

The Vision of Virtue and Knowledge of the Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas

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IN THIS article I wish to offer an interpretation of Thomas Aquinas's natural law theory that at once respects the fact of its historical development while arguing that such respect does not negate the claims of natural law to universality.¹ Central to my argument is a correct understanding of the role emotion plays in practical judgment for Thomas, a role that is not that of a mere psychological support or prop but rather is integral to the process of reasoning itself. This point is quite easily missed if one reads Thomas's treatment of law in isolation from the rest of his ethical teaching. In order to facilitate an appreciation of this connection, I have chosen to concentrate primarily on the *Summa theologiae*, a work in which he offers a systematic treatment of all aspects of his ethical teaching, along

¹ The limitations of this essay require that I prescind from the wider theological context in which Aquinas develops his natural law theory, concentrating instead on purely philosophical issues. While the view presented here is incomplete, it nevertheless constitutes a necessary propaedeutic to any adequate theological discussion of the subject, for as any student of Thomas knows, grace does not abolish nature, but rather perfects it. In the conclusion I will indicate the significance of this basic tenet for further theological reflection on the themes that I discuss throughout the course of this article.

For a discussion of the natural law as a participation in the eternal law, see Pauline C. Westerman, *The Disintegration of Natural Law Theory: Aquinas to Finnis* (New York: Brill, 1998), 21–47. For a treatment of the Old Law as a restatement of the natural law—a restatement required because of the obscuring effects of sin on human perception of the natural law—as well as of the insufficiency of the Old Law and of the necessity for the New Law, as the law that enables union with God, see Pamela M. Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law: An Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

with all the necessary ontological supports. Indeed, as Pamela M. Hall correctly points out, "the very structure of the *Summa* itself, dialectical in nature, hinges on the relationship and interdependence of its many parts."² The same could be said of Thomas's entire intellectual edifice. Failure to appreciate this fact inevitably leads to a distortion of Thomas's teaching on the natural law.³

The role that the emotions/passions⁴ play in reason's constitution of the natural law is a case in point as I have already stated. In contrast to the conception of Thomas's thought as predominantly intellectualist, a careful reading of his work reveals a sensitive appreciation of the role our emotions play both in our perception of moral reality and in our reasoning about the same. The following words of Martha Nussbaum would, I believe, receive approbation from Thomas: "Emotions are not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, they are parts, highly complex and messy parts, of this creature's reasoning itself."⁵

² Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law*, 23.

³ On this point, see also Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas and the Implications for Modern Ethics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 27–28. This distortion of Thomas's teaching on natural law, arising from a failure to situate it in the context of his overall system of thought, is quite widespread in contemporary Catholic moral theology. Obviously lacking familiarity with the philosophical anthropology that undergirds his thought, Charles Curran, for example, notes in Thomas "a definite tendency to identify the demands of natural law with physical and biological processes," *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 127. Curran believes that Thomas relies too much on Ulpian, who thought of humanity as being layered on top of animality (*ibid.*, 130). A critique of this kind of misunderstanding of Thomas's natural law theory would lead us far away from the concerns of this article. It will nevertheless become clear as the arguments presented here unfold that the notion of humanity as being layered on top of animality is completely alien to Thomas. He in fact regards the human person as a unitary composite being. It is precisely this view of human nature that explains the dynamic of reciprocity that obtains between reason and the emotions, a dynamic we are at pains to elucidate in this essay.

⁴ Throughout this essay I employ both "emotion" and "passion" as translations of the Latin *passio*. It ought to be borne in mind, however, that the term "passion" does not connote the same degree of intensity as it does in contemporary English. For a brief discussion of the problems in translating *passio* into contemporary languages, see Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002), 30–33.

⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3. It must be admitted nevertheless that Thomas's conception of the precise nature of the relationship obtaining between reason and emotion differs from that of Nussbaum. It does not however fall within the scope of this article to discuss these differences.

If this assertion is true then the implications for ethical theory in general, and natural law theory in particular, are quite obvious. In short, they cannot be ignored in the manner in which they have been by philosophy for so long, since they color in a fundamental way our perception of reality and, consequently, our moral deliberations concerning the same. In particular I argue here that for Thomas affectivity is integral to the perception of what constitutes the human good, which perception provides the starting point for the practical reason as it deliberates about the means to attain this good.⁶ It ought to become clear in the course of this essay that in Thomas's scheme of things perception of the natural law can never be divorced from the agent's affective constitution. As such this perception is intrinsically bound up with habit and therefore inevitably narrative in structure. Hence the fluctuations in appreciation of the various natural law precepts throughout the course of history, a phenomenon I attempt to account for in the case of one particular group mentioned by Thomas, namely the Germans, among whom "formerly, theft, although it is expressly contrary to the natural law, was not considered wrong."⁷

Natural Law

Reason is central to Thomas's definition of law. He describes law as "an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated."⁸ After explaining the different elements of his definition of law, Thomas proceeds to show how this definition is worked out in the case of eternal law, natural law, human law, and divine law. Eternal law is clearly the core form of law for Thomas, from which the other forms are derived.⁹ Given that the world is ruled by divine providence, as Thomas has shown elsewhere,¹⁰ we can say that it is governed by divine reason. It follows therefore that "the very Idea of the government of things in God the Ruler of the universe, has the nature of a law."¹¹ Indeed, since the divine reason's conception of things is not subject to time, but is

⁶ Nussbaum would, I suspect, be surprised to see the view that emotions are integral to the process of reasoning itself applied in support of Thomas's natural law theory. For in her estimation any system that advocates rule following ("deductivism") understands reasonable and moral action to be independent of desires; in such systems, according to her, reason is taken to be self-motivating. See her "Practical Syllogisms and Practical Science," in *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium*, trans. Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 165–220.

⁷ *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 94, a. 4.

⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 90, a. 4.

⁹ *ST* I–II, q. 93, a. 3.

¹⁰ *ST* I, q. 22, aa. 1 and 2.

¹¹ *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 1.

rather eternal, this kind of law must also be eternal. All things are ruled and measured by the eternal law in that they receive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends from its being imprinted on them. They may therefore be said to partake of the eternal law.

Human beings however enjoy a unique position in material creation, for they partake in divine providence by being provident both for themselves and for others because of their sharing in the divine reason, whereby they have a natural inclination to their proper act and end. It is precisely this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature that is called the natural law. Thomas underscores the centrality of reason in the natural law when he states that, because the rational creature shares in eternal reason in an intellectual and rational manner, “the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is properly called a law, since law is something pertaining to reason.”¹² Nussbaum’s contention that any ethical system that is characterized by rule-following necessarily deems moral action to be independent of desires seems initially, at least, to have some validity in the case of Thomas’s natural law theory, for emotions have a role to play only insofar as they are ruled by reason, in which case they too belong to the natural law.¹³

When we proceed to examine the determination of natural law, which determination we call human law, the force of reason does not flag. Indeed, the analogy between practical reason and speculative reason further emphasizes the role of reason in natural law. Just as speculative reason, on the basis of naturally known indemonstrable principles, draws the conclusions of the various sciences, so too practical reason, on the basis of the precepts of the natural law—which are general and indemonstrable principles in the practical domain—proceeds to the more particular determination of matters.¹⁴ Thomas is, however, aware that practical reason is concerned with singular and contingent matters, unlike speculative reason, which deals with necessary things. Human laws, consequently, do not enjoy the kind of inerrancy that belongs to the demonstrated conclusions of the sciences.¹⁵ The usefulness of a law does nevertheless extend beyond a single act, for “if there were as many rules or measures as there are things measured or ruled, they would cease to be of use, since their use consists in being applicable to many things.”¹⁶

¹² *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 2, ad 3.

¹³ *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2, ad 2.

¹⁴ *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 3.

¹⁵ *ST* I, q. 91, a. 3, ad 3.

¹⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 96, a. 1, ad 2.

These assertions concerning human law mirror what Thomas states elsewhere concerning natural law. The natural law is the same in all men with regard to general principles, “both as to rectitude and as to knowledge.” Yet when one descends into those details “which are the conclusions, as it were, of those general principles,” the natural law, although “it is the same for all in the majority of cases, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge,” may in some few cases fail. It may fail “as to rectitude, by reason of certain obstacles (just as natures subject to generation and corruption fail in some few cases on account of some obstacle),” while it may fail “as to knowledge, since in some the reason is perverted by passion, or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature.”¹⁷ As a concrete illustration of this point, Thomas cites the example of the Germans who formerly, according to Julius Caesar (*De Bello Gall.* vi), did not consider theft to be wrong. Elsewhere Thomas tells us that the secondary precepts, which are derived by practical reason from first principles, “can be blotted out from the human heart . . . by vicious customs and corrupt habits, as among some men, theft, and even unnatural vices, as the Apostle states (Rom 1) were not esteemed sinful.”¹⁸

Practical Reason as Constitutive of the Natural Law

The foregoing brief account serves to highlight the centrality of reason to Thomas’s conception of natural law. The natural law can be understood only in relation to what he terms the “order of reason” (*ordo rationalis*).¹⁹ It is important however to offer some clarification here, for Thomas distinguishes between the theoretical intellect and the practical intellect. By this distinction, Thomas does not mean that we possess two intellects, one theoretical and the other practical. Stated very simply, there is one mind that operates theoretically when it is a question of attaining to the truth of a particular reality—or indeed of reality itself—and operates practically when the subject seeks to realize his desired ends in action. While paradigm cases of purely theoretical or purely practical intellectual activity doubtless exist, most of our thinking is a mixture of both kinds.²⁰

¹⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 4.

¹⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 6.

¹⁹ See Frank J. Yartz, “Order and Right Reason in Aquinas’ Ethics,” *Mediaeval Studies* 37 (1975): 407–18.

²⁰ See John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 11. The reader will note that the understanding of the relationship obtaining between the practical reason to the speculative reason presented in this present article differs radically from that espoused by Finnis, Grisez, and others who follow their cue. Among the various problems that the natural law theory developed by these authors presents is that of intuitionism, for they argue not only that it is self-evident that certain things are good, but also that some goods are basic while others are

In the words of Ralph McInerny, "as often as not we are interested in the truth because of some practical aim we have."²¹

Apart from whatever motivation we may have for acquiring theoretical knowledge, however, it is clear that for Thomas a relationship obtains between the theoretical reason and the practical reason, which goes beyond simply crossing over into one another's territory. In Thomas's understanding the practical reason includes and asserts the theoretical. The former is an extension of the latter: *intellectus speculativus per extensionem fit practicus* (theoretic reason becomes practical).²² The practical reason presupposes the theoretical and is rooted in it. It becomes clear, therefore, that Aquinas's conception of the intellect is profoundly unitary. The intellect is a single faculty that manifests two different modes, theoretical and practical, but which are so related that the practical is an extension of the theoretical. This understanding of the intellect is crucial in Thomas's ethical realism, for the practical reason is the measure of right action precisely because it has received this measure from objective reality by way of the speculative intellect of which it is an extension. For Thomas ethical imperatives are founded upon ontological indicatives, that is to say, upon the way things are. Because of the ontological unity of the intellect, there can be no disjunction between "is" and "ought."

not. The fact that many dispute these claims certainly calls into question their self-evidence. Their method, moreover, fails to offer any guidance beyond personal experience and social conventions on how one can judge whether something is only apparently good or is indeed truly so. The position that I outline with regard to the Germans later in this article requires the presence of theoretical knowledge, that is to say, it demands a grasp of the facts. For, as Ralph McInerny states, "The judgment that something is good presupposes and depends upon theoretical knowledge of the thing judged to be good and of the one for whom it is judged to be good" (*Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1992], 192). This assertion does not preclude the fact that theoretical knowledge can more often than not be "confused, vague, and susceptible to all but endless refinement and addition" (*ibid.*). If I have a headache I do not have to be a medical doctor in order to take appropriate steps to deal with it. If I need to get better immediately I can administer some medication to myself in the full knowledge that it will relieve my pain; I most certainly do not require the expertise that a pharmacist or a chemist has concerning pain relievers. If I so choose, however, I can try to acquire that kind of expertise. For a concise and insightful critique of the position taken by Grisez and Finnis, see Russell Hittinger, "After MacIntyre: Natural Law Theory, Virtue Ethics, and Eudaimonia," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1989): 449–61. See also McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action*, 184–206.

²¹ McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action*, 185.

²² *ST I*, q. 79, a. 11, s.c.

The practical reason simply translates the knowledge of being, gained by the theoretical reason, into the realm of action.²³ The penetrating insight of Goethe thus becomes more intelligible to us, namely that “in our doing and acting everything depends on this, that we comprehend objects clearly and treat them according to their nature.”²⁴

Having delayed briefly on the relationship between the theoretical and the practical intellect, it is necessary at this point to highlight a fundamental aspect of the constitution of the latter, an aspect central to the argument of this essay: Unlike speculative reason, practical reason is appetitive in its condition, that is to say, the principle of practical reason is the “desirable” (*appetibile*). As St. Thomas states, “the practical intellect is said to move because the starting point of its deliberations, namely the object desired, moves.”²⁵ We can agree with Rhonheimer’s description of practical reason: It is, he states, “embedded” in “seeking” and depends upon it.²⁶ For, as Thomas notes, “*good* is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good.”²⁷ In the words of Pamela M. Hall, “one cannot act intelligibly, that is, deliberately and

²³ This analysis differs from that of those who argue that the question of “ought” does not arise from the experience of being but rather from the subjective experience of our goal-directed nature that manifests itself in seeking, choosing, and doing. It is this experience, they opine, that provides the foundation for the systematic reflection that is proper to moral philosophy proper. Hence Martin Rhonheimer maintains that “such judgments as ‘All striving is guided to some goal’ and ‘That toward which everything strives we call the good,’ are not derived from metaphysics, but represent an original experience that is *sui generis*” (Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy*, trans. Gerald Malsbary [Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2000], 23). Here we witness the influence of John Finnis who asserts that the good that guides ethical reflection is not preceded by—in fact is independent of—any theoretical knowledge, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983).

²⁴ Quoted in Josef Pieper, *Living the Truth*, trans. Lothar Krauth and Stella Lange (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 108. Pieper offers an analysis of the structure of the extension of reason from the sight of the good to the command that is directed toward action (*ibid.*, 145–51). He does not, however, deal with the problem of bad choice or with the aporia of the apparent good. For a very fine treatment of the same, see Rafael-Tomás Caldera, *Le jugement par inclination chez saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1980).

²⁵ “Propter hoc dicitur intellectus practicus movere, quia scilicet eius principium, quod est appetibile, movet.” In *III De anima*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 24, ed. Stanislas Eduardus Fretté (Paris: Vivès, 1875), lect. 15. My translation.

²⁶ Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 27.

²⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

rationally, without acting purposively, for the sake of some end understood as good.”²⁸ Indeed, it is precisely because of its appetitive condition that the acts of the practical reason are necessarily experienced as preceptive: *Good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided.*²⁹ This precept refers of course to goodness under its formal aspect, the *ratio boni*.

As we will see, however, it is possible to be mistaken at the level of this first principle about the true nature of the particular good that confronts one, for at this level all the force of subjectivity comes to bear on the perception of reality. This contention is of course at odds with an understanding that treats the rules of natural law as if they were intuitively knowable or evident a priori to reason. Our position does seem to cohere much more with common experience and the testimony of human history. Knowledge of self-evident truths is attained by laborious acquisition through reflection on human experience³⁰; and the formulation of rules on the basis of this experience is meant to facilitate us in securing the goods of human life—although it is very possible to misinterpret experience and to formulate erroneous rules on this basis, thereby actually undermining the attainment of these goods. Notwithstanding this possibility, however, the natural law can be said to be teleological in its very nature, that is to say, it has as its end or purpose human flourishing or fulfillment.³¹ Human fulfillment is of course nothing other than the fruit of a life lived virtuously, and so it becomes clear that natural law theory and virtue theory do not constitute two completely disparate approaches to moral reality; they are rather intimately connected with each other. The arguments offered here aim to substantiate this claim. In this regard, I seek to show that a life of virtue does not so much lead to a discovery of the rules that truly conduce to a flourishing existence as being the very process of discovery itself, while these rules in turn guide us in our efforts to fulfill ourselves as human beings and thus they culti-

²⁸ Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law*, 30.

²⁹ *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2.

³⁰ This assertion may seem confused, but we must bear in mind Thomas’s distinction between truths that are self-evident *secundum se* (“in themselves”) and those that are self-evident *quoad nos* (“in relation to us”). Thus, he states that “certain axioms or propositions are universally self-evident to all; and such are the propositions whose terms are known to all, as *Every whole is greater than its part*, and, *Things equal to one and the same are equal to one another*. But some propositions are self-evident only to the wise, who understand the meaning of the terms of such propositions: thus to one who understands that an angel is not a body, it is self-evident that an angel is not circumscriptively in a place: but this is not evident to the unlearned, for they cannot grasp it,” *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2.

³¹ See *ST* I–II, q. 90, a. 2.

vate a life of virtue.³² On the one hand, moral perception is a function of virtue; on the other hand, one's store of moral knowledge furnishes the matrix within which consequent virtuous activity unfolds. This dynamic, which obtains between virtue and law, means however that the natural law is not something given once and for all to human beings; it is rather something that stands in constant need of reappropriation by means of rational reflection and virtuous living.³³ In the remainder of this article, evidence is adduced to support these claims.

It is important to bear in mind that it is only by the reflection of practical reason on its own act that we attain the linguistic formulation of this experience of practical judgment "good is to be done and pursued and evil to be avoided." It is quite possible that one might never adequately succeed in formulating it—or indeed any of the basic and self-evident

³² This view is clearly opposed to that of those who argue either for the primacy of law or for that of virtue in the ethical doctrine of Thomas. In this regard Nelson, who argues for the primacy of prudence over natural law in Thomas's ethical theory, has surely got it wrong. He is right, nevertheless, when he argues that the standard account of Thomas's natural law theory, "which begins with intuited moral knowledge and then proceeds to the virtues," is an erroneous interpretation (Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence*, 37). What is required is a synthesis of these two misinterpretations in the manner that Hall proposes: "[F]or prudence to operate effectively, the *inclinationes* must come into play—those specific directednesses which are the core of natural law for Aquinas. Without acknowledgement of this teleology, one cannot locate in Aquinas any notion of natural human flourishing" (Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law*, 20).

For a succinct portrayal of some versions of the standard (erroneous) account of Thomas's natural law theory, see Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence*, 8–11. Nelson is himself, however, guilty of misinterpretations of Thomas. The scope of this article does not permit a treatment of these misunderstandings, but I might perhaps be allowed to quote one instance: "Thomas's perspective, therefore, leaves very little room for a full-fledged ethics of natural law. The foundations of such a theory seem to have been drastically undermined by Thomas's portrayal of a human nature created in such a way that it is oriented by nature only to its final end and is unavoidably free to direct itself to more particular ends." What, one might therefore ask, are we to make of the basic inclinations listed in *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2, inclinations that constitute the core of the natural law for Thomas? On this point, see Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law*, 23–44.

³³ Pamela M. Hall makes a similar point in stressing the narrative nature of the natural law: "We discover the natural law through a process of reflection on the goods of our nature and on what conduces to those goods. This reflection is characterized as a kind of practical reasoning within experience; we reason about our actions and, more comprehensively, our lives as proceeding towards those goods which constitute our flourishing. In doing this, we appropriate more and more the directednesses which are the core of the natural law," *Narrative and the Natural Law*, 50.

principles of practical reason. As Clifford G. Kossel puts it, however, “one knows well enough to employ them in rational discourse and in practical life.”³⁴ What we encounter here is in effect, as Thomas Ryan points out, an instance of affective knowing in “the form of primordial moral awareness.”³⁵ The judgment “good is to be done and pursued and evil to be avoided” itself cannot be derived from a prior judgment; it is absolutely primary. The first principle of practical reason conditions everything else that is recognized in a universal sense as good or that is to be concretely realized *hic et nunc* in action by way of prudence. The recognition of universal goods expresses itself in the precepts of natural law, while those goods to be realized concretely here and now are expressed by the precepts of prudence.³⁶

The Truth of the Practical Intellect

We have emphasized the appetitive condition of the practical reason. For St. Thomas, indeed, “the truth of the practical intellect depends on conformity with right appetite.”³⁷ This conformity does not of course concern necessary matters that can in no way be affected by human will; it pertains rather to contingent matters, for such matters alone can be effected by us, whether these be matters of interior action or the products of external work. Hence, concludes Thomas, “it is only about contingent matters that an intellectual virtue is assigned to the practical intellect, namely, art, as regards things to be made, and prudence, as regards things to be done.”³⁸

Here it is human action, namely, the things to be done, that is in question. The relevant virtue in this domain is prudence, the subject of which is the practical intellect in its relation to the right will. Thomas describes prudence as “the right reason of things to be done.”³⁹ Just as man is rightly disposed to the principles of speculative truth (such as the principle of contradiction) by the natural light of the active intellect, so too is he rightly disposed to the principles of the reason of things to be done—principles that are provided by the ends to which man is rightly disposed—by the

³⁴ Clifford G. Kossel, SJ, “Natural Law and Human Law (Ia IIae, qq. 90–97),” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 173.

³⁵ Thomas Ryan, S.M., “Revisiting Affective Knowledge and Connaturality in Aquinas,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 52.

³⁶ Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 32.

³⁷ *ST* I–II, q. 57, a. 5, ad 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *ST* I–II, q. 56, a. 3.

rectitude of the will.⁴⁰ Thus the principles of the reason of things to be done, that is to say, of prudence, are fundamentally determined by the constitution of a person's will. For a person's affective condition either facilitates or impedes his prudential reasoning, dictating the degree to which the latter is in conformity with truth. This dynamic obtains regardless of which species of prudence is in question: that which is directed to one's own good (*prudence* simply so called), that which is directed to the common good of the home (*domestic prudence*), or that which is directed to the common good of the state or kingdom (*political prudence*).⁴¹

I argue that the impact of the affective constitution of an individual on the operation of his practical reason is fundamental in Thomas's ethical thought and in his natural law theory in particular, a claim that I hope to substantiate in the remainder of this essay and one central to appreciating the dynamic which, I posit, obtains between virtue and law. As already stated, this dynamic means that the natural law is not something given once and for all to human beings, but is rather something that stands in constant need of reappropriation by means of rational reflection and virtuous living.

Affectivity and the Perception of Moral Truth

The important place that the passions occupy in the moral life for St. Thomas is indicated by the fact that he foregoes any systematic treatment of them in the treatise on the soul in the *Summa theologiae*, I, questions 75–79, choosing instead to devote a treatise to them in the *secunda pars*, that part of the *Summa theologiae* that deals with moral concerns. He adopts this course of action in spite of his assertion in the prologue to the treatise on the soul that he intends to discuss the operations of the soul, which operations include the passions.⁴² The choice to defer any inquiry into the passions until the *secunda pars* bears witness, according to Paul Gondreau to “the wholly integral role that affectivity plays in the moral life.”⁴³ This role cannot be understated. As Gondreau remarks, the passions are for Thomas “integral and indispensable features of the moral life, since

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *ST* II–II, q. 47, a. 11. Thomas's assertion that there are three species of prudence points to his understanding that our knowledge of human nature and of what contributes to its flourishing is acquired on both an individual plane and a communal plane. The latter plane leads us to human law, a kind of law from which the natural law can never be wholly separated. See Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law*, 41–42.

⁴² *ST* I, q. 75, prol.

⁴³ Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul*, 108.

one's emotional disposition figures largely in determining whether the human thrust for the good has indeed been attained."⁴⁴ Although the passions furnish the necessary first step in the moral life, however, the fulfillment of the human desire for perfection requires, as we shall see, the overseeing command of reason—or *imperium*, to employ Thomas's term.

At the beginning of the *secunda secundae pars*, Thomas observes that "General remarks about moral matters are of little use because human actions are about particular things."⁴⁵ When the moralist comes to discuss particular concrete cases, he encounters the fact that human beings are moved by passions. As Gilson points out, "the study of the passions, therefore, must precede any discussion of moral problems."⁴⁶ In adopting this approach, Thomas displays his moral realism; as Gondreau points out, "the moral quality of human life begins for him in the most concrete of human experiences: the movements of sensitive affectivity, the passions."⁴⁷ For Thomas our choices and intentions do not exist in the realm of abstraction; rather, a man desires this object, he fears that outcome, and so on.

One of the principal reasons Thomas views human affectivity in such a positive light is because of his hylomorphism, that is to say, the theory of form and matter that he inherited from Aristotle, albeit adapting it according to his own purposes. According to Thomas's hylomorphic metaphysics of human nature, the human person is a unitary composite being, comprising both body and soul. In keeping with this view, he recognizes that one cannot separate the sensible dimension of human life from the psychic. Thus, as Judith A. Barad comments, "the psychic and corporeal elements of emotional experience are not characteristic of two entities; together they make up one affective experience."⁴⁸ Sensibility therefore is integral to affectivity and cannot be ignored in any treatment of the moral life, for just as emotion has both psychic and physical components, so too moral judgment includes rational and emotional elements. The intrinsic connection between the various dimensions of the human person will be illustrated in the following summary of Thomas's account of the emotions insofar as they have an impact on the life of reason. It will become evident that a hylomorphic metaphysics of human nature requires that any affect-

⁴⁴ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁵ ST II-II, prol. My translation.

⁴⁶ E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas*, trans. L. K. Shook (New York: Random House, 1956), 271.

⁴⁷ Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul*, 108.

⁴⁸ Judith A. Barad, "Aquinas on the Role of Emotion in Moral Judgment and Activity," *The Thomist* 55 (1991): 399.

tive movement be informed by and integrated into the life of reason; a synergy therefore obtains between affectivity and the life of reason. The moral life engages the entire human person.⁴⁹

According to Thomas, all the soul's powers are rooted in the one essence of the soul; in other words, they emanate from one and the same spiritual principle, although it must be emphasized that they remain distinct from one another, having different formal objects.⁵⁰ This connection between the soul's powers means that when the exercise of one power becomes more intense, that of another is weakened or perhaps even altogether impeded. There obtains among the various powers of the soul a spiritual equivalent of the principle of conservation of energy; "in the operations of the soul," therefore, "a certain attention is requisite, and if this be closely fixed on one thing, less attention is given to another."⁵¹ The rational appetite or will is not immune from the dynamism we have just described for, as Thomas states, "by a kind of distraction, when the movement of the sensitive appetite is enforced in respect of any passion whatever, the proper movement of the rational appetite of will must, of necessity, become remiss or altogether impeded."⁵²

More pertinent to our discussion is the second way in which Thomas argues that a passion of the sensitive appetite can move the will indirectly. This influence has its source in the will's object, namely the good apprehended by reason. It is clear that the judgment and apprehension of reason in those who are deranged is impeded on account of "a vehement and inordinate apprehension of the imagination and judgment of the estimative power."⁵³ Just as the judgment of the sense of taste is conditioned by the disposition of the tongue—the disposition of the tongue of one affected by illness might, for example, make even perfectly good food seem bitter to the sense of taste—so too "the apprehension of the imagination and judgment of the estimative power follow the passion of the sensitive appetite."⁵⁴ Consequently, the imagination of one overtaken by a fit of passion is consumed with the object of his emotion, finding it difficult to divert his attention elsewhere. As a result, Thomas tells us, "the

⁴⁹ See Servais Pinckaers, "Les passions et la morale," *Revue de sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 74 (1990): 381–86.

⁵⁰ Thus sight has color as its object; hearing, sound; and so on.

⁵¹ *ST* I–II, q. 77, a. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* For Aquinas imagination "is as it were a storehouse of forms received through the senses" (*ST* I, q. 78, a. 4). The estimative power apprehends "intentions that are not received through the senses" (*ibid.*)—that something is good or harmful, for example, or that something is useful.

⁵⁴ *ST* I–II, q. 77, a. 1.

judgment of the reason often follows the passion of the sensitive appetite, and consequently the will's movement follows it also, since it has a natural inclination always to follow the judgment of reason."⁵⁵ In other words, the passion of the sensitive appetite informs the judgment of reason, which in turn gives a certain direction to the movement of the will. It is not difficult to see how a person's ability to engage in moral reasoning is impaired when he is in the grips of emotion. As Barad points out, "being overtaken by a strong emotion, our reasoning ability becomes centered on the object of the emotion to such a degree that we do not consider the advantages of alternative courses of action."⁵⁶

In this regard it ought to be noted that whether the object of the will be a true good or merely an apparent good, there is always an affective influence on reason, an influence that issues from the sensitive appetite. Given the ontologically unitary nature of the human being there can be no such thing as pure, detached reason in the sense of reason that prescind completely from emotion. The question on any particular occasion is: Given the appetitive condition of the practical reason that we have already noted, to what extent does affectivity facilitate or impede an objective perception of reality on the part of reason? To what extent is the affective response in accord with the very constitution of the reality at hand and therefore allow reason to accomplish its work in fidelity to the demands of truth?

Aquinas himself notes that "the fact that something appears good in particular to reason, whereas it is not good, is due to a passion."⁵⁷ This influence of passion on reason can even lead to a situation in which a man fails to consider in particular what he knows in general; passion in effect fetters the reason and hinders it from arguing from the appropriate premise. An incontinent man, for example, may well know that fornication is wrong, but on account of passion fails to see that this particular act is one of fornication and therefore immoral. This state of affairs arises because, instead of reasoning from the universal premise "No fornication is lawful," the incontinent man employs the premise "Pleasure is to be pursued." Man in effect reasons about the universal proposition that is "suggested by his the inclination of the passion,"⁵⁸ and reasons to his

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Barad, "Aquinas on the Role of Emotion," 406.

⁵⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 77, a. 2, ad 2. Elsewhere he states that "a man is changed as to his disposition according to the passions of the sense appetite. Hence something seems fitting to man when experiencing a certain passion which would not seem so with the passion absent; for example, something seems good to a man when angry which does not seem so when he is calm. In this way, on the part of the object, the sense appetite moves the will," *ST I-II*, q. 9, a. 2.

⁵⁸ *ST I-II*, q. 77, a. 2, ad 4.

conclusion accordingly. Thomas explicitly refers to this argument, which occurs in his treatise on the passions, when he comes to expound his theory of the natural law. Although the general principles of the natural law, in the abstract, can in no way be blotted out from human hearts, they can be blotted out in the case of a particular action, “in so far as reason is hindered from applying the general principle to a particular point of practice, on account of concupiscence or some other passion.”⁵⁹ In order that the conclusion of his practical reason may in fact be in accord with the objective reality confronting him, a man must enjoy “a right appetite of the end” so that reason “may hold itself aright in respect of principles, that is, the ends, on which it builds its argument.”⁶⁰

It ought to be borne in mind with regard to all that we have said thus far that reason always remains the first principle of human acts; all other principles of human acts are subordinate to reason, but in various ways. Some, such as healthy members, obey reason without resistance, “for as soon as reason commands, the hand or the foot proceeds to action.”⁶¹ In contrast to healthy limbs, “the appetitive faculty obeys the reason, not blindly, but with a certain power of opposition.”⁶² Referring to Aristotle, Thomas cites the analogy of the exercise of political power, whereby a man rules over free subjects who enjoy a certain right of opposition, in order to elucidate the relationship obtaining between reason and the passions. Reason, for example, might demand that one adhere to a special diet in order to regain or to maintain one’s health; this demand, however, will have no effect unless the sensitive appetite approves of it and translates it into actual practice.

Insofar as the passions do not obey the lead of reason, therefore, but rather lead an unruly existence, they impede the judgment of reason. Or, as Thomas expresses it elsewhere, they “drag the reason down with them.”⁶³

⁵⁹ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 6. This idea is echoed in Thomas’s treatment of the Old Law. Thus in *ST* I-II, q. 99, a. 2, ad 2, he states: “Now human reason could not go astray in the abstract, as to the universal principles of the natural law; but through being habituated to sin, it became obscured in the point of things to be done in detail. With regard in fact to the other moral precepts, which are like conclusions drawn from the universal principles of the natural law, the reason of many went astray so that it judged certain things to be good which in themselves are bad.” (My translation.) Thomas maintains that the habit of sinning gave rise to a progressive ignorance of the natural law; hence the necessity for the Old Law, which clarified the natural law, knowledge of which habitual sin had obscured.

⁶⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 3, ad 2.

⁶¹ *ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *ST* III, q. 15, a. 4. The translation is from Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul*. The original Latin reads “trahunt rationem.” The Blackfriars translation is “deflect the reason.”

When however they do follow the judgment of reason, as though commanded thereby, they facilitate the execution of its command since they are inclined to the good that is in accord with reason. Moreover, as Mark D. Jordan puts it, "so far as the passions are brought under right reason, they increase the exercise of reason and so nearness to the good."⁶⁴ It is precisely this inclination of the appetitive faculty to the good that is in accord with reason, which constitutes moral virtue. Moral virtue is not simply the appetitive condition that inclines a man to what is in accord with right reason; in order to count as moral virtue it must be joined with right reason. Moral habits are "to be considered as virtues in so far as they are in conformity with reason."⁶⁵ The movements of passion constitute the matter of moral virtue, while moral virtue itself is effected by the *habitus* of choosing informed by the rule of right reason. In the words of Gondreau, "reason's penetration into sensibility helps the concupiscible and irascible powers engage *actively* in the work of virtue, whereby they desire *themselves* the good of reason and where they exercise their *proper* activity *within* the arena of virtuous duty."⁶⁶

Virtue and Habit

The notion of moral virtue necessitates a brief examination of *habitus*, for Thomas's treatment of virtue must be understood in relation to the preceding treatise on habit. Virtue itself denotes a certain perfection of a power. Thus, for example, the ability to see with 20/20 vision can be said to be the perfection of the power of sight in human beings. The active natural powers, such as sight, are however determinate to their acts; thus sight is determinate to the act of seeing. In contrast the rational powers proper to man alone are not determinate to one action, but are rather inclined indifferently to many. In order to determine the acts of the rational powers habits are required. Thus, concludes Thomas, "human virtues are habits,"⁶⁷ for as we have just seen, an appetitive inclination must be joined with right reason in order to constitute a virtue.

Further specifying what he means by human virtue, St. Thomas points out that it "cannot belong to the body, but belongs only to that which is proper to the soul."⁶⁸ In other words, human virtue does not refer to the body, which man shares in common with other animals; neither does it

⁶⁴ Mark D. Jordan, "Aquinas's Construction of a Moral Account of the Passions," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 33 (1986): 92.

⁶⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 2. See I-II, q. 61, a. 2; also, II-II, q. 141, a. 6.

⁶⁶ Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul*, 281.

⁶⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 55, a. 1.

⁶⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 55, a. 2.

pertain to the forces common to the soul and body for the same reason. Since the soul is related to the body as form to matter, the former being the act of the latter, it becomes evident why Aquinas refers to human virtue as an operative habit. For form is the principle of action, “since everything acts in so far as it is in act,”⁶⁹ and human virtue implies reference to act. In addition to being an operative habit, human virtue is also a good habit. If we take any power whatsoever if it either fails to reach or exceeds the limits of its power, it is defective. Thus, for example, in human beings short-sightedness is a defect, while to possess the eyesight of an eagle is also defective. In a like manner, “moral virtue observes the mean,”⁷⁰ this mean being established by the rule of reason. In establishing its rule, reason resists the lower powers exerting themselves in opposition, for the perfection of a lower power entails a falling away from reason.⁷¹ In contrast, “reason is shown to be so much the more perfect, according as it is able to overcome or endure more easily the weakness of the body and of the lower powers.”⁷²

In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomas explains that the virtuous man is a sort of living rule and measure of human actions because on each occasion he correctly discerns that which is good and that which is bad. His virtue puts him in harmony with the true good since virtue consists in this harmony. In each case therefore he sees what is truly good because that which is proper to each habit, that is to say, that which is in agreement with it, naturally appears to it as delightful. In other words, the proper objects of the virtues naturally seem delightful to the virtuous man on account of habit.⁷³ We encounter the same doctrine in the *Summa theologiae*. There Thomas tells us that in the same way the sense of taste discerns tastes according to its habitual disposition, so too man judges the object of his actions according to his habitual disposition. This is so because habit makes what is agreeable to him seem good, and what is repugnant to him seem bad. This fruit of habituation is what Aristotle is referring to, Thomas states, when he says, “according as someone is, so does the end appear to him.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *ST I-II*, q. 64, a. 1.

⁷¹ *ST I-II*, q. 55, a. 3, ad 2.

⁷² *ST I-II*, q. 55, a. 3, ad 3.

⁷³ Aquinas, *In Ethic.*, III, lectio X (no. 494).

⁷⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 24, a. 11. In response to the charge of relativism—that is *really* good that seems to me to be good—I direct the reader to the metaphysical account of the good offered in Rafael-Tomas Caldera, *Le jugement par inclination chez saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1980), 31–58. As always, Aquinas steers a *via media* between objectivism and subjectivism. The ontological constitution of an object is such that it is good insofar as it is perfect, and this is so independently of human

Habit therefore makes that which is in agreement with itself seem good. This is so even in the case of evil, when the habit of the subject is a vice and not a virtue. Thus, for example, injustice “may spring from a gust of passion, namely anger or lust.” When however it proceeds from choice and the doing of wrong affords pleasure, it issues from a corresponding habit, “for *whatever befits a habit is, of itself, pleasing to the one who possesses it.*”⁷⁵ This experience of an appetitive inclination that does not participate in the life of reason, an experience with which we are all familiar, is one that has perhaps not received as much attention as it merits, given that it results in an all-too-common human experience, namely immoral action.

The mediation of habit in the discernment of good is a constant in Aquinas’s doctrine concerning judgment in moral matters. Correct discernment in matters of virtuous action is a direct function of the habit of virtue; thus, for example, a chaste person decides aright on issues affecting chastity.⁷⁶ Thomas constantly describes the manner of this discernment as an intuitive judgment analogous to the judgment of the senses or, again, analogous to the intellect’s discernment of the first principles of speculative reason: “Just as a person assents to the first principles through the inborn light of natural reason, so also a virtuous person, through the disposition given by virtue, has a right judgment about what is in keeping with his virtue.”⁷⁷ Thus, whatever is in agreement with a person’s habit appears spontaneously to him as good, and whatever is repugnant to it appears spontaneously to him as bad. Discernment is spontaneous because the individual’s habit is in consonance (or dissonance) with the objects of perception. These objects therefore, when apprehended by perception, are immediately grasped as delightful (or repugnant).

The Germans and Theft

The same observations can be made, *mutatis mutandis*, concerning erroneous perceptions of the good on the part of the vicious. The barbarian

apprehension. A habit will incline a faculty to that which is truly good in so far as the habit itself is proportioned to the good; it will incline the faculty to that which is lacking in goodness in so far as it lacks due proportion to the good: *qualis unusquisque est, talis finis videtur ei*. The objective ontological constitution of the object, however, remains unaffected by human apprehension. The goal of the moral life, when viewed in these terms, is to achieve a right proportion between our internal subjective constitution and the objective constitution of external reality.

⁷⁵ ST II–II, q. 59, a. 2, emphasis added. The translation offered here departs slightly from that in the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa theologiae*.

⁷⁶ ST II–II, q. 60, a. 1.

⁷⁷ ST II–II, q. 2, a. 3, ad 2.

Germans' ignorance of certain precepts of natural law is a case in point. Because of their long-standing practice of raiding other communities they lost an awareness of the wrongness of this custom.⁷⁸ Instead, this practice afforded them a certain pleasure, a pleasure that fettered both their communal and individual reason. Instead of reasoning from the premise "One ought not to steal," they employed some other premise—perhaps "Material comfort ought to be pursued."⁷⁹ The starting point for deliberation about human action, namely, the end, was therefore defective. Prudence was consequently also vitiated, for it cannot exist without moral virtue that rectifies the appetite—which in turn has due regard for the end of human action.⁸⁰ The affective pleasure afforded by reaping the material benefits furnished by the time, labor, and skill of others gradually blinded them to the wrongness of stealing and led them to adopt the second premise as the normal point of departure in their practical reasoning. Reason, in the course of this moral decline, retreated increasingly from its exercise of political dominion over the passions; and there prevailed the dual ignorance of which Thomas S. Hibbs speaks: "ignorance of the good and ignorance of one's own ignorance."⁸¹

One can imagine young men being educated in this environment. Growing up in a society in which raiding the possessions of other communities was accepted to some degree or other, the youngest generation of such men would naturally have regarded it in the same light. The impression they formed could then easily be translated into a premise in a practical syllogism, stating in effect that raiding the possessions of other communities is a legitimate way of sustaining life and pursuing material comfort. The sense that this stealing was a morally legitimate pursuit would have grown gradually stronger over a period of time; it did not happen

⁷⁸ As E. A. Goerner points out, the Germans obviously did not think that all robbery was just. "They only thought it good if practiced against people outside the community of the raiders, as is clear from the passage in Caesar to which Thomas referred," Goerner, "On Thomistic Natural Law: The Bad Man's View of Thomistic Natural Right," in *Political Theory* 7 (1979): 114–15. The passage in question is as follows: "Latrocinia nullam habent infamiam quae extra finis cuiusque civitatis fiunt," *De Bello Gallico* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), vi, 23.

⁷⁹ According to Caesar's interpretation, the Germans valued raiding because it "exercised the youth and diminished sloth," *De Bello Gallico*, vi, 23.

⁸⁰ Thomas would say that the Germans at this stage possessed false prudence: "For since a prudent man is one who disposes well of the things that have to be done for a good end, whoever disposes well of such things as are fitting for an evil end, has false prudence, in so far as that which he takes for an end, is good, not in truth but in appearance," *ST* II–II, q. 47, a. 13.

⁸¹ Thomas S. Hibbs, "Divine Irony and the Natural Law: Speculation and Edification in Aquinas," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1990): 426.

overnight. The demise of a sense of right and wrong surrounding the practice of theft could therefore be described as narrative in character. Expressing this notion otherwise, we could say that it was the result of habituation: Long-standing practice over several generations led to an impairment of the functioning of practical reason and to an eclipse of a sense of right and wrong in relation to stealing from neighboring societies. The more the Germans failed to enact the natural law, the more stunted became their prudential ability to discern and to apply it. Any attempt at reasoning with them would have doubtless been in vain for, as Nancy Sherman points out in commenting on Aristotle's theory of virtue, for "those who have already been corrupted by a life of pleasure and immoderate feeling, rational persuasion and dialogue are no longer viable means of effecting reform."⁸² Their reason having been fettered by unruly passion explains why this would have been so. Indeed, the Germans would have come to regard their activity as an almost "natural" part of their life because, as Thomas notes, "custom (*consuetudo*) becomes a second nature, and produces an inclination similar to a natural one."⁸³ In making this assertion, Thomas recognizes that reason cannot escape the influence of the social practices that furnish the context in which it necessarily operates. Such practices as that of the Germans can therefore stifle knowledge of the natural law. We witness here, from a negative perspective, the importance of community and tradition.

The depletion of the surrounding communities' resources led to a reversal of the dynamic just outlined for, no longer in a position to live parasitically at their expense, the Germans themselves were forced to adopt a more self-sustaining mode of existence.⁸⁴ In so doing, one might reasonably speculate that they experienced life in a more stable community along with the virtues that such a life necessarily entails. In its early phase this radical change in organization and conduct of German society no doubt occasioned widespread discomfort—*emotional* discomfort predicated upon the deliverances of the speculative intellect with regard to attendant circumstances.⁸⁵ Once

⁸² Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 165.

⁸³ *ST I-II*, q. 58, a. 1. As Kossel notes, we witness here a progression from *consuetudo* to *habitus*. See "Natural Law and Human Law," 188, note 51.

⁸⁴ See Goerner, "On Thomistic Natural Law," 115, for a brief account of how this process might have worked itself out.

⁸⁵ See note 19 above. The observation of Goerner is pertinent here: "The kind of training through punishment that the natural law imposes would seem to be just the sort of slow social process whereby Germanic, northern Europeans, who liked nothing better than a good raid, had been painfully and imperfectly learning for a millennium that robbery, *as a way of life*, doesn't pay for technically developed societies living together," Goerner, "On Thomistic Natural Law," 116.

again, however, time allowed them to become habituated to the new state of affairs. The pleasure that attended this habituation allowed them to appreciate in a new light not only the fruits of their labor but also the virtues that were necessary in order to produce these fruits. They would have come to understand how the advantages that life in a well-ordered society, in which justice reigned supreme, could be completely destroyed by the kind of activity in which they themselves had once engaged. Such a realization might well have occasioned a certain horror on their part with regard to their past activity, activity that was incompatible with the good of human nature considered as a totality; their affective reaction would certainly have resulted in an unfettering of their reason so that they were once again capable of proceeding from the premise “One ought not to steal” in their practical deliberations concerning their dealings with other communities. Doubtless, too, many other premises that had previously been cast into oblivion were now reactivated because of the relocation of spiritual energy effected by their newfound life of virtue, that is to say, because of the transition from a life characterized by the prevalence of unruly passion to one in which the effective political exercise of reason predominated.

Being forced to live a life that happened to be in accord with right reason led, by way of habituation, to an existence actively informed by right reason; in other words experience of the benefits of their new way of life—experience, needless to say, informed by an attendant affective pleasure—provided the necessary conditions for reason to be able to see the connection between this new way of behaving and the fact that they were now flourishing to a greater degree as human beings both on an individual and a communal basis.⁸⁶ A rectified appetite, albeit helped initially by coercive conditions, facilitated prudence in reasoning on the basis of correct premises to appropriate means (practical conclusions) ordered toward acquiring the goods of human existence. Now, if faced with depleted resources, the Germans would size up the situation in the light of past experience, a sizing up that would, of course, be informed by an appropriate imaginative and affective feel for how this experience was related to what was at hand and their response would be more in accord with the objective demands of the natural law than previously had been the case.

Once again we must emphasize that growth in appreciation of the natural law among the Germans would necessarily have been a gradual affair:

⁸⁶ Here there is a recognition that desires are preceded and prepared by perception. If this were not so it would not be possible to progress from a state of affairs in which desires were in accord with right reason to one in which they were joined with it.

Growth in virtue would have resulted in greater pleasure in fulfilling the demands of the natural law, while this increase in pleasure would itself have facilitated rational appreciation of the demands of the natural law. In turn a heightened awareness of the demands of the natural law, when accompanied by actions fulfilling these demands—actions chosen for their own sakes and performed from a firm and unchanging character⁸⁷—would have produced an experience of even more intense pleasure, thereby facilitating further progress in rational understanding of the natural law. And so on. The fact that that neighbors' resources had been completely depleted and that there was, therefore, nothing material to be gained from raiding them could not automatically evoke actions performed for their own sakes and from an unchanging character. The passage of time and the habituation to action in accord with right reason which it allowed was necessary for all the conditions for virtuous action to be actualized, action that was the fruit of a personal appropriation of the demands of the natural law. The Germans became ever more a living rule and measure of virtuous actions because they themselves were increasingly conformed to the demands inherent in the very constitution of reality itself—a reality of which their own human nature and circumstances were a part—as expressed in the natural law.

Conclusion

It seems reasonable to argue that the forms of community in which we participate condition in a fundamental way (speculative) reason's perception of what constitutes the human good. Given that the natural law is an *opus rationis*, a work of reason, it cannot escape the influence of particular cultural forms and social practices that furnish the context in which the life of reason unfolds; knowledge of the natural law is in fact nurtured or stifled through such forms and practices.⁸⁸ Nobody can argue with the

⁸⁷ The astute reader will have noticed that here I have drawn on Aristotle's conditions for actions performed from mature virtue: "The agent . . . must be in certain conditions when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character," *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a30–4.

⁸⁸ Recent work in epistemology has devoted attention to the social dimensions of knowledge. See, for example, Frederick Schmitt, ed., *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994). W. Jay Wood summarizes well the influence of the attendant societal context on our careers as intellectual and moral agents: "Family, friends and social institutions contribute mightily toward shaping the framework within which our development takes place. What goals are worth pursuing, what goals should be subordinated to others, what practices ought to be avoided and which pursued, and what

fact that the goods of family, friendship, intellectual inquiry, and so forth are sought in different ways in different societies; indeed, a variety of ways of pursuing any one of these goods may exist within a particular social community. These social expressions of the fundamental *inclinationes* are, however, open to revision if they do not promote human flourishing. Natural law theory is therefore not an unchanging body of moral knowledge that is mediated from one generation to another—in the sense that it is up to each generation to attempt to reach conclusions concerning which cultural forms and social practices are conducive to human flourishing and which ones impede or even destroy it.

Our delineation of the way in which habit and passion affect human functioning for either good or bad precludes any charge of relativism being leveled against us. The objective conditions required for human flourishing do not change over the course of time, although the manner in which they are fulfilled is of course subject to the conditioning of social, political, and cultural context. What can fluctuate, however, is our ability to perceive these conditions and to mold our choices accordingly. This fluctuation is a function of the subjective factors we have discussed, namely habit and passion. These factors can either help or hinder right perception of what constitutes suitable means to the attainment of the goods of human life.

The example of the Germans' practice of raiding serves as an illustration of how accepted norms of behavior in a particular society can impede perception of the human good and of the most suitable means to the realization of this good. Moral obscurity is occasioned by habituation—with its attendant affective constitution—to modes of conduct that do not conduce to human flourishing. Thus while social practices express a community's understanding of what constitutes human flourishing, this understanding may be distorted because of the epistemic impact of accepted norms of conduct that serve to undermine rather than to promote human well-being. For a reciprocity of influence obtains between understanding what promotes human flourishing and accepted mores: A particular society's understanding of flourishing expresses itself in particular norms of behavior, while concrete expressions of these

resources are available to assist us in moral and intellectual growth are matters shaped in large measure within families, churches, schools and other social frameworks. Imagine how the complexion of your intellectual life might vary as you were alternately a part of traditions whose chief goals were world economic domination, the biblical concept of shalom, aesthetic sensitivity, the dissolution of the self and union with God," *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 20.

norms reinforce the common perception of flourishing. Unfortunately, as the example of the Germans indicates, the only way out of moral obscurity is furnished by the disastrous effects it occasions. This fact, however, ought to be a source of encouragement for those who despair at the moral fabric of contemporary western society, as also should the anthropological explanation offered by Thomas as to why improvement is always possible. To Thomas's understanding of how we (re)discover the natural law may be applied the following words that Nancy Sherman employs with regard to learning virtue: It is "neither a mindless nor a purely intellectual matter, and . . . the process requires practical reason and desire working in tandem throughout."⁸⁹

It thus becomes clear that virtue theory and natural law theory cannot be two alternative and mutually exclusive approaches to ethics; they are, rather, mutually implicative and depend upon one another for their elucidation. What I have termed the "vision of virtue" can never stand outside the conditioning context of society and culture. (A fundamental flaw of modern conceptions of practical reason is to think that it can do so, it being sufficient that agents be armed with rules for right conduct.) Aquinas would certainly agree with Russell Hittinger's contention that "deliberations and judgments are shaped by character and virtue, or lack thereof."⁹⁰ Indeed this dynamic is clearly operative in Thomas's ethical thought, as I hope to have clearly shown in this paper. Nevertheless, he would also commend Hittinger for his realization that "deliberations and judgments not only flow from character, but are made in the light of universals. And by universals we mean not only propositions about conduct, but a knowledge of the world and other human beings."⁹¹ Viewing virtue and law as twin components in a dialectical process enables us to transcend the limiting perspectives of particular societies and epochs in the light of what is good for man while, on the other hand, preventing us from doing violence to what are legitimate particular expressions of universal precepts of the natural law.

In this essay I have confined myself to the realm of philosophical reflection on the epistemic impact of the life of virtue—or lack thereof—on our ability to know the natural law. What I have argued does, however,

⁸⁹ Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 199.

⁹⁰ Russell Hittinger, "After MacIntyre," 455. Hittinger adds that "by universals we mean not only propositions about conduct, but a knowledge of the world and other human beings." Unfortunately, to explicate what this contention would mean in the context of Aquinas's thought would take us well beyond the confines of this article.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

have great significance for any adequate theological treatment of the relationship obtaining between virtue and law, for grace builds on nature. Man enjoys the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity as a result of the life of grace that is operative in him, the very grace that heals the obscuring effects of sin occasioned by the Fall. By grace the nature of the soul is transformed so as to “participate in the Divine Nature, after a manner of likeness, through a certain regeneration or re-creation,”⁹² enabling him in his intellective power to participate in the divine knowledge through the virtue of faith and in his power of will to participate in the divine love through the virtue of charity. Of course the illuminating effects of grace are often undermined because of the same kind of factors discussed throughout the course of this article: Human nature is not destroyed by grace, but rather is perfected; as such, it always remains ontologically unitary in its constitution. Nevertheless, given the sanitary effect of grace on the life of reason, it is not difficult to appreciate how ultimately the most exalted grasp of the natural law is reserved for those who are animated by a living faith. A substantiation of this assertion however must await treatment in a future article. N V

⁹² *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 4.