

The Dignity of Man and Human Action

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1. Introduction

The word “dignity” refers to the quality of being worthy or honorable; it also signifies excellence. Within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, man’s dignity consists in his reason, in mind: what is best, most excellent, in man is, according to Aristotle, mind. Aquinas considers man’s excellence to reside in his intellectual soul. Now while it is possible to speak of dignity with respect to the human body, I will restrict my remarks in this presentation to the dignity which is man’s due to his rational nature. My proposal will be to consider human action within an aesthetic context, whereby both the action and the end intended can be understood in relation to beauty, to an experience which makes us aware of our dignity in the order of the universe and also of our destiny as relational beings. I will begin with Aristotle’s consideration of virtuous action as endowed with spiritual beauty, which in Aquinas will be referred to as *honestum* or the honest good, and will proceed to show how our actions put us in relation to others such that we may be glorified or put to shame.

2. “Seemly” Action in Aristotle and Moral Beauty in Aquinas

Although the consideration of the natures of things plays a fundamental role in Aristotle’s ethics and provides a public setting or a common framework in which moral decisions are made, nature does not do the determining; it is rather human choice and decision that determine. Of course, this does not mean that

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Aristotelian ethics is then to be relegated to a purely private or subjective affair, for according to Aristotle what is to assure objectivity and universality in making the right choice in conformity with the nature of things is education in the virtues. It is the moral virtues which dispose the individual to make the right moral decision, the right choice. However, although these virtues are oriented, as it were, to choosing, they do not impose a rigid determination, for the determination of human action always lies in the agent, in his power to choose. One might think, therefore, that if individual choice is determined neither by nature nor by education, by correct habituation, then the individual can choose to disregard nature and his moral education, can in fact choose that which is contrary to what ought to be done. This is not however the case in Aristotelian ethics, for although the agent is not necessitated to make the right choice, to perform the good action, he is aware, in his role of deciding, that the good action is the fitting one and what becomes him as a rational agent. In his ethics, Aristotle stresses «the appeal of the goodness appropriate to human actions, a goodness expressed in Greek by the neuter of the adjective that means beautiful in an aesthetic context, the *kalon* [...]. One may convey the Aristotelian meaning by saying that [the beautiful or] the seemly presents itself to the human mind with an obligatory force of its own. The obligation is expressed in Aristotle by means of the Greek *dei*. It is what ought to be, or what should be [...]. The texts read as though every virtuous action has an inherent quality [of beauty], of seemliness, and that the seemliness itself shows the deliberating human individual that he ought to perform [the] action. The obligation expressed by the verb *dei* arises apparently from the seemliness of the action and from nothing else [...]. So in Aristotle the seemliness alone gives rise to obligation. Under this aspect the seemliness extends to all the moral starting points and to all morally good actions, whether in regard to means or in regard to end»¹. Although no further explanation is given by Aristotle regarding the inherent seemliness of virtuous actions which gives rise to their obligatory character, he is nevertheless aware that each act of human choice «is a new beginning, a beginning not determined by anything that preceded it [...]. Every act of choice results in a determination that springs from itself and not from anything antecedent. It in fact sets up on each occasion a starting point that adds to the order in the universe and that was not previously contained in it»².

Because human choice is an intellectual act, it reflects upon itself, that is, it recognizes that it is deciding and that it is the cause of whatever follows; thus, it is aware of its responsibility and of its dignity. «To be an originator in so profound a sense, to be master of a new series of events in the universe, to be responsible for what happens in a way that brings credit or blame, [honor or

¹ J. OWENS, *The Grounds of Ethical Universality in Aristotle*, «Man and World» 2,2 (1969), pp. 183-84. See also O.J. BROWN, *Natural Rectitude and Divine Law in Aquinas*, «Studies and Texts», 55 (1981), p. 20 and p. 56, note 63.

² *Ibidem*, p. 177.

shame], are aspects that present themselves spontaneously to one's reflection»³. In making a choice, we are engaged in an action that makes us aware of our dignity and calls for a response which corresponds to that dignity. The decisions we make thus call for a respect for the natures of things. «In the responsibility and dignity of bringing a new direction, no matter how small, into the universe lies the obligatory appeal to do the thing in a befitting way. This would appear to be the explanation of what Aristotle means by doing the seemly for the sake of the seemly, or of doing a thing as it ought to be done»⁴. Every act of choice thus faces not only the natures of things and the moral culture in which one has been educated, but also the responsibility for originating something new in the universe. Cognizant of this, our act of choice «sees in the proposed course of conduct a congruence that may be termed seemliness, or an incongruence that may be called unseemliness. Inherent in the seemliness appears the obligation to act accordingly, in the unseemliness to avoid the action»⁵.

Aristotle's treatment of the beautiful, of the "seemly", in the moral order can be completed by Aquinas's teaching on spiritual beauty, on what Aquinas calls the honest good or *honestum*. Etymologically, St. Thomas tells us that «honesty means an honorable state», so that a thing will be called honest because it is "worthy of honor", and honor is given to what is excellent: «The excellence of a man is gauged chiefly according to his virtue, as stated in *Phys.* vii. 17. Therefore, properly speaking, honesty refers to the same thing as virtue»⁶. St. Thomas's explanation of the *honestum* or honest good has a foundation identical to that of virtue, that is, the *honestum* is desirable for itself (although it may also be desired for the sake of a more perfect good), and is rooted in man's internal choice⁷. Aquinas also relates the *honestum* to the beautiful through virtue, since the well-proportioned life according to the clarity of reason, which is a life of virtue, is what spiritual beauty or the *honestum* consists in⁸. The beautiful which is identified with the *honestum* here is a kind of moral good⁹. In the knowing of

³ *Ibidem*, p. 184.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 186-87.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 145, a. 1, resp. Hereafter cited as *S. Th.*

⁷ See *S. Th.* II-II, q. 145, a. 1, ad 1 and 3. Virtue is desired for itself, although it is also desired for something else, namely, happiness.

⁸ See *S. Th.* II-II, q. 145, a. 2, resp.

⁹ St. Thomas makes it clear that the identification of the *honestum* with spiritual beauty does not confuse the order of finality, of goodness, with the order of formality, of the beautiful. He further removes any confusion regarding the incompatibility of the *honestum* and the beautiful due to the diversity of appetite and cognition. He says: «The object that moves the appetite is an apprehended good. Now if a thing is perceived to be beautiful as soon as it is apprehended, it is taken to be something becoming and good. Hence Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* IV) that the beautiful and the good are beloved by all. Wherefore the honest, inasmuch as it implies spiritual beauty, is an object of desire [...]». *S. Th.* II-II, q. 145, a. 2, ad 1.

virtue, the mind is taken by its consonance and clarity, for virtue is rationally ordered or proportioned to man's end; it is in itself attractive, what is fitting for man. Thus, virtue is apprehended not only as a means to happiness but also in its beauty. «And since this beauty [...] is desirable to the knowing faculty as an end, and the *honestas* of virtue is its attractiveness as an end, it follows that virtue's *honestas* is nothing more than its spiritual beauty. The "aspect of goodness" which virtue has in itself — over and above its goodness as a means to happiness — is, therefore, its beauty which, desirable for and in itself, is its *honestas*. *Honestas* and beauty, in the moral order, are, therefore, formally the same»¹⁰.

3. Virtue, Honor, and Glory

Just as the action that is appropriate to man can be seen within an aesthetic context, so too can the end which is fitting to man due to his rational nature be related to the experience of beauty, to an experience which calls us beyond ourselves, beyond a simply natural happiness and an earthly dwelling place¹¹. To better understand man's destiny, we can turn to the notion of glory, which is promised to us in Scripture, and which has been the subject of reflection for many Christian thinkers¹². Although Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that man's happiness does not consist in human glory, there is however an important sense in which beatitude for Aquinas does necessitate glory.

In order to show how glory can be taken to mean either fame with men or fame with God, we will consider the relationship between virtue, honor, and glory in Aquinas. Honor is defined as an attestation to a person's excellence¹³. Men receive honor from other men by means of signs: that is, by words which testify to a person's virtue or excellence, or by deeds, such as bowing, offering a gift, erecting a statue, etc. Honor thus considered denotes something external and corporeal. It makes known the good and the beautiful¹⁴. Although in public life, men do place happiness in honor, both Aquinas and Aristotle claim that honor is not an adequate

¹⁰C. CHERESO, O.P., *The Virtue of Honor and Beauty According to St. Thomas Aquinas, An Analysis of Moral Beauty*, The Aquinas Library, River Forest, Illinois 1960, pp. 48-49. See *S. Th.* II-II, q. 145, a. 1, ad 1 and also *In De Div. Nom.*, cap. IV, lect. V, n. 356, cited in Chereso. In the *Summa* text, Aquinas quotes the following from CICERO: «Some things allure us by their own force, and attract us by their own worth, such as virtue, truth, knowledge. And this suffices to give a thing the character of honest».

¹¹In his *Commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius's Divine Names*, chapter 4, Aquinas invokes the Greek meaning of *kalos* as "to call", in insisting on Dionysius's conception of God as the cause of harmony, «calling all things to Himself». See V. BOURKE's translation of ch. 4, lect. 5-6, in *The Pocket Aquinas*, Washington Square Press, New York 1960, p. 270.

¹²See C.S. LEWIS, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (Michigan), 1965.

¹³*S. Th.* II-II, q. 103, a. 1, resp.

¹⁴*S. Th.* II-II, q. 103, a. 1, ad 2.

reward for virtue; it is rather an extrinsic and superficial good¹⁵. While happiness is a good which can be obtained by man through his will, it is not in man's power to secure honor¹⁶; it is rather in the power of others to pay him honor.

Like honor, praise also consists of signs, but since praise is given only by verbal signs, honor is more extensive than praise¹⁷. Besides, praise is also distinguished from honor because in praising a person's excellence, we do so in reference to an end, whereas we honor virtue or excellence for itself: «Thus we praise one that works well for an end. On the other hand, honor is given to the best, which is not referred to an end, but has already arrived at the end»¹⁸.

According to Aquinas, the effect of honor and praise is glory, for in testifying to a person's excellence, the person's goodness becomes known, that is, becomes clear, to many. The word glory signifies «clear knowledge together with praise»¹⁹. Properly speaking, glory denotes that «some[one's] good is known and approved»²⁰. However, the word glory does have a broader meaning, whereby glory consists not only in the knowledge of many or a few, but also in the knowledge of oneself, when for example one considers that one's own good, whether bodily or spiritual, is worthy of praise.

Human glory or fame is for Aquinas often deceptive and lacking in stability, since human knowledge frequently fails where contingent singulars, such as human acts, are concerned²¹. And since human opinion and praise can change, man's perfect good must be other than glory. It is evident that man's true good could never consist in what is false or unstable. The perfection of the human good which is called happiness does not depend on human knowledge as its cause. Human knowledge and praise do not therefore constitute man's happiness or his good; rather, «man's good depends on God's knowledge as its cause. And therefore man's beatitude depends, as on its cause, on the glory which man has with God»²². Therefore, the only glory that man really needs is glory with God; man needs to be known and approved by God, and if he is, he will have attained that happiness which is the true good.

Aquinas reminds us, however, that man's desire for honor, for glory, arises from man's very desire for happiness. And so we might say that we all want to be publicly praised and acknowledged; we want whatever good we do or possess to be known and loved; we want to please²³. Yet, as was already mentioned, our

¹⁵ See *In I Ethicorum*, lect. 5, 1095b.23-26; 64.

¹⁶ See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III, part I, ch. 28.

¹⁷ See *S. Th.* II-II, q. 103, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁸ *S. Th.* II-II, q. 103, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *S. Th.* II-II, q. 132, a. 1, resp.

²¹ See *S. Th.* I-II, q. 2, a. 3, resp.

²² *S. Th.* I-II, q. 2, a. 3, resp.

²³ See *S. Th.* II-II, q. 112, a. 2, sed contra, and J. PIEPER, *Faith, Hope, Love*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1997, p. 186.

happiness does not consist in fame or human glory. As Aquinas says: «It is better to know than to be known: because only the higher things know; whereas the lowest are known»²⁴. Since the supreme element of any rational creature is his intellect, his beatitude will consist in his most perfect operation; thus, the beatitude of the rational creature consists in «the most noble act of his intellectual vision»²⁵. The human mind, in so far as it is able, is ordered to comprehend all there is; man's desire is «to know what is ultimate and perfect»²⁶. Just as Aquinas says that it is better to know than to be known, since the intellectual soul possesses a potency unto infinity²⁷, he also says that it is better to love than to be loved. As he puts it, «Men wish to be loved in as much as they wish to be honored. For just as honor is bestowed on a man in order to bear witness to the good which is in him, so by being loved a man is shown to have some good, since good alone is lovable. Accordingly men seek to be loved and to be honored for the sake of something else, viz. to make known the good which is in the person loved. On the other hand, those who have charity seek to love for the sake of loving [...]»²⁸. Just as the human mind when it knows is united to the known and continues to know, «the capacity of the rational creature is increased by charity, because the heart is enlarged thereby»²⁹. The perfection of man consists in knowing and loving — knowing the ultimate truth and loving the perfect good; man's perfection consists in activity and not in what apparently seems to be passivity, that is, being known and being loved. And yet, there is a sense in which man's happiness does include the latter, and to which we have referred above as fame with God, approval of the creature by Him. How do we then incorporate this seemingly passive aspect of man's being, of his nature, in the actuality of his perfection? I will attempt to very briefly answer this question here.

Our being and our actions are expressive; they somehow present us to others and thus are always open to the interpretation and judgment of others³⁰. Therefore, when our goodness, our good actions, being expressive and communicative, are known and approved by others, we are the recipients of glory. So we might say that being, action, gives itself to be known and is received by a knowing subject. In the case of man, his being, his actions, communicate to others and what is received by others is judged favorably or unfavorably; through their praise or reproach, he is known and may thus be glorified or put to shame.

²⁴ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III, part I, ch. 29.

²⁵ *De Veritate*, q. 8, a. 1, resp.

²⁶ *S. Th.* I-II, q. 32, a. 2, resp.

²⁷ See *S. Th.* I, q. 76, a. 5, ad 4.

²⁸ *S. Th.* II-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁹ *S. Th.* II-II, q. 24, a. 7, ad 2.

³⁰ See N. CLARKE, S.J., *Action as the Self-Revelation of Being: A Central Theme in the Thought of St. Thomas*, in L. THRO [ed.], *History of Philosophy in the Making*, University Press of America, Lanham (Maryland) 1982, pp. 63-80.

The human person is thus in relation to others: he knows and is known, he loves and is loved.

A fuller explanation of this relationality of the human person has to be sought, I think, in the supreme model of what it means to be a person, that is, in the Christian notion of God as personally triune. As Norris Clarke puts it in his Marquette lecture of 1993 titled *Person and Being*: «Within the unity of the Supreme Being the Father is subsistent Self-communication, while the Son is subsistent Receptivity (the Holy Spirit as well in its own unique mode), but both aspects are equally valuable and integral to what it means to be [...]»³¹. I think this can be put in terms which will relate more specifically to the topic at hand: from all eternity the Father knows and loves the Son and the Son is known and loved by the Father; the Father takes delight in His Son. Because man is made in the image and likeness of the Triune God, and because the Son is the Image of the Father through Whom all was made, man desires not only to know and to love, he also desires to be known and to be loved. For when man was created, God took delight in His creation and saw that it was very good. God's vision of what He made penetrates man's very being, such that man longs to be beheld by God. Man's challenge, however, is to focus his attention from the human faces that approve him to the Divine Face that holds true commendation and glory. So rather than please men, his task should be to give delight to God, much as the artifact might give delight to its maker, being what it is, and doing what it ought, acting in accordance with his worth, his dignity as a rational being; in this way, man will answer the call of Beauty, of the True Good, and be united with that Beauty that will one day approve and glorify him.

³¹N. CLARKE, S.J., *Person and Being*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee 1993, p. 87.

