

NATURAL INCLINATION AND THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF THE GOOD IN THOMISTIC NATURAL LAW

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Size is not always a gauge of significance. The issue that I propose to address here centers on a single clause from the *Summa theologiae*. But it goes nearly to the heart of St Thomas's teaching on natural law. It concerns the way in which Thomas thinks the human mind comes to understand good and evil. The specific question raised by the clause is the role played in this process by what Thomas calls "natural inclination." This question leads to an even more basic one: what it is, for Thomas, that constitutes a truly intellectual grasp of the good.

The paper is set up as follows. First I present the text and survey the principal ways in which recent interpreters, including John Finnis, have handled it (section I). Then I argue for the reading of it that I find most satisfactory, considering particularly its context in the *Summa* (section II). From here I move to the more basic question. Drawing upon passages from various works, I try to bring out a number of fundamental and, I think, insufficiently noticed elements in Thomas's account of the understanding of the good; these bear directly upon on how that understanding is related to "inclination," and also to "nature" (III and IV). Finally, I draw some conclusions about the practical significance of Thomas's way of associating the precepts of natural law with natural inclinations (V). At various places there will emerge points of comparison, and sometimes of contrast, with Finnis's interpretation of Thomas on natural law.

I THE TEXT AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

The article in which our clause appears is I-II, q. 94, a. 2. The clause is the central portion of the following sentence.

Since good has the *ratio* of end, and bad the *ratio* of the contrary, hence it is that *all those things to which man has natural inclination, reason naturally apprehends as good, and consequently as to be pursued by action; and their contraries as bad, and to be avoided.*¹

¹ Translations throughout this paper are mine. For the most part I leave *ratio* untranslated.

In the vast literature produced over the past few decades on natural law in St Thomas, this article of the *Summa* has received a great deal of attention. Interpreters often feel a need to offer some explanation for the passage that I have singled out. It is not surprising. Thomas simply lays it down that the objects of natural human inclination are things that reason naturally apprehends as good. One may well wonder why this is so, and here he does not say. The variety of answers that have been offered is astonishing. Here is a brief sketch of what I think are the most prominent positions on the question.

On some readings, what Thomas has in mind in the passage is what he elsewhere speaks of as judgment “by connaturality” or “through inclination.” Reason’s grasp of an object of natural inclination as good would be an act moved directly by the inclination itself. It is not that reason consciously reflects upon the inclination and then goes on to judge its object good. Rather, the very presence of the inclination casts a kind of light upon the object, and reason spontaneously judges the object in this light. The most famous proponent of this view, Jacques Maritain, holds that such judgments do not even involve rational formulation or conceptualization.²

This seems to be a minority position. More interpreters take Thomas to be talking about a kind of knowledge that is more properly rational, involving some conscious reflection and conceptualization. Still, on some accounts, the connection between knowledge and inclination remains very tight. Reason’s natural grasp of human goods, though not knowledge “through” inclination, would consist simply in the apprehension “of” natural inclinations and of their objects.³ Knowing an object of natural inclination as good would be nothing other than knowing it to be such an object.

² Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 92; “On Knowledge through Connaturality,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 4.4 (June 1951): 473-481 (esp. 477-480); “Du savoir moral,” *Revue Thomiste* 82 (1982): 533-549. See also Yves R. Simon, *Practical Knowledge* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), 33.

³ For example, Paul-M. van Overbeke, O.P., “La loi naturelle et le droit naturel selon S. Thomas,” *Revue Thomiste* 57 (1957): 65 ff.; Leo Elders, “Nature as the Basis of Moral Actions,” *Jacques Maritain Center, Thomistic Institute*, 2001, <http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/ti01/elders.htm>, section III, ¶1 & ¶3; John C. Cahalan, “Natural Obligation: How Rationally Known Truth Determines Ethical Good and Evil,” *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 126.

Others, however, judge it necessary to assign a somewhat less immediate role to natural inclination in the formation of reason's apprehension of the human good. Here there is an even greater insistence on the rationality of the apprehension. The thought would be more or less as follows. That something is the object of natural inclination only means that desire for it naturally exists. But truly rational knowledge that something is good, genuine understanding of its goodness, does not consist in merely registering the existence of desire for it, even desire that exists naturally. Rather, such knowledge serves to make the desire itself intelligible. It shows the desire to be "right" or to "make sense." It consists in seeing the object as something intrinsically desirable, "fit" to be desired. In other words, the mere "fact" of being desired does not show a thing to be *truly* good. Surely, in our passage, Thomas is speaking about apprehending things as true human goods. Seeing them as objects of natural inclination cannot suffice for this. It must only be some kind of preliminary.

What else is required? For some, what is needed is reason's penetration to the root source of the natural inclinations, which is human nature. To understand something as a true human good is to see it as an end toward which man is aimed by nature, a purpose of his being human.⁴ For others, the decisive factor in practical reason's natural apprehension of a human reality as a true human good is not the determination of its relation to human nature. It is rather the sheer understanding of the good in general—the basis of the first precept of natural law—and the consideration of the reality in light of it. The latter view is the one initially proposed by Germain Grisez and subsequently adopted by John Finnis.⁵

Finnis and Grisez do however still acknowledge a preliminary role for natural inclinations in the genesis of practical reason's natural understanding of human goods. Experience of the inclinations would be what

⁴ See Douglas Flippen, "Natural Law and Natural Inclinations," *The New Scholasticism* 60.3 (Summer 1986): 290-1, 306.

⁵ To cite only the initial works: Germain Grisez, "The First Principle of Practical Reason: a Commentary on the *Summa theologiae*, I-II Question 94, a. 2," *Natural Law Forum* 10 (1965): 168-201; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Law Series, 1980), esp. 33-36.

provides the data in which the goods are first grasped. They point us to the goods, though they are not the criteria by which we judge them good.⁶

Now, despite the serious differences among the positions so far considered, there is one assumption that they all share. I have presented them so summarily because what really interests me here is this assumption. It is that the natural inclinations in question are pre-rational. That is, they would exist independently of reason's apprehension of their objects as good, and the apprehension would somehow follow on them.⁷ The differences that I have signaled only regard how it follows.

The assumption is seldom even stated explicitly. However, in Finnis's recent book on Thomas, there is a very interesting and well documented set of observations which I think show him to be uneasy with some of its implications.⁸ He is clearly worried about what sort of inclination it is that Thomas could have in mind in our passage. As he explains in considerable detail, there are several types of human inclination that are in some sense "natural" for Thomas, and that cannot possibly fit the bill.

In any case, the assumption that the inclinations are pre-rational has not in fact gone entirely unremarked in the literature, nor unchallenged. I am referring to the interpretation offered by Lawrence Dewan in two very important articles.⁹ It seems to me that Dewan's work in this area has received far too little attention. Elsewhere I have expressed my adherence

⁶ See Grisez, "The First Principle of Practical Reason," 357-358; Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 34, 402. A similar line, giving a somewhat stronger role to the inclinations, is found Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); see my review in *The Thomist* 66.2 (April 2002): 311-315.

⁷ In her recent *Nature as Reason. A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), Jean Porter dwells at some length on the role of the natural inclinations. Her account is complex, but I think it is clear that she too treats them as prior to reason's grasp of their objects as good; see 68-82, 116-39 (esp. 127), 189-90. Of the positions that I have sketched, perhaps the closest to hers would be that of Flippen.

⁸ John Finnis, *Aquinas. Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 92-93.

⁹ Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "Jacques Maritain and the Philosophy of Co-operation," in M. Gourgues and G.-D. Mailhiot (ed.), *Alterité. Vivre ensemble différents* (Montréal and Paris: Bellarmin/Cerf, 1986), 109-117; "St. Thomas, Our Natural Lights, and the Moral Order," *Angelicum* 67 (1990): 285-307 [originally published in *Maritain Studies/Études maritainiennes* 2 (1986): 59-92]. Also quite pertinent is his "The Real Distinction between Intellect and Will," *Angelicum* 57 (1980): 557-593.

to his view and added a few considerations regarding Thomas's intention in I-II, q. 94, a. 2.¹⁰ What I want to do here is to confirm the position and develop it a little further.

II THE INCLINATIONS AS RESULTS OF THE UNDERSTANDING

My basic thesis, then, is that not only the apprehension that Thomas is talking about in our passage, but also the inclination, is rational. Reason's natural understanding of human goods does not follow the natural inclinations to them. The inclinations follow the understanding. I think this is a much more plausible reading of our passage, for several reasons. (These partly overlap with the observations by Finnis that I mentioned a moment ago.)

First, this reading explains easily why Thomas can simply lay it down, as though obvious, that reason naturally apprehends as good all the things to which man is naturally inclined. If he were talking about non-rational inclinations, inclinations that do not follow from reason's own apprehension, it would be a very dubious assertion. There are many non-rational inclinations existing in us by nature whose objects do not become known to us except after much investigation, if at all—certainly not “naturally.” Think of some strictly physiological inclination, such as the natural tendency for our brain synapses to fire. Their firing is certainly a good thing. But it is hardly something that we are naturally aware of. Thomas did not even know that brains have synapses. If however he is talking about inclinations that follow upon the natural apprehension of their objects as good, his assertion is self-evident.

Another point is the caliber of the inclinations that he must be talking about. They are right inclinations. Their objects are true human goods. Otherwise they could hardly correspond to precepts of natural law.¹¹ But Thomas is quite explicit about the fact that sometimes the non-rational

¹⁰Stephen L. Brock, *The Legal Character of Natural Law according to St Thomas Aquinas*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Toronto, 1988), 143-166.

¹¹ See I-II, q. 93, a. 6: he speaks generally of “inclination to what is consonant with the eternal law.”

inclinations existing naturally in a human being are not right.¹² This is particularly clear in the case of the sensitive appetite.¹³ Unreasoned feeling may be right or wrong. The rectitude of a person's feeling is guaranteed only when it is directed by (right) reason. In the very article to which our passage belongs, Thomas says that "the inclinations of the parts of human nature, such as the concupiscible and irascible appetites, pertain to natural law insofar as they are regulated by reason."¹⁴

Should we see the inclinations as contained in man's very essence, prior even to his physical dispositions and feelings? Thomas does teach that the elements of a subject's essence—its substantial form and matter—are already a sort of inclination (I, q. 59, a. 2). And no doubt he thinks such inclination always right. However, as he explains in the same place, its range is rather limited. It is only toward what is included within the subject's own substantial being.¹⁵ Any inclinations toward objects that extend outside the subject's being must be distinct from its essence. Many of the objects of inclination mentioned in I-II, q. 94, a. 2 are clearly not included in man's substantial being.

If the inclinations are neither physical dispositions, nor spontaneous feelings, nor elements of man's very essence, then in Thomas's conception of human nature, only one possibility remains. They must be movements of man's rational appetite, inclinations of the human will. But if so, they must be inclinations that derive from reason's apprehension of their objects as good. The will is not moved toward anything except what reason—practical reason—apprehends as good and desirable.¹⁶

¹² See Finnis, *Aquinas*, 93, n. 150. He also points out that Thomas must be talking about inclinations that everyone has. This too suggests that they cannot be natural bodily or sensitive inclinations, since these vary among individuals; see I-II, q. 51, a. 1, near the end of the corpus.

¹³ See especially I-II, q. 71, a. 2, ad 3; I-II, q. 78, a. 3. Also I, q. 81, a. 3, ad 1 & ad 2; I-II, q. 91, a. 6; I-II, q. 94, a. 4; *In VI Eth.*, lect. xi, §1278; *In XII Meta.* lect. vii, §2522; *De malo* q. 16, a. 2.

¹⁴ I-II, q. 94, a. 2, ad 2. See I-II, q. 94, a. 4, ad 3.

¹⁵ Compare Anthony Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law. An Analytical Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 96-100.

¹⁶ I-II, q. 9, a. 1, ad 2. Compare Clifford G. Kossel, S.J., "Natural Law and Human Law (Ia IIae qq. 90-97)," in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 174.

I think this is the correct view. If we suppose that Thomas is speaking of inclinations of the will in the corpus of I-II, q. 94, a. 2, none of the aforementioned difficulties arises.

First, these inclinations cannot exist in such a way that any of their objects, or the goodness thereof, escape reason's apprehension. This is obvious, since the inclinations of the will always follow upon such apprehension.

Thomas also teaches that the will's natural inclinations are always right—just as intellect's natural understanding is always true.¹⁷ This in fact is why they are always right. In voluntary matters, he says, even if the rectitude of reasoning about the things that are for an end depends on the rectitude of the appetite of the end, nevertheless the rectitude of the appetite of the end itself depends upon the right apprehension of the end, which is through reason.¹⁸ Here we are surely talking about the right apprehension of the end.¹⁹ “Good has the *ratio* of end.”

Finally, the natural inclinations of the will are by no means limited to the goods contained in a man's substantial being. In fact they extend to the whole range of goods cited in I-II, q. 94, a. 2. They include “universally all the things that befit the willing subject according to his nature.” And so, “man naturally wants not only the object of the will [the good in general], but also other things that befit other powers, such as knowledge of the true, which suits the intellect; and to be and to live, and other such things as regard natural continuance.”²⁰

Besides skirting the various difficulties, taking the inclinations to be rational rather than pre-rational also gives our passage a much clearer connection with the truly fundamental article on natural law in the *Summa*, the one concerned with its very existence: I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

Thomas begins the corpus of this article by observing that all creatures

¹⁷ I, q. 60, a. 1, ad 3; see I, q. 17, a. 3, ad 2.

¹⁸ I-II, q. 19, a. 3, ad 2; I-II, q. 58, a. 5, ad 1.

¹⁹ Even as regards the last end considered merely formally or abstractly—*beatitudo in communi*—the desire of it depends on the apprehension of it; see I-II, q. 5, a. 8, c. & ad 1; I-II, q. 10, a. 2.

²⁰ I-II, q. 10, a. 1. I use “natural continuance” to translate *naturalem consistentiam*. An indication of what this covers is found in I-II, q. 60, a. 5, where he speaks of the “*bonum ... ad consistentiam humanae vitae pertinens in individuo vel in specie, sicut sunt delectabilia ciborum et venereorum.*”

have their natural inclinations from some impression of the eternal law of divine providence. He then argues that the rational creature is subject to providence in a higher way than the rest, since he himself “becomes a sharer in providence, providing for himself and others.” This in turn shows that he shares in “the eternal reason (*ratio*) through which he has natural inclination toward due act and end.” Note the “through which.” Man partakes in the *ratio*, the intelligible conception, that is the very source of natural inclination in him. Thomas goes on to trace this share in the eternal reason to the light of man’s own natural reason, “by which we discern what good is and what evil is.”

Moreover, the article’s second objection and reply refer explicitly to the will. The objection argues that there is no natural law in man, because the ordination of human acts to their end is not through “nature,” but through reason and will. The objector is taking ‘nature’ in the sense of something “pre-rational.” But Thomas’s reply makes no appeal to anything in us that is “natural” in this sense. Instead, he simply reminds us that reason and will themselves have a natural dimension. “All reasoning derives from principles naturally known, and all appetite of things that are for the end derive from the natural appetite of the last end. And so likewise, the first direction of our acts toward the end must come about through a natural law.” Thus, to adopt the usual reading of the 94,2 clause is to slip back into the wrong sense of ‘natural.’ The inclinations that it is referring to are natural effects of reason and will, i.e., of the principles by which man acts *humanly*.²¹ They are inclinations of man *as man*.²²

There is however at least one obvious objection to this reading of the 94,2 clause. This is that the conclusion which Thomas draws from it is that “the order of the precepts of natural law is according to the order of the natural inclinations.” He then uses this rule to lay out the order of the precepts. So it may seem that the inclinations are prior to the apprehension, not its result.

I shall discuss Thomas’s rationale for the order that he assigns to inclinations and precepts in the final section. But to answer this objection, I think it suffices to draw a distinction.

²¹ I-II, q. 1, a. 1. It is no accident, I think, that earlier in the corpus of I-II, q. 94, a. 2, Thomas remarks that *qui dicit hominem, dicit rationale*.

²² Very pertinent here is III, q. 19, a. 2.

Earlier in the article, we are told that the very first precept of natural law, “good is to be done and pursued, and bad avoided,” is “founded upon the *ratio* of good.” But we should note that the precept is not simply identical with the *ratio* of good, any more than the absolutely first principle of reasoning, the principle of non-contradiction, is simply identical with the *ratio* of being. One thing is the very discernment of what good is, and another is the judgment that it is to be pursued through action. And likewise, I believe, while the other precepts of natural law present the objects of man’s natural inclinations as things “to be done and pursued,” they are founded upon the prior apprehension of the objects simply as good. Thus, what Thomas says is that “all those things for which man has a natural inclination, reason naturally apprehends as good, and *consequently* as things to be pursued by action.”

In other words, *both* the inclinations and the precepts follow upon the understanding of the objects as good. And if anything, the inclinations follow even more immediately than do the precepts. For the inclinations require nothing but the consideration of the objects as good, desirable. But the precepts require a consideration of the objects not only as good, but also as matters of action, doable or pursuable.

Some might call these distinctions hairsplitting. I would rather call them metaphysics. It seems to me that this reading of our text has deep roots in Thomas’s philosophy of the good. What I want to focus on here are certain elements of his account of the good’s intelligibility.

III UNDERSTANDING DESIRE

Picking up on a point mentioned earlier, I think that Finnis and others are quite right in holding that for Thomas, the properly intellectual apprehension of something as good does not consist in merely registering a desire for it. There is a passage in his commentary on the *Metaphysics* where he is very clear about this.²³

He is discussing Aristotle’s argument that the first, highest cause of things must be a final cause—a desirable, a good—and that, as the first desirable, it must be an *intelligible* good. Thomas observes that not everything *we* find desirable is an intelligible good. He points to the inconti-

²³ *In XII Meta.*, lect. vii, §2522.

ment person. “According to reason, he is moved by the intelligible good. But according to the concupiscible power, he is moved by something pleasant to the senses, which seems good, although it is not good unqualifiedly (*simpliciter*) but only in a way (*secundum quid*).” Further on Thomas indicates how different these two ways of “seeming good” are:

what is desired according to concupiscence seems good because it is desired. For concupiscence perverts the judgment of reason, such that what is pleasant seems good to it. But what is desired with intellectual appetite is desired because it seems good in itself (*secundum se*).

That which is unqualifiedly good, then, is an intelligible good; and it is not something that seems good to reason merely because it is already desired. It seems good, desirable, in itself. Things that are good in themselves are what Thomas elsewhere calls *bona honesta*. These, he says, “have in themselves that whence they are desired.”²⁴ They are genuine origins of desire. Neither reason’s judgment that they are good, nor the will’s resulting desire of them, supposes any prior appetitive response such as pleasure.²⁵ To be sure, the *bona honesta* are pleasant. But the pleasure of them presupposes the judgment that they are good.²⁶

So it certainly is not a judgment “through inclination.” In fact, pleasure need not even accompany it. There is pleasure only when what is judged good is also judged to be present.²⁷ If we tend to think that judgments of good and bad must always be associated with pleasure and pain, perhaps it is because we do not always distinguish sufficiently between intellect and sense. Thomas brings out the relevant difference in his commentary on *De anima* III.7 (at 431a8-16).

Aristotle says that when what is sensed is pleasant or painful, the sensitive soul, “as it were affirming or denying,” pursues or shuns it. Pleasure and pain, he explains, are “the operation of the sensitive mean

²⁴ I, q. 5, a. 6, ad 2.

²⁵ Even as regards goods to which sense-appetite also extends, is it true in every case that we experience sense-desires for them before we understand their goodness? For instance, can a child not understand the good of *coniunctio maris et feminae* before he feels any urge toward it himself?

²⁶ See I-II, q. 4, a. 2, ad 2.

²⁷ I, q. 20, a. 1.

with respect to the good or bad as such.” Thomas remarks that although making an affirmation or a negation is proper to intellect, the sense makes something like it when it apprehends something as pleasant or painful.²⁸ A little further on, turning to the intellectual soul, Aristotle says simply that when it affirms or denies an object as good or bad, it pursues or shuns. Thomas picks up on the fact that this time there is no mention of pleasure or pain. In Aristotle’s account of the sensitive part, Thomas says,

desire or shunning did not follow at once from the grasp of that which is good or bad, as here with intellect; but pleasure and pain followed, and then from this, desire and shunning. The reason for this is that just as sense does not grasp universal good, so too the appetite of the sensitive part is not moved by universal good or bad, but by a certain determinate good which is pleasant to sense, and by a certain determinate bad which is painful to sense. But in the intellective part there is the grasp of universal good and bad; whence too, the appetite of the intellective part is moved immediately by the apprehended good or bad.²⁹

Intellect grasps “universal good and bad,” the *ratio boni* and the *ratio mali*. It discerns “what good is, and what bad is.” It can move desire and shunning by simply applying the concepts of good and bad. Neither the judgment, nor even the desire or shunning that the judgment moves, presupposes any prior appetitive response such as pleasure or pain.³⁰

What may make all of this difficult to understand (besides our tendency to confuse intellect and sense) is that the *ratio* of good does after all contain a reference to appetite. To be good is to be desirable. So in order to grasp “what a good is” and to move desire, intellect must also grasp “what desire is.” This might lead us back to thinking that its grasp of the good does somehow depend upon some sort of primordial experi-

²⁸ *In III De Anima*, lect. xii, §767.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, §771.

³⁰ In fact, even at the level of the senses, Thomas posits an apprehension of “suitable or harmful” prior to the response of pleasure or pain. (*In III De Anima*, lect. xii, §769; I-II, q. 9, a. 1, ad 2.) If pleasure or pain must follow, I take it that this is because what sense apprehends, it apprehends as somehow present. But universal apprehension of something abstracts from its presence or absence. It bears absolutely on “what the thing is.”

ence of inclination or appetite.³¹ And this could only be pre-rational appetite, sense-appetite.

But Thomas is very clear that the experience of sense-appetite does not provide the basis for grasping the *ratio boni*. This is a point that Dewan has brought out especially forcefully.³² In order to grasp the good, what intellect must understand is its own appetite, intellectual appetite. This is why, before it grasps the good, it must grasp *itself*.

“First,” Thomas says,

intellect apprehends just a being (*ipsum ens*); second, it apprehends itself understanding (*apprehendit se intelligere*) a being; and third, it apprehends itself desiring (*apprehendit se appetere*) a being. Whence, although the good is in things, there comes first the *ratio* of a being; second the *ratio* of a true [which is in the mind]; and third the *ratio* of a good.³³

This talk of intellect apprehending “itself” desiring is striking. In a way, of course, it is only shorthand for the *person* apprehending himself desiring. But it is the person *qua* intellectual apprehending this; and, it is the person apprehending himself desiring *qua* intellectual.

So the appetitive act relative to which intellect knows “what a good is”—the desire essentially associated with the *ratio boni*—is something intellectual. It is the operation of the will. Yet this cannot mean that in order to know the *ratio boni*, one must first “experience” the will’s operation, as though there were already an operation of the will there to be experienced. For again, the will does not operate except through intellect. It bears on “universal” good and bad. There is no such thing as operation about universal objects that does not involve intellect.

But knowing the will’s operation does not require that it already “be there.” In general, even though it is true that what is known is always somehow “in act,” it need not always be in act in itself. It suffices that its proper causes or principles be in act. This is how we can know some

³¹ Cf. Rafael T. Caldera, *Le jugement par inclination chez saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1980), 34; Fulvio Di Blasi, *Dio e la Legge Naturale. Una rilettura di Tommaso d'Aquino* (Pisa: ETS, 1999), 185-6.

³² “Jacques Maritain and the Philosophy of Co-operation,” 114-115; “St. Thomas, Our Natural Lights, and the Moral Order,” 293-297.

³³ I, q. 16, a. 4, ad 2.

future events: by discerning them in their present causes. As for the acts of the will, the cause in which the intellect knows them is itself. Thomas says that the intellect knows the act of the will, not just once it has its own existence, but insofar as it already “exists in” the intellect, “as the principled is in the principle, in which there is a notion of the principled.”³⁴

This is how intellect *first* knows the act of the will. This act *must* be known before it occurs, because its occurrence is caused by the practical intellect of the one who has it.³⁵ Practical intellect causes its effects by ordering or directing to them. It *always* pre-conceives them. It knows them, not as already existing, but as fit or due to exist.³⁶ This is how it knows, and causes, the will’s desire for something: by judging the thing “good,” i.e., fit to desire, *conveniens ad appetendum*.³⁷

Perhaps we can even say that when Thomas speaks of intellect apprehending “itself” desiring, he is speaking in the way in which he elsewhere speaks of practical intellect as “moving”; viz., as *directing to* movement.³⁸ Then it would truly be intellect knowing itself (though also knowing the movement of the will as what it is directing toward). In any case, we should not overlook the fact that prior to its knowledge of itself as practical, intellect knows itself absolutely, as “understanding ‘a being’.” Thus it can grasp “a true.” As Dewan says, “The intellect, in conceiving ‘the true’, already knows itself as terminus of the «movement» from being to the soul; its natural «next thought» is of the «movement» from the soul to being.”³⁹

I think we might also say that in knowing the true, the mind already knows itself as principle of a certain “ordering” of the soul’s operation. For the very acts of affirming and denying are a sort of ordering, though one that terminates “in the soul itself.” They are intellect ordering its own thoughts, applying conceptions to its consideration of things, or remov-

³⁴ I, q. 87, a. 4, ad 3.

³⁵ I-II, q. 9, a. 1, ad 2

³⁶ See I-II, q. 93, a. 2, ad 3.

³⁷ I-II, q. 19, a. 1, ad 1.

³⁸ I, q. 79, a. 11, ad 1. Thomas also speaks of *synderesis* as “inclining”: I, q. 79, a. 12, obj. 2 & *Sed contra*.

³⁹ “St. Thomas, Our Natural Lights, and the Moral Order,” 294-295.

ing them, as it sees fit.⁴⁰ Knowing itself as a “soul-orderer,” it can go on to conceive itself ordering the soul with respect to things “outside,” directing appetite. Aristotle’s comparison of appetitive acts to affirmations and denials would then be no mere afterthought. It might even be the most natural way to think of them.

At any rate the comparison is not confined to acts of sense-appetite. In his account of the principles of good choice in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2, Aristotle remarks that “what affirmation and denial are in intellect, pursuit and avoidance are in appetite” (1139a21). Thomas’s comment ties the comparison to the very possibility of “intelligent desire.”

Intellect in judging has two acts, namely affirmation, by which it assents to the true, and negation, by which it dissents from the false. To these two there respond proportionally two [acts] in the appetitive power, namely pursuit, by which the appetite tends to a good and adheres to it, and shunning, by which it draws back from a bad and dissents from it. And accordingly, intellect and appetite can be conformed, insofar as what intellect affirms to be good, appetite pursues, and what intellect denies being good, appetite shuns.⁴¹

IV UNDERSTANDING DESIRABILITY

So although ‘good’ means desirable, grasping it need not be a function of pre-rational desire. Still, it must be a function of *something*. To understand a thing is to know its nature. There is such a thing as the nature of desirability, the “what good is” that the natural light of reason enables the rational creature to discern.⁴² And there is more involved in it than what the merely abstract notion of desire—of “movement from the soul to things”—expresses. For not every possible object of such movement is something that even *seems* to have the “nature of the good.”

This was the point of the passage from the *Metaphysics* commentary. What seems to have the nature of the good is what seems to be good “in itself” or to “have in itself that whence it is desired.” It is what seems *honestum*. But being pleasant to the senses also makes a thing seem to be a possible object of desire (indeed it makes it able to move the will), and

⁴⁰ See I, q. 16, a. 2.

⁴¹ *In VI Eth.*, lect. ii, §1128 [809].

⁴² I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

yet it does not, by itself, make the thing seem *honestum*. It only makes it similar in a certain effect: pleasure.

The merely “pleasant good,” Thomas says, is “good” only in a qualified, derivative *sense*. The unqualified sense is that of the “good in itself,” the *honestum*. This is the *primary* sense, the one *first* understood, to which all others refer.⁴³ And the “that whence it is desired” which the *honestum* has in itself, whatever this is, will be what goodness or desirability primarily consists in.

In other words, from the very start, understanding “a good” means not only grasping a certain relation to desire, but also grasping the *principle* of this relation, that which the relation is a function of.⁴⁴ It is just as with “a true.” In part, ‘true’ signifies a certain relation to intellect. A true thought is one to which intellect “tends”⁴⁵ or which is acceptable to it. But ‘true’ also signifies the basis of this relation. There is something “in” the thought that makes it acceptable: its conformity to what it is about. This is what its acceptability is a function of, and what its truth consists in. I think a brief look at what Thomas thinks desirability or goodness consists in can shed further light on his use of natural inclinations in I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

We have already heard him saying that first the mind grasps a *being*, then it grasps itself understanding a *being*, and then it grasps itself desiring a *being*. So ‘a good’ always means at least: a being. It also means something relative to the soul: an *understood* being. But there is something else as well that it also means (in the primary sense), something pertaining to the good thing in relation to itself. Thomas explains this in the corpus of I, q. 16, a. 4. “A good,” he says, is not quite as “close” (in intelligibility) to “a being” as “a true” is. “The true regards being absolutely and immediately. But the *ratio* of good follows on being insofar as it is somehow *perfect*; for thus is it desirable.”⁴⁶

⁴³ I, q. 5, a. 6, ad 3. The *bonum delectabile* seems to coincide with what Thomas calls the *bonum apparens*, the “specious good”; see I-II, q. 19, a. 1, ad 1, alongside the following texts: I, q. 5, a. 6, ad 2; I, q. 63, a. 1, ad 4; *In III Eth.*, lect. x, §495 & *passim*.

⁴⁴ John I. Jenkins, “Good and the Object of Natural Inclination in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 3 (1993): 62-96, holds that while the real nature of the good is something more than merely being desired, our first and natural apprehension of it is only as what is desired.

⁴⁵ I, q. 16, a. 1.

⁴⁶ See I, q. 5, a. 1.

What goodness consists in is perfection.⁴⁷ It is so in the good thing, and it is also so in the mind's initial grasp of it. Thomas is arguing that good comes after true *in ratione*, in intelligibility. He says this means that it enters the mind later.⁴⁸ Its *ratio* supposes and includes the *ratio* of perfect. (Presumably the *ratio* of "a bad" includes that of "a defective.")

What is "a perfect"? It is something "from which nothing is absent according to the mode of its perfection."⁴⁹ This is not circular. Thomas is presenting perfection as something related to a *measure*, that which sets a "mode."⁵⁰ Elsewhere he calls perfection "fullness of being."⁵¹ The fullness of a container is measured by its capacity, which is determined by its inner shape (its inner *perimeter*). What Thomas identifies as the measure of a being's fulfillment is "what it is," its nature; this is determined by its *form*.⁵² And so, "for each thing, that is good which befits it according to its form, and bad, that which departs from the order of its form."⁵³ Moreover, "every existence and every good is *considered* through some form."⁵⁴

A sign of how basic the *ratio* of "perfect" is for the *ratio* of "desirable" is that desire is understood, from the start, as movement from what is "in the soul" to what is "in reality"; i.e., from a thing's "being known" to its simply "being." If grasping goodness presupposes grasping truth, it is not only because the desire to which goodness is relative is intellectual, but also because grasping desirability involves comparing the two modes. Merely "being known" is a "ghostly" way of being—insubstantial, unfulfilling. It is not "being *in act*."⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Cf. *In IX Eth.*, lect. xi, §1904.

⁴⁸ See I, q. 16, a. 4, ad 2.

⁴⁹ I, q. 4, a. 1; I, q. 5, a. 5.

⁵⁰ See I, q. 5, a. 5, obj. 1 & c.; I-II, q. 85, a. 4. Also *In III Sententiarum*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 3, c.; d. 34, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 3, c.

⁵¹ I-II, q. 18, aa. 1 & 2.

⁵² I, q. 5, a. 5.

⁵³ I-II, q. 18, a. 5. Other pertinent texts: I, q. 21, a. 1, ad 3; I, q. 49, a. 1; I-II, q. 71, aa. 1 & 2.

⁵⁴ I-II, q. 85, a. 4.

⁵⁵ See I, q. 18, a. 4, ad 3.

Nor is it *active*. “Heat in the mind does not heat,” Thomas says, “but in the fire.”⁵⁶ Thomas finds the notion of “perfect” closely associated with that of active power. A being is perfect, mature, when it can effect its like.⁵⁷ This makes sense, since likeness is “communication in form.”⁵⁸ The being is “full” when its form can “overflow.” Thus grasping active power entails grasping form; and the *ratio* of good, or of final cause, presupposes the *rationes* of formal and agent cause.⁵⁹

We should notice that the thought is not at all that goodness is “implied” in perfection, as though “derivable” from it by some kind of conceptual analysis. It is the *ratio* of the perfect that is included in the *ratio* of the good, not vice-versa. To say otherwise would be to fall into the “is-ought fallacy” that Hume exposed, and that Finnis and Grisez are so wary of.⁶⁰ The *ratio* of “a good” adds something new to those of “a being,” “the nature of a being,” and “the fullness of a being according to its nature.” It adds the relation to desire, the final causality.

However, this novelty definitely has the status of an *addition*, an “outgrowth.” The *ratio* of the perfect is the matrix in which it is begotten (and apart from which it corrupts). In relation to Hume, this is very important. For even though what Hume exposed is a genuine fallacy, the larger argument that he was engaged in is itself nothing short of sophistry. What he showed was that the notion of “according to nature” does not contain the notion of “good.” But what he actually needed was the sophistical inference from this, which he leaves tacit, that the notion of “good” does not contain the notion of “according to nature.” For it is really only this inference that provides grounds for his main thesis, which is that the notion of “good” has no rational or intelligible basis at all—that it is a mere func-

⁵⁶ *De ver.*, q. 22, a. 12; see I-II, q. 5, a. 6, ad 2.

⁵⁷ I, q. 5, a. 4.

⁵⁸ I, q. 4, a. 3.

⁵⁹ I, q. 5, a. 4.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 33-49; *Aquinas*, 90; Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, & John Finnis, “Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987): 127.

tion of sentiment or feeling.⁶¹ Of course Finnis and Grisez reject this thesis. They say that reason grasps “intelligible” good. Yet they give every appearance of accepting that tacit inference.⁶² Its effect, I believe, is just what Hume wanted: to eviscerate the intelligibility of the good.

On the other hand, I think that Finnis and Grisez are right to maintain that our original apprehension of the good is practical, not speculative.⁶³ For we should not lose sight of precisely how it is that grasping “the nature of a being” is needed for grasping what a good or a final cause is. It is needed as a principle for grasping perfection, “fullness of being.” But the mind need not yet be seeing “the nature of a being” as itself an *effect* of goodness. That is, it need not be judging that a thing’s perfection is what the thing is *aimed* at by nature, the *purpose* of its being what it is.⁶⁴ One thing is to see what human perfection is, and that this is desirable; quite another is to judge that human kind *exists* for its sake (rather than, say, by chance). This judgment is speculative. It uses the notion of the good to *explain* man’s existence. It involves coming to see nature itself as the work of a mind. But the first thing our mind apprehends as an effect of goodness, the effect tied to its initial grasp of “what a good is,” is its own desire. As we saw, it first apprehends this in a practical way. Eventually it may come to see this too as involving the influence of a higher mind.

⁶¹ See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), Book III, Part I, Section i, esp. 469-70, and Section ii, 470-476. It is interesting to note that for Thomas, even the mere *bonum delectabile*, to the extent that it retains something of the *ratio boni* and is capable of moving the intellectual appetite, also retains some appearance of being “according to nature”; see I-II, q. 6, a. 4, ad 3.

⁶² Finnis says, “the *underived* first principles of practical reasonableness ... make no reference at all to human nature, but only to human good”; *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 36. He seems to qualify this somewhat in *Aquinas*; here he remarks on the close association between the notions of “good” and “perfection” (91), and he suggests that the practical knowledge of the first practical principles does “amount to an understanding however informal,” of human nature (92). However, what he seems to mean is that this understanding of human nature would be a *result* of the practical knowledge, not a principle of it. Thus, he says that “the epistemic source of the first practical principles is not human nature or a prior, theoretical understanding of human nature.... Rather, the epistemic relationship is the reverse...” (91).

⁶³ See Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 33-4; *Aquinas*, 89.

⁶⁴ See above, at n. 4.

We might ask: why does the mind find the perfect fit to desire, and the defective fit to shun? Here I believe we reach a sheer beginning, something immediate. We might as well ask: why does the mind find acceptable the proposition that states the case as it is, and unacceptable the ones that do not? It is just the nature of mind.

V UNDERSTANDING HUMAN GOODS

Returning now to I-II, q. 94, a. 2, we may be struck by how concerned this article is with the order in which the human mind understands things. In fact the order of intelligibles given in I, q. 16, a. 4—being, true, good—shows up here. Before giving the first precept of natural law, which is founded on the *ratio* of good—this being the first, most common notion in *practical* reason—Thomas gives what is absolutely first and common to all reasoning whatsoever, namely the *ratio* of being, together with the principle founded upon it. And his formulation of this principle points to the true: “affirming and denying do not go together.”

It is from this high, quite “metaphysical” vantage-point that he goes on to contemplate the order in the precepts of natural law. The first one rests on the good taken absolutely or universally. The others rest upon certain particular goods, the ones we are familiar with: “those to which man has natural inclination.” As we saw, the order among these precepts is said to be “according to the order of natural inclinations.”

Now, if I was right in arguing that both the inclinations and the precepts flow from the natural understanding of human goods, then one might wonder why Thomas even mentions the inclinations. Why does he not say simply that the order of the precepts is according to that of the understanding of human goods? I would suggest two reasons, interrelated.

First, bringing in the inclinations is a way of recalling the fundamental account in I-II, q. 91, a. 2, where the existence of natural law, although proper to man, was explained within the setting of the common subjection of all creatures to the eternal law, from whose impression all have their natural inclinations. This underscores the fact that Thomas is still seeing natural law as a particular effect of God’s universal providence. And second, since “inclination” is thus a more common effect of providence, the move from inclinations to precepts is a move from the gener-

al to the particular. This sort of move is extremely typical of Thomas's teaching. I-II, q. 94, a. 2 is itself filled with such moves.

So the perspective is remaining quite "metaphysical." Finnis stresses this.⁶⁵ However, is there any reason to think that Thomas is suddenly no longer speaking about the order in which things "fall into the apprehension of all,"⁶⁶ or indeed, about the order in which they fall into the *practical* apprehension of all? He referred explicitly to this order in presenting the first precept: the good is what "falls first in the apprehension of practical reason."

If we adopt the assumption that the inclinations to which the other precepts correspond are pre-rational, then indeed we may have grounds for thinking that the order given here is incidental to practical reason's apprehension of the goods. This in fact is Finnis's view.⁶⁷ But if we take them to be rational, then surely we must regard the order as the apprehension's own. The *vision* being offered of it is something metaphysical.⁶⁸ But it is a metaphysical vision of practical reason itself. It is an overview of the natural principles by which the rational creature "becomes a sharer in providence" (I-II, q. 91, a. 2).

The order goes, once again, from the general to the particular. It begins with the inclination to that good "which is according to the nature that man shares with all substances."⁶⁹ After this is the inclination to what is according to the nature he shares with all animals. Last comes the incli-

⁶⁵ See *Aquinas*, 92-94.

⁶⁶ Following the Leonine edition.

⁶⁷ He calls it an "irrelevant schematization" (*Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 95) and a "metaphysical stratification" (*Aquinas*, 81).

⁶⁸ This is not at all to say that it contributes nothing to practical knowledge of the goods; see Kevin Flannery, *Acts Amid Precepts. The Aristotelian Logical Structure of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theory* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 48-49.

⁶⁹ Even this is to be seen as inclination in the properly human "mode," intellectual. On the intellectual mode of this inclination, see I, q. 75, a. 6. More generally on the community and diversity of "natural inclination" in intellectual and non-intellectual beings, see I, q. 60, aa. 1 & 5; I, q. 62, a. 3, ad 2. There would also be some difference between the angelic and human modes, since the human intellect naturally thinks of itself (and its effects) in terms taken from physical things: I, q. 87, a. 3, ad 1. Pertinent here is II-II, q. 108, a. 2 (cf. I-II, q. 87, a. 1).

nation to the good that is according to the nature of reason, which is proper to man.⁷⁰

Why is this the order? I think the answer is quite simple. Thomas is talking about what “practical reason naturally apprehends to be human goods.” The apprehension is of goods *as human*. This means, as pertaining to “what a man is.” They are the perfections whose measure, and a principle of whose intelligibility, is the nature of man. At each turn, he speaks of what is according to some dimension of human nature. There is an order in the natural understanding of these dimensions.⁷¹ And Thomas leaves no doubt about its shape. Proceeding from the general to the particular is not just a way that he happens to be fond of. He sees it as the primary way in which *all* human understanding proceeds.⁷²

One last question: if the order is that of practical apprehension, does it have any practical bearing? I do not think that by itself, it implies an order among the goods *as goods*, a rank in their *value*.⁷³ The order is only in reason’s acquaintance with them. Yet it does, I believe, have at least two practical implications, one direct and one indirect.⁷⁴

Directly, even if it is not a ranking of the goods in themselves, it does seem to suggest a certain subjective ranking, a gradation in the care that people are naturally apt to give to the goods.⁷⁵ Some inclinations are more deeply ingrained than others. We do, I think, find people generally tending, both individually and collectively, to be more concerned about

⁷⁰ In the next article Thomas even arrives at an inclination *proper* to man through a reasoning from general to particular.

⁷¹ This of course is not the same as scientific knowledge of man (just as the practical understanding discussed here is not the same as the science of ethics). But all intellectual cognition of things, scientific or not, is some sort of apprehension of their natures.

⁷² His fullest presentation of this view is I, q. 85, a. 3.

⁷³ Even less does it imply that the goods are “commensurable”; see Flannery, *Acts Amid Precepts*, ch. 4, esp. 105-108.

⁷⁴ I am not talking here about what the scientific determination of the order contributes to practical knowledge of the goods (see above, n. 68), but about possible upshots of the order itself, as a feature of “natural reason,” in human conduct.

⁷⁵ Although they do not refer to I-II, q. 94, a. 2, Grisez, Boyle, and Finnis do acknowledge the existence of rankings of this sort; see the section entitled “Natural Priorities among the Basic Goods” in “Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends,” 137-139. Of course they deny any hierarchy among the goods themselves, as goods; *ibid.*, 139-40.

human survival than about the family, and more about these than about the demands of social life or the knowledge of God.⁷⁶ And taking this strictly as a general tendency, is it not, after all, quite rational?

The indirect implication is related to the last article in q. 94, on whether precepts of natural law can be “deleted from the human heart.” Thomas says that knowledge of the so-called secondary precepts, which involve some reasoning, can be obliterated altogether. The common, strictly “natural” ones, those “known to all”—the ones surveyed in article 2—cannot be deleted *in universali*, i.e., absolutely or in themselves. But even they can be deleted *in particulari operabili*. Reason can be impeded from using them to guide conduct. This is “on account of concupiscence or some other passion”—some non-rational inclination. What I think is implied by there being an order in which they are known is that reason is less liable to be anesthetized in some areas of natural law than in others.⁷⁷ The order of the precepts would be a kind of scale (obviously not the only one) measuring the degree to which people may be living in the grip of passion. This could be useful when looking for the appropriate remedy.

But perhaps more important are the implications of the general thesis that the inclinations that Thomas is talking about are rational. In aligning the true, intelligible human goods with natural inclinations, he is not suggesting that if some *non-rational* inclination is inborn, as e.g. homosexuality is said sometimes to be, its object is therefore a true good of the person in question. The further implication is that its object need not seem a true good even to the person himself. The inclination only makes the object seem *delectabile*, not *honestum*. While it may pervert particular judgments, impeding the application of what is naturally understood, it does not positively alter that understanding. It does not denature the very light of the mind. This I think is an encouraging conclusion.

⁷⁶ These are the goods cited in I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

⁷⁷ Such a difference is suggested in I-II, q. 100, a. 5, ad 1.