

ARE PERSONS INTRINSICALLY VALUABLE?: METAPHYSICAL REFLECTIONS IN THE TRADITION OF ARISTOTLE & AQUINAS

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Preliminary Remarks

This paper is essentially concerned with the metaphysics of the person. The preliminary remarks attempt to set the locus of this discussion at the core of ethical thinking, since the implications of the question concerning the intrinsic value of man have serious and far-reaching consequences in the sphere of human moral action. If man is *not* intrinsically valuable, then he may be subject to the arbitrary extrinsic values accorded to things, employed as they are as means rather than as ends. The extrinsic bestowal of values is of course contingent upon the source of those values, and since, in this case, it is man himself who would author these values, it is also man himself who can change them. Thus, proceeding from reasons of political, social, or economic expedience and convenience, the variables of the history of cultural self-interest can continually fashion the ever-changing current of moral values.

If, on the other hand, it can be shown that man is intrinsically valuable, then he would be an end in himself. Furthermore, contrary to the establishment of extrinsic values, this intrinsic value could only come from some transcendent ground of man's being. Such a ground would remove the vagaries of a contingent value system established by a contingent source, and establish the basic principles of an absolute value system, given through the being and nature of man himself, dependent upon an absolute source.

Proceeding from the recognition that values are of different kinds, this paper will argue the following: First, following Aristotle and employing the distinction between existence and subsistence, it will be shown that the latter category establishes an intrinsic *unity* proper to natural substances; secondly, through Thomas Aquinas' employment of Aristotle's notion of substance and his own understanding of the participation of contingent being in *esse*, it will be shown the Aquinas makes a case for the intrinsic *metaphysical* value proper to all natural substance; and thirdly; it will be argued, that the unique mode of subsistence proper to persons provides evidence of a participation not only in *esse* but also in spirit. Moreover, it will be concluded that it is precisely this intrinsic *spiritual* value which is the reason for and the ground of man's intrinsic *moral* value.

The major hope of this presentation is to offer substantive relief from the serious moral and spiritual void of which the contemporary ethical malaise is both a cause and a sign.

The Intrinsic Unity of Natural Substance

The relation between existence and subsistence is analogous to that between genus and species. Subsistence is a sub-set or special mode of existence. The term "existence" is what Aristotle would call a first principle and as such is incapable of definition. The various uses of the

word may be shown, however, and Aristotle frequently devoted himself to the exploration of the ways in which things are said. Accordingly, existence or more properly existent beings may be divided, primarily, between substantial existence (that which has its being "in itself") and accidental existence which includes artificial being (that which has its being "in another"). It is to substantial beings or substances that subsistence is attributed; subsistence being defined as that mode of being proper to things which have their coming-to-be in themselves, i.e., an intrinsic principle of being. This intrinsic principle is that by virtue of which they are what they are and have the properties and operations they have. It is what Aristotle calls "form".

To appreciate this distinction fully, contrast this notion of subsistent being with that of accidental or artificial being, i.e., that which has an extrinsic source of its coming-to-be. Consider, for example, the relationship of the parts of a car to the car and the relationship of the parts of a living being with itself. In both cases the parts may be said to exist. In the case of the car, however, its being comes through an extrinsic principle, that is through the action of a maker. Moreover, the unity which the car receives is an extrinsic unity ordered to the function of that being. In such instances of artificial beings the end of the being is in the mind of the maker, while the being itself is considered solely in terms of its function as a means to that end.

By contrast, the parts of a living being have an organic unity — from their seeds, oak trees, horses, and men consistently develop into what they are to be. Form or nature for Aristotle is precisely that intrinsic principle of specification and unity which causes the being, under appropriate conditions, to become what it is. In this case, the end of the being is in the being itself and may be seen as the full perfection proper to its form.

Aristotle's insight is the recognition of these different modes of being proper to existing things. This vision contains not only that contrast between an intrinsic and extrinsic source of unity, but also the recognition that the end proper to the being is also either intrinsic or extrinsic.

The absence of such an understanding is observable in the ethical sphere. Not only has the occasion of transplant operations given the appearance of an interchangeability of parts comparable to that in machines, but the contemporary inclination to define persons according to their function has also followed as a natural concomitant of that notion of the person which is based upon the machine model.

The history of this metaphysical problem is actually not of recent vintage. Its roots lie with the Cartesian concept of man as a duality of matter and spirit. For Descartes, matter was always considered on the model of

the machine. Hence to argue for the existence or non-existence of spirit in such matter is an entirely misconceived way of looking at man. It is the very structure of the alternatives themselves which must be rejected. Unfortunately, the majority of modern discussion concerning the nature of man argue from within the parameters of this Cartesian world-view. In this first section, the Aristotelian understanding of natural substance as possessing intrinsic unity has been offered as that alternative to the Cartesian position which provides a more adequate explanation of the material world. It also gives the framework from within which those contemporary ethical problems which center upon the person (euthanasia, abortion, etc.) may be approached.

The Intrinsic Metaphysical Value of Things

Thomas Aquinas draws upon Aristotle's notion of substance and infuses it with his own unique metaphysical insight. For Aristotle, there is an act/potency relation between accidents and substance (the accidents are the specifying principles causing this substance, in potency to modification, to be actually modified in this way rather than that) and between form and matter (the form being the specifying principle causing the matter, in potency to substantial existence, to be actually this substance rather than some other). To these Aquinas adds an additional relationship: act is related to potency as *esse* (the act of existing¹) is to *essentia* (the essence or nature of a being which, in material being, includes both the form and the matter). Thus, in the essential order there is no difference between, for example, an actual man and a potential man; in the concrete, existential order, however, there is all the difference in the world: this (theoretically) potential essence being made actual be *esse*.

Aquinas also recognized that things are not their own reason or cause for existing. Since that which is in potency for act cannot move itself to act except by a being already in act, Aquinas concluded that all contingent being must ultimately be grounded in a being who is its own reason for existing, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, Self-Subsisting Being.² Thus, in the metaphysical order, all beings have a contingent or extrinsic source of their existence, yet, since they receive this through a *participation* in the Absolute Source, their act of existing is nonetheless intrinsically proper to each.

Although the world-view of Aquinas, grounded in the participation of all existent being in an Absolute Source,

bestows thereby an intrinsic *metaphysical* value on all being, it is not yet that which is required to place persons in a special category in the moral domain. Despite Aquinas' vision which holds *all* created being in a certain reverence, it is also true that, for him, the lower exists for the sake of the higher, thus justifying action based upon the utility of means.

This gradation between lower and higher is given through the recognition of the essential attributes proper to the various classes of beings. These proper attributes are also called perfections since Aquinas understood perfection as convertible with being.³ Since animate beings possess perfections not possessed by inanimate, and, more specifically, animals possess more than plants, and man more than animals, the gradation of the universe is specified and observable. This principle however can be made to operate within a genus as well, and thus an easy case could be made to support slavery and mass extermination of human kind for the selective breeding of a superior race. If there is a case to be made for some intrinsic *moral* value proper to persons, it can not come from some intrinsic *metaphysical* value alone. Something additional is required.

The Intrinsic Spiritual Value of Persons

Employing the Principle of Operation (*Operatio Sequitur Esse*), Aquinas looks upon the unique operations of man's being, intellectual knowing and loving, as signs or effects which result from the unique kind of being which he is. Since Aquinas believed that the intellectual operation of conception cannot be explained by reference to man's material dimension alone, he concludes to an immaterial or spiritual dimension of man's being as well. It is precisely such a nature which is made actual through the act of existing. Thus over and above the intrinsic *metaphysical* value which man shares with all contingent being, the analysis of the nature of man also reveals an intrinsic *spiritual* value.

It is consistent with the thinking of Aquinas to maintain that it is this spiritual dimension which requires that the person always be regarded as an end, never merely as a means. If man participates in the Absolute on the existential order, then, through the analysis of his nature, it may also be claimed that in a unique way man participates in the Absolute on the level of essence as well. Man's capacity for intellectual knowledge and love are made possible through his participation in the very image and like-

¹ The best translation of *esse* appears to be "act of existing" since it stresses the aspect of an activity both in the use of the word "act" and also in the participial ending on the word "exist". The most convenient and frequent translation of this term, however, appears to be either "being" or "existence", neither of which convey the notion of activity. The reader should note that in the text which follows these shorter terms are employed, and he is hereby cautioned not to lose sight of the insight which is intended.

² N.B. note 1 concerning the translation of *esse*.

³ It should be noted that Aquinas distinguishes between first perfection and second perfection. To the former corresponds the act-of-existing (*esse*), to the latter corresponds all those properties and operations proper to the nature of a being. The word perfection as we might use it, is actually a third sense still, for it implies that quality of completeness or wholeness of any second perfection. Thus my existence is first perfection, my possession of sensation, for example (or specifically hearing) is a second perfection, and the quality of my hearing may be the use of the term in our ordinary, present usage. Other uses of the term perfection can be shown to be derivatives of these.

ness of the One Who is the Source of all perfection.

The reason for affirming man as an end in himself is the same reason for affirming his dignity and sacredness: to wit, the nature of man himself, existentially and essentially participating in the source of all that is. This spiritual dimension places man in a category entirely different from the rest of material beings; it is a mode of being which establishes his intrinsic *moral* value, protecting him from the manipulative, utilitarian regard given to inanimate things and lower forms of life.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has argued for the intrinsic *moral* value of the person. The argument began with Aristotle's position of the intrinsic unity proper to substances, and went on to show how this intrinsic *unity* was transformed to an intrinsic *value*, through Aquinas' position of Participation in *Esse*. It was then objected that this value, as an intrinsic *metaphysical* value, is not sufficient to establish man as an end in himself, sacred in the moral order. The con-

clusion of the argument attempted to respond to this objection by asserting that the metaphysical analysis of the person reveals an intrinsic *spiritual* value over and above the metaphysical, and that it is precisely this intrinsic spiritual value which requires: 1) that the person always be regarded as an end in himself, 2) that the person is sacred in himself and cannot be defined in terms of his functions, and 3) that the liberty and authority by which man bestows extrinsic values upon things cannot be said to operate in relation to man himself.

True, everything may depend in the final analysis upon whether man actually does participate in the spiritual order, or whether he is not merely the sum total of the organization of his material parts. In either case, the concern of this paper has been to present the implications of this problem even if in no other way than to show that the source of moral value ultimately depends upon the more profound issue concerning man's nature. This paper has argued that only a spiritual nature of man assures man's intrinsic value in the moral order.