

Thomas Aquinas on Charity: Citizenship and the Scholastic Idea

Matthew Raphael Johnson
Johnstown, PA

Virtue in Thomas' system is based on the purposes of a human being: “The virtue of a human being considered as human works toward a good that is natural to us, and so the love of this good—the good of reason—is in our will naturally.”¹ And again, “The distinctive good of a human considered as human is the good of reason, since human existence is rational existence”² A virtue is that which brings about the proper end of the person. In Thomas' view, these ends are two: first, the relative end of a rational social life and second, the ultimate end of salvation in heaven. This dual concept will be detailed below.

Charity cannot be understood or acted upon unless a) there exists a political community that acts as the origin and aim of the virtue; b) that there is friendship³ in this community that serves as the rational and affective tie of love, and c) that the final end of this community be known. Charity has its origin, therefore, in the common good, but this good has two parts: the material prosperity of the whole, and their ultimate salvation after death. These are distinct, but closely related.

A healthy community nurtures the virtues through the ties of friendship. Our initial impetus to virtue is that we love our fellow citizens and seek the best for them. The idea of “community” implies such relationships; a community is precisely a society with such affective ties. Charity should be understood as part of Thomas' political idea as he makes explicit in the *Summa*. His political theory has charity as its foundation. Charity is defined in two ways because man contains two elements: body and soul.⁴

The Scholastic idea here requires context. In Longwell's (1928) piece, he summarizes the significance of scholasticism this way (and I paraphrase and extrapolate):

1. It was the first time that reason was seen as the primary authority in building a system of thought.
2. It was a massive attempt to deduce the permanent from the contingent, and the contingent from the permanent. It was a continuum of nature that was orderly, following basic natural laws comprehensible by science.
3. It tried to show that all aspects of thought: logic, ontology, metaphysics, ethics, politics, theology – are all complimentary, saying the same thing from different points of view.
4. This is no rationalism, however. Reason never works by itself. Reason cannot justify itself (that would be circular reasoning). It holds that, since God is the creator of all things, nature is bound by law, it is regular, and it is understandable. What we perceive and reason about “out there” is really what's “out there” and not some delusion.
5. The liberal arts are needed for a good and just society. Theology has nothing to fear from philosophy or science, and science has nothing to fear from theology.
6. God created a world in which His presence was known. Not obvious, but, with

¹ Aquinas, Thomas. *Disputed Questions on Virtue*. J. Hause and CE Eisen, trans. (Indianapolis, IN, USA: Hackett Publishing Co., 2010), ans

² *Summa Theologica*, article 2, ans

³ *Virtue*, reply ob 6, on the issue of friendship and affection

⁴ *Summa*, qu 23, art 1, reply ob 1

thought and a good will, God's presence in the law-abiding cosmos is our guarantee of its objective truth.

7. Neither belief or reason exists on its own. Belief needs a rational and logical foundation, but at the same time, logic needs some “stuff” to work on. Neither exists in isolation.
8. The method was one of debate. Each section was a question (e.g. does God contain anything material?) The way the *Summa* was written for example, Aquinas puts his opponent's views first, as best as he can. Then he answers those objections. Hence, it's not normal writing, but a constant dialogue and debate.

In the (1908) essay by Perrier, the main question is the relation between language and theology. This is significant, since the scholastic movement was basically empiricist. Our language and concepts derive from our experience in the world. God, in his essence, is not part of our experience in this world, and therefore, our logic does not apply to him. He is above reason (rather than being irrational). The point is (as far as science goes) is that the qualities we see in nature: fertility, beauty, law, structure, power, development, we can, in a metaphorical sense, apply to God. God has no development, he is completely actualized. But we come to this conclusion because we see how natural objects develop. Though that, we then conclude that there must be a cause by which all of these laws and developments can derive and receive their regularity and predictability. Perrier writes,

We love goodness in the things that surround us: we attribute such a goodness to their creator as their primary cause, and call him the good God; we admire the power of nature and the power of man: we know that this power comes from the maker and sustainer of man and nature, and we call him the all-powerful; we admire the wisdom of our sages and call God omniscient (Perrier, 1908).

This captures the significance of Scholasticism perfectly. The point is that these good things that we see and hear do not exist by accident. They are the presence of Reason in the world, within which our own logic can function and be sure of its conclusions.

God is Creator in many senses: he gives objects their meaning, he gives matter its form, he creates matter and form together, and he shows his own Wisdom (so to speak) in the highly complex organic and reciprocal nature of all things in relation. “Providence” is the concept of God bringing all objects to their proper end and purpose (of course, modern science says that there is no purpose to anything in nature).

Science in the Aristotelian and medieval view was qualitative. Modern science is quantitative. This is because the medieval mind (as well as the classical Greek) saw the world as a set of hierarchies. These hierarchies were based upon levels of universality. Matter is the most particular. It is the least universal. Form is more universal, in that one form can be instantiated in many material things (the form of man can be found in millions of men). Yet, even higher forms exist like “animal” or “living being” that have even a broader scope. These are not the creations of medieval science, but are built into the very fabric of the universe. A form is spirit – it makes a thing what it is. We perceive it only because it is “encased” in matter and hence individualized.

White (1947) makes the point that scholasticism was a response to the economic developments of the high Middle Ages (from, say, 1100-1400). Powerful trading cities, the decline of the nobility, the rise of the centralized state, the development of both secular and canon law and the rise of capitalism all created the need for a new philosophy, a sense of the concrete. White writes,

The later Roman Empire and the early Middle Ages lived not in a world of visible facts but rather in a world of symbols. The intellectual atmosphere was so saturated with Platonic modes of thought that the first Christian millennium was scarcely more conscious of them than it was of the air it breathed. . . . Then suddenly, toward the middle of the twelfth century, something began to stir in the art of western Europe: a fresh sense of the immediacies of concrete experience, a new attachment to physical actualities (White, 1947).

This is an essential quote. It goes to the heart of the question. Humanity was getting richer, cities more significant, trade more powerful. Concrete realities were what was real, not symbols of the older, Platonic worldview. It's not that scholastics thought that the concrete was the only reality, but that the concrete was actually real, so real that it could lead us to spiritual truths the concrete thing can only barely approximate.

In the Moody piece (1958), we're on the same sort of wavelength. His argument is that the significance of scholasticism lies in the fact that it uses human modes of thought to comprehend the universe. In a sense, the universe must make itself transparent to man. Without that, modern science is impossible.

He argues further that the church, which sponsored Scholasticism (though there were plenty of catholic counter-currents as well), were not going to reject the newly translated Greeks and Arabs. They wanted to show how all knowledge ultimately is one. Truth is truth, regardless of the source. Scholasticism was intensely critical – it questioned everything, from the existence of God to the necessity of the state. Of course, God can be grasped rationally and the state is needed, but the reasons behind this were now logical, rational and based on a solid scientific foundation. This was the gateway to modernity: ancient thought was about the cosmos, metaphysics, ultimate realities and symbols – the Aristotelian and scholastic movement was critical – it dealt with the origin of concepts and their justification. It was revolutionary.

Weisheipl (1965) makes a similar argument. The entire concept of medieval physics in the high middle ages revolved around the word “nature.” This was, more or less, the principles governing the movement and rest of objects in accordance with their natures and purposes. This is a big deal, since it is clearly a scientific enterprise. For Aquinas and the scholastics, they used Aristotle in one very important way: motion was change. Change was the passage of something from potency to act. Form was act, matter was potency and passive. Motion therefore, was the manifestation of form altering the matter in which it is encased in the process of developing.

But all this development needs a cause. Everything that changes and develops has something acting upon it, making it change. The whole, that is nature as a system of processes, also must have a cause. Nature, in this sense, was a system of causes, following an understandable rule, towards a specific end or purpose. Now this is not exactly modern science, but it lies at the root of it.

Consider this quote from the Smith (1990) piece:

It is crucial to note, however, that the Scholastics, especially those of the thirteenth century, did not simply dismiss reason for its potential unreliability. On the contrary, they were convinced that reason could tell us the truth about external reality as long as it was used with care. This conviction was based on the assumption of a God-given, natural, logical order to external reality. When we recapitulate that logical order through

reasoning, we achieve a true and full understanding of it. We reach such an understanding by paying close and careful attention to what our senses tell us. The validity of reason is therefore wholly contingent on the validity of sensation. And the validity of sensation is ultimately contingent on the logical inexorability of the natural order. . . . The grounds of our internal intellectual certainty lie "outside" us in the absolute certainty of the natural order. Reason is thus subject to an external regulating principle: namely, the logic of that order.

First, that of the political community, since this virtue must extend to the whole society as a unit, actively seeking its welfare above any personal interest. This first definition also includes the idea that any virtue only becomes such when it is both voluntary and pleasurable. Charity is then, at this stage, to freely will the good of the community, and to be pleased with such action. This, however, is merely a secular virtue and hence not charity proper.

The second definition is the relationship of the charitable person to God. The political community is never an end in itself. It exists so that the virtues can be exercised, but the ultimate end of all association is salvation. The community has the secular good of its own prosperity, but this is strictly subordinated to the theological virtues for the sake of salvation, that is, the avoidance of mortal sin. Thomas confirms this: "Charity is not a virtue of human beings considered as human, but a virtue of human beings insofar as they become gods and children of God through their participation in grace."⁵ The first definition is secular and can be implemented through wise social arrangements. The second, charity deriving from grace, is something the church alone can provide.⁶

Charity itself, in its ultimate fullness, is a spiritual virtue and is not "normal" for human beings to have. Therefore, it is a matter of infused grace. It is a theological virtue that has civic ties as its foundation, but grace is required to overcome our sinful self-regard and seek the common benefit.⁷

Friendship and love, while distinct, are the ties that unify citizens together into a political community. The true end of the political community is the reception of grace and thus, salvation. Friendship is civic virtue that leads to love. Thomas, in his Summa, states that "friendship extends to a person in two ways: first in respect to himself. . . secondly it extends to someone on behalf of another."⁸ In this case, friendship extends to one another as citizens, and on behalf of God, who alone can lead the community to its end. Love is the active wish that the entire community develops both secular and theological virtues.⁹

In the same vein, a human's good as a citizen is the common good of the state. Therefore, since virtue acts for the sake of the good, if we are to have virtue we must be disposed to act well for the sake of the good, that is, willingly, readily, resolutely, and with pleasure. . . . However, loving that good for its own sake— wanting it to endure, to spread, and for nothing to be done against it— this makes us well disposed toward that society of the saints. This is charity, which loves God for his own sake and loves our neighbors, who are capable of happiness, as ourselves, and which fights

⁵ Questions on Virtue

⁶ Summa, art 3, rely ob 1; it is possible that the way out here is that the legal compulsion of justice (so to speak) leads reason to see other motives for action, but this is a matter of grace.

⁷ Virtue, reply ob 15

⁸ Summa, qu 23, art 1, reply ob 2

⁹ Summa, qu 23, art 1, reply ob 3

against all obstacles to this, both in ourselves and in others.¹⁰

Thomas does not make a distinction between the good of the state and that of the communion of the saints. They are distinct, but they imply each other. The common good defined in secular, economic terms is, of itself, useless. Charity implies, however, that citizens support each other for the sake of grace, since loving God is first manifest in these secular pursuits. In the Summa, Thomas makes it clear that charity differs from justice because the latter is based on legal obligation, while charity is based on freedom and love.¹¹ Charity is therefore superior to justice and goes beyond it.

Friendship must have the common good as the aim, and this must be sought for its own sake, not from any advantage. Even more, the state cannot be loved for its own sake, but we love it and seek its preservation through friendship in that the ultimate friend is one that seeks the salvation of the whole.¹² This is to say that charity is a theological virtue, but its origins are in the community and its ties of mutual support.

In his answer to objection 2 of question 23 art 1 also extends friendship to our personal enemies. Our personal relations are insignificant because salvation is a rational and objective end. As such, our personal likes and dislikes are irrelevant. This implies that friendship and love also do not require subjective affection, but only the self-less knowledge of our objective ends to the extent we are human.

Therefore, in both the Summa and the Disputed Questions, Thomas defines charity in the following way:

1. It begins in that human beings are naturally social. Humans form communities.
2. These communities suggest the concept of the common good.
3. The common good, grasped by reason, gives rise to the virtues that reject all forms of egotism. This is the origin of charity – to seek the good of the whole.
4. However, man's end is not merely secular. The end of humanity is salvation through grace. Therefore, charity is not, of itself, the common good, but it takes its origin from it.
5. Given that this is our true end, charity cannot remain a secular virtue. It also consists in bringing about conditions such that salvation can be attained.
6. The common good implies, beyond the secular, that our ultimate end be reached, and that is citizenship in heaven.
7. Therefore, charity, infused by grace, is that disposition that grasps the common good in its spiritual sense, that is, salvation, and thus seeks to bring about the conditions which will facilitate it.

The Church of Rome had taken over, so to speak from the Roman empire. She adopted some of her legal categories and structures, and scholasticism was a method of bringing the older philosophy into Catholic theology. It was highly structured, intensely logical and very analytic. By analytic I mean it dealt with the definitions of words and terms and their distinctions.

Its method is to bring the reader from the absolutely necessary to that which is contingent. From pure form and actuality (God) to the very principle of individuation and perishability (matter). It was meant to be a huge structure that captures the whole of thought and knowledge in a single system.

1. External reality had an objective order. It was not an illusion, the projection of sin or

¹⁰ Virtue, art 2, ans

¹¹ Summa, art 3, rely ob 1

¹² Summa, qu 23, art 1, ans

base desire. It was not symbol. It was real.

2. When we consider our perceptions, we must rigorously use reason to get to the truth of the matter. This takes care, time and patience,. It also takes clear thought. But the point is that perception + reason = truth. The bible and the church tell us all about our ultimate end and purpose, and God's love for humanity. Reason and perception, on the other hand, fill in the details as to God's creation.
3. It is empirical – knowledge comes from our sensation. Hence, two things have to be parallel and in order: our sensations must be true, and our thought about them must be accurate and logical.
4. How do we know our sensations are true? Because the external order is created by God, and we know that because it shows all the marks of being designed – it functions as a community, each part doing its job for the whole. No part could exist without the others, and hence, it acts like a great organism that had to be brought into existence at the same time, as a single unit.

This is what scholasticism did for science, western culture and the human mind. It showed that God can be understood with grater precision when we analyze causes in nature, our own concepts and the relations between our thought and our senses. This is the very gateway to modernity.

Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. Disputed Questions on Virtue. J. Hause and CE Eisen, trans. Indianapolis, IN, USA: Hackett Publishing Co., 2010, article 2

Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Theologica. Question 23, articles 1 and 3.

Longwell, HC (1928) The Significance of Scholasticism. The Philosophical Review, 37(3), 210-225

Perrier, J.L (1908) The True God of Scholasticism. The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods, 5(26), 708-714

White, L (1947) Natural Science and Naturalistic Art in the Middle Ages. The American Historical Review, 52(3), 421-435

Moody, E (1958) Empiricism and Metaphysics in Medieval Philosophy. The Philosophical Review, 67(2), 145-163

Weisheipl, JA (1965) The Principle *Omne quod movetur ab alio movetur* in Medieval Physics. Isis, Vol 56(1), 26-45

Smith, MA (1990) Knowing Things Inside Out: The Scientific Revolution from a Medieval Perspective. The American Historical Review, 95(3), 726-744