to his spiritual nature). To see, however briefly, something of this, we can note the way Thomas answers a rather convincing adversary. The adversary argues that God is the principle object of charity (i.e. the being who is primarily loved, by virtue of charitable love); but sometimes a person has a neighbor more closely related to God than the person himself is; thus, that person should love that neighbor more than himself. In reply, Thomas says that charitable love derives its quantity not only from the side of the object, which is God, but also from the side of the one doing the loving, who is the person himself who has the charity: just as the quantity of any action depends in someway on the subject itself in which the action occurs. Thus, even though one's better neighbor is closer to God than we ourselves are, still, since the neighbor is not as close to the person who has the charity as that person is to himself, it does not follow that we ought to love that better neighbor more than ourselves.¹²

We see here how the very idea of inclination is indissociable from that of self-assertion. The implication

is that a subsisting good thing can love more than itself only another which surpasses it in the very line of subsistence, and this other, in the case of persons, can only be God (i.e. the Cause of beings as beings).

In the same context, we see Thomas reply to an opponent who argues that one loves more the one strives to keep from harm; but, by charity, a man sustains harm to himself to protect his neighbor: thus, he must love the neighbor more. Thomas answers that it is bodily harm that a person ought to sustain for his friend; and he continues:

"...and precisely in so doing, he loves himself more, according to the spiritual mind because that (way of acting) pertains to the perfection of virtue, which is the good of the mind. But in spiritual matters, a person ought not to suffer harm, i.e. by sinning, with a view to freeing the neighbor from sin..."¹³

Thomas constantly sees us as naturally loving ourselves more than our neighbors, in the line of unqualified love.

There is one more point to be made as regards our love for our neighbor (and it is one which is most important for our theme). St. Thomas teaches that, when all the historical striving has reached its term, the multitude of person. will find themselves existing in an ultimate order of greater and lesser proximity to, intimacy with, God. One person will find himself behind somebody else and in front of another. Will one love to see that someone else, ahead of oneself, receiving a greater good than oneself? Yes, says St. Thomas. Even though one loves oneself more intensely than one loves one's (better) neighbor, one loves God, and his plan, and

his will, more than one loves oneself. I.e., one's love for the order of the universe derives from the friendly love by which one loves the Divine Personal Being, the Universal Good, more than one loves one's own person.¹⁴

C. Conclusion

In his inquiry into the grounds of happiness, Thomas makes it clear that human corporeal existence cannot constitute the ultimate goal of human rational striving. This surely applies not only to the existence of individuals but to the entire human race. If the race, or the community, or the individual is worth preserving in corporeal existence, that worth must be found in them as the instruments and theatre for acts of mind and will, goods which incomparably surpass the merely bodily good.¹⁵

Thus, to someone arguing that it is impossible to overdo fearlessness, because one should not fear even death, Thomas replies:

"Death, and whatever else can be visited upon us by mortal man, ought not to be feared in such a way that one fall away from Justice. Nevertheless, it is to be feared, inasmuch as by it a man can be prevented from performing virtuous works either as regards himself or as regards the improvement he can make in others..."¹⁶

Again, when Thomas is in the course of making the point that courage, as a virtue, has to do with facing death primarily in a war, an opponent argues that one ought not to risk death for the temporal peace of the republic, since such

peace is the occasion for much lascivious behaviour. Thomas replies:

"The peace of the republic is something intrinsically good, nor in it rendered bad by the fact that some people make poor use of it: for there are many other people who make good use of it; and much worse evils are presented by it, viz homicides, sacrileges, than those evils which are occasioned by it, which later pertain especially to sins of the flesh."¹⁷

Clearly, Thomas is teaching us to view both oneself and the multitude of persons having the good of peace as corporeal existent whose raison d'etre is the practice of virtue, i.e. the life of reason. The risking of one's corporeal existence for the community is seen as reasonable, inasmuch as the community is seen as the adequate theatre for the fullness of the practice of virtue.

In sum, the entire moral life is seen by St. Thomas as grounded in the relation of the particular created person to the uncreated Personal Being who is God. This is, in and of itself, a relation of a particular good to the universal or common good. What we might call Thomas' "radical personalism" is identically a doctrine of love for the Common Good more than for one's own self.

1. Summa theologiae 1.50.3 and 1.112.4.ad 2.
2. Summa theologia 1.75.7.ad 3 and 1.79.3 (ed. Ottawa, 481a41-b2).
3. Summa theologiae, 1-2.2.6 (Ed. Ottawa, 723b33-724a5).
4. Summa theologiae 1.29.1.
5. St. Thomas, Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi 1.23.1.1 (ea. P. Mandonnet, Paris, 1929; Lethielleux, t. I, p 557: "Et inde est quod tractum est in usu ut quolibet individuum hominis de quo potest talis narratio fieri, 'persona' dicatur..." (my italics)
6. Cf. Summa theologiae 1.113.1 and 2, especially 2. ad 3.
7. Summa theologiae 1.21.1 (ea. Ottawa, 149ae3-5): "...ordo universi, qui apparet tam in rebus naturalibus quam in rebus voluntariis, demonstrat Dei iuatitiam." Also, 1-2.93.6 in its entirety (on how the whole of human affairs fall under the rule of the Eternal Law).
8. Summa theologiae 1.59.1
9. Summa theologiae 1.60.1 and 2.
10. Summa theologiae 1-2.26.4.
11. St. Thomas, Summa theologiae, 1.60.5; cf. T. R. G. Bower, "The object in the world of the infant," Scientific American, Oct., 1971, p. 32.
12. Summa theologiae 2-2.26.4. ad 1.
13. Summa theologiae 2-2.26.4. ad 2.

14. Summa theologiae 2-2.26.13 (ed. Ottawa, 1565a1-11).
15. Summa theologia 1-2.2.5 and 6 (ed. Ottawa, 723b30-724a3).
16. Summa theologiae 2-2.126.1. ad 2.
17. Summa theologia 2-2.123.5. ad 3.