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FOUNDATIONS IN AQUINAS'S ETHICS*

By Scott MacDonald

I. Introduction

Aquinas likes foundations. He famously endorses a form of causal proof for God's existence because he believes that one cannot go on to infinity in series of what he calls "per se causes."[1] We might say that he thinks there have to be *causal* foundations, causes that possess their causal power in and of themselves and do not acquire it from other causes. In epistemology, he argues that one cannot go on to infinity in chains of justification; there must be *epistemic* foundations that are known just by virtue of themselves and require no further epistemic support.[2] In his moral theory, too, Aquinas likes foundations. Here is an application of foundationalist principles in his moral psychology:

> In all cases of things that have a per se order with respect to one another, it must be that, when the primary thing has been taken away, the things that are ordered toward the primary thing (*ad primum*) are taken away. . . . Now in the case of ends one finds two sorts of order: the order of intention and the order of execution, and there must be something primary in each sort of order. For a kind of principle that moves the appetite is primary in the order of intention. Thus, when that principle has been taken away, the appetite would be moved by nothing. . . . But the principle in intention is the ultimate end. . . . [T]herefore in this case it is not possible to proceed to infinity, because nothing would be desired (*appeteretur*) if there were no ultimate end.[3]

* I read earlier versions of this paper to the philosophy departments at Purdue University, UCLA, and Texas A&M University, and at a conference at the University of Toronto. I am grateful to the audiences on those occasions for stimulating discussion. I am grateful, too, for helpful comments from the other contributors to this volume, and its editors.

[1] See the first two of Aquinas's so-called five ways: *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*), part I, question 2, article 3. (Hereafter references to *ST* will cite part, question, and article as follows: Ia.2.3. "Ia" indicates the first part [*prima pars*] of *ST*, "IaIIae" the first part of the second part [*prima secundae*], and "IIaIIae" the second part of the second part [*secunda secundae*].)

[2] See Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* book 1, chapter 4.

[3] *ST* IaIIae.1.4. Translations are my own except where noted.

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So just as God is Aquinas's first *mover,* ultimate ends are his first *motivators.*[4]

Foundationalist principles and reasoning appear prominently in other contexts in Aquinas's moral theory, and in this essay I consider one of these contexts. Aquinas sees a close analogy between practical reasoning—the sort of reasoning by which moral thought proceeds—and theoretical reasoning—reasoning about matters of fact. He frequently exploits that analogy to make a point about the nature and structure of practical reasoning, as in this passage:

> Human reasoning, since it is a kind of movement, proceeds from an understanding of certain things—namely, things that are known naturally without any inquiry on reason's part—as though from a kind of immovable principle. Moreover, it comes to a stop at an understanding insofar as, by means of principles known naturally per se, we form a judgment about the things we arrive at by reasoning. Now, it is clear that just as theoretical reason reasons about theoretical matters, practical reason reasons about things that are to be done. Therefore, there must be things that are impressed in us naturally: principles regarding things to be done, just as much as principles of theoretical matters. . . . [T]he principles regarding things to be done that are impressed in us . . . pertain to a specific natural disposition which we call *synderesis.* (*ST* Ia.79.12)

I will have more to say about the details of this passage shortly. But what is immediately clear is that Aquinas thinks that practical reasoning proceeds from foundations: practical principles that are impressed in us naturally, known naturally per se, and possessed by synderesis.[5]

What I want to suggest here is that Aquinas's foundationalism about practical reasoning—the sort highlighted by Aquinas himself in passages such as the one I have just quoted—is easily misunderstood. Commentators often suppose that Aquinas takes this foundationalist account of practical reasoning to license a moral theory, and in particular a theory of natural law, with thick foundations: universal, objective, self-evident, substantive moral principles from which all morality can be derived.[6] But

[4] I have discussed these various applications of foundationalist reasoning in various papers. See Scott MacDonald, "Aquinas's Parasitic Cosmological Argument," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1991): 134–73; MacDonald, "Theory of Knowledge," in Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 160–95; and MacDonald, "Ultimate Ends in Practical Reasoning: Aquinas's Aristotelian Moral Psychology and Anscombe's Fallacy," *The Philosophical Review* 100 (1991): 31–66.

[5] Aquinas takes the technical term "synderesis" from the tradition. It appears to be a corruption of the Greek "*suneisis*" ("understanding"). What exactly Aquinas means by it will emerge in Section III below.

[6] See, for example, Martha Nussbaum's description of Aquinas's moral theory in Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De motu animalium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

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some foundationalisms are thinner than others, and I will argue that Aquinas's foundationalism about practical reasoning is among the thin ones and is thinner than these interpreters suppose. Since I think that if one is going to be a foundationalist, thin is better, I will take myself to be going at least some way toward defending Aquinas against thick interpreters.[7]

In order to get the relevant texts and issues in front of us, I am going to focus on a paper of Terence Irwin's.[8] Irwin is not a thick interpreter of Aquinas; he thinks Aquinas is *conflicted* as between thick and thin foundationalism about practical reasoning, concluding that Aquinas's position is inconsistent. I will reject Irwin's conclusion, but I think his analysis usefully brings the issues into focus.[9]

Irwin characterizes the conflict he finds in Aquinas not in terms of thick versus thin *foundations* but in terms of wide-scope versus narrow- or restricted-scope *deliberation.* But Irwin's focus on the scope of what Aquinas calls "deliberation" is just another way of coming at the issue of foundations, as will become clear. Irwin argues that certain features of Aquinas's moral theory commit him to thinking that deliberation has wide scope in our practical thought whereas other features of his account commit him to restricting deliberation's scope more narrowly. In order to see what this means, we need to have before us a basic picture of Aquinas's understanding of practical reasoning.

II. Practical Reasoning: The Basics

Practical reasoning is reasoning about things that can be done (*operabilia, agibilia*) or are to be done (*agenda*). (For present purposes, we can leave aside practical reasoning's application to things that can be made [*factibilia*].) Thus, one condition on practical reasoning—part of what distinguishes it from other sorts of reasoning—is its object: things that can be done, actions or courses of action that can be undertaken. But some of our thinking or reasoning about action is not entirely or fully practical—it is theoretical or merely hypothetical thinking about action. To think through the process of changing a flat tire in preparation for writing an automobile owner's manual, or to muse about what one will do with the winnings, should one win the lottery, is to reason abstractly and theoretically about things that can be done. If reasoning

[7] My project here requires supplementing with an account of what Aquinas calls the "precepts of natural law." I intend to undertake that account in another paper.

[8] T. H. Irwin, "The Scope of Deliberation: A Conflict in Aquinas," *Review of Metaphysics* 44 (1990): 21–42.

[9] Irwin himself no longer endorses the conclusion he draws in "The Scope of Deliberation." See T. H. Irwin, "Practical Reason Divided: Aquinas and His Critics," in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, eds., *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 189–214; and the chapters on Aquinas in Irwin's forthcoming *History of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

about action is to be *full-fledged* practical reasoning, it must also satisfy one other condition: it must begin from or be undertaken in the service of a present desire or intention that one believes would be fulfilled or advanced to some extent by the action about which one reasons. If one desires something (or intends to bring about some state of affairs or obtain or promote some end), then when one reasons about how to satisfy that desire (bring about that state of affairs, promote that end), one is reasoning about how one will proceed in that regard, what one should do, what course of action to undertake. The desire or intention that precipitates the reasoning makes it *fully* practical. One's reasoning in that case is not only about what can or might be done but is also actually directed toward acting, toward proceeding in the direction of fulfilling one's intention. When reasoning of this sort, in these conditions, has run its course, the typical outcome, Aquinas tells us, is a judgment about what course of action to undertake and a corresponding volition or act of will—what Aquinas calls "choice." On this picture, then, the cognitive enterprise of reasoning about action is fully practical when it is integrated with one's appetitive states and acts, arising from desire or intention and giving rise ultimately to volition or choice.[10]

The *point* of fully practical reasoning is to enable us to act in aid of our desires and intentions by discovering or constructing ways of advancing or fulfilling them. The need for reasoning of this sort is especially clear in cases where the objects of our desires or intentions are relatively general or indeterminate or remote—too general or indeterminate or remote for it to be entirely obvious how to realize them. Reasoning of this fully practical sort, then, connects our relatively general or indeterminate desires or intentions to more specific or determinate ones, and ultimately to concrete courses of action we can undertake to satisfy or realize them. Aquinas develops this picture at some length and in considerable detail early on in the second part of *Summa theologiae.* In schematic form, the central part of his complex analysis looks like this:

Appetitive act:	INTENTION of some end *E*
Cognitive process:	DELIBERATION about how to attain or achieve *E* (giving rise to a determinate JUDGMENT that some course of action Ø-ing is to be done [or some more determinate end *E** is to be pursued])
Appetitive act:	CHOICE to Ø [or to pursue *E**][11]

[10] For fuller discussion, see my "Practical Reasoning and Reasons-Explanations: Aquinas's Account of Reason's Role in Action," in Scott MacDonald and Eleonore Stump, eds., *Aquinas's Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 133–60.

[11] Here are three simple examples:

(A) INTENTION: to incorporate regular exercise in my life
DELIBERATION: walking to work every day would be a good way of incorporating regular exercise in my life; JUDGMENT: so I should start walking to work
CHOICE: to walk to work every day (or today) *(continued)*

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(Terms in caps are Aquinas's preferred technical terms. There is considerably more complexity in Aquinas's account than this basic schema presents, but the additional complexity does not affect the present discussion.)[12]

As I have been describing it, practical reasoning is the cognitive process, the process of *reasoning,* that spans the distance between the precipitating intention and the concluding choice. This way of characterizing fully practical reasoning focuses attention on the reasoning process to which Aquinas gives the name "deliberation" and its immediate result, a judgment about what is to be done. If we think of deliberation (plus judgment) as what makes practical reasoning *reasoning,* then we might think of the flanking acts or states of appetite or will as what makes practical reasoning *practical* or *fully practical.* And we might think of this three-part schema as displaying the fundamental components (and the relations among them) required for a basic unit of fully practical reasoning. (Henceforth, I will be using the expression "practical reasoning" to mean "fully practical reasoning.")

III. The Scope of Deliberation

Once we see the basic schema, we might wonder whether the picture it presents is complete. We might wonder, that is, whether there is more to the reasoning part of practical reasoning than what is captured in the schema by "deliberation" (plus "judgment"). One way of pressing that familiar question in this context would be to ask whether some rational process or activity can play any role in our acquiring our *ends,* in our coming to have the intentions we have, the intentions from which deliberation begins. If the answer to that question is "no," then we might suppose that the basic schema I have presented is essentially the whole story of practical reasoning. And in that case we might say that the reasoning in these practical contexts is subordinate to and wholly in the service of antecedent desire. ("Wholly in the service of antecedent desire" sounds a bit more dignified than "slave of the passions.")

Aquinas, however, clearly believes that the answer to our question is "yes": reason or intellect can—in fact, must—play a role in our discovering or constructing the ends that are presupposed by deliberation. In

(B) INTENTION: to walk to work every day
DELIBERATION: if I'm going to walk to work every day, I'll need to get up earlier;
JUDGMENT: so I should get up earlier
CHOICE: to get up earlier

(C) INTENTION: to be happy (possess the complete good, live the best life)
DELIBERATION: happiness consists in a life containing an appropriate balance of pleasure and virtue; JUDGMENT: so I should live *that* life
CHOICE: to pursue a life containing an appropriate balance of pleasure and virtue

[12] Aquinas introduces these technical terms at *ST* IaIIae.11–13. The full discussion in *ST* IaIIae extends from q. 6 to q. 17. For more detail, see my "Practical Reasoning and Reasons-Explanations."

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fact, he seems tempted to offer two different accounts of the role reason can play, one of which ascribes a wide scope to deliberation and the other of which restricts deliberation's scope more narrowly. On the one account—the wide-scope account—deliberation can be about things that are for the sake of our ends (as the schema makes clear), but also, in significant ways to be explained shortly, about the ends themselves. We can *deliberate* about what will be our ends. This is what it means for deliberation to have wide scope.

On the other, narrow-scope account—the account suggested by Aquinas's foundationalism about practical reasoning—deliberation is restricted to reasoning about things that are for the sake of intended ends and cannot also be about the ends themselves. This is what it means for deliberation to be restricted to a narrow scope. For Aquinas, however, this sort of restriction on the scope of *deliberation* does not amount to a restriction on *reason's* scope in our practical lives, because deliberation is not the only rational process or activity that bears on practical matters. As we have seen, he identifies a nondeliberative cognitive capacity which he sometimes calls "synderesis," a disposition by which we grasp fundamental practical principles—ends—from or on the basis of which deliberation can proceed. On this account, synderesis and deliberation together—not deliberation alone—constitute the rational components of practical reason.

Now, Irwin thinks it is clear that Aquinas sometimes ascribes wide scope to deliberation and sometimes (more often, perhaps, when he is emphasizing the foundationalist structure of practical reasoning and the role of synderesis in it) restricts deliberation's scope. That is the conflict Irwin finds in Aquinas's account. Let's look at the grounds for ascribing these two different positions to Aquinas, beginning with the case for a restricted-scope reading.

A. The case for nondeliberative practical understanding (with restricted-scope deliberation)

As we have seen, Aquinas has clear foundationalist commitments, and they inform not only his account of theoretical cognitive activity but also his explanation of the nature of practical reasoning. In a passage we looked at earlier (*ST* Ia.79.12), he develops an extended analogy between the structures of theoretical and practical reasoning, which I have set out in table 1.

In theoretical thought, we know some things because we have reasoned to them—they are conclusions of theoretical inferences. But theoretical knowledge of this sort must rest ultimately on foundations: propositions that we know just in virtue of themselves and not by having reasoned to them from other propositions. Aquinas calls these foundational propositions "first principles"; he claims that we know them just in virtue of themselves (they are known per se); and he argues that, because of the

TABLE 1. *The Analogy between Theoretical and Practical Reasoning*

	Theoretical Reasoning	*Practical Reasoning*
Natural (unmediated) apprehension of principles known per se	Understanding (*intellectus*)	**Synderesis**
Reasoning from principles to conclusions	Theoretical reasoning (typically, demonstration)	**Deliberation**
Mediated apprehension of conclusions	Theoretical knowledge (*scientia*)	**Practical judgment**

sorts of creatures we are, we have a natural capacity (which he calls "understanding") for grasping first principles. Theoretical reasoning, therefore, begins from the understanding of first principles and proceeds to conclusions which we can know by virtue of their inferential connection—in this case, typically their deductive or demonstrative connection—with first principles.[13]

Aquinas insists that practical reason manifests the same sort of foundationalist structure.[14] In some cases when we judge that certain things are to be done, our judgment is the conclusion of a process of reasoning, deliberation. But judgments of this sort must rest ultimately on foundations—first *practical* principles—that we grasp just by virtue of themselves. Aquinas says that, like theoretical first principles, these practical foundations must be known per se, and it must be that we have a natural capacity—practical understanding or synderesis—for apprehending them as such. Like theoretical reason, then, practical reason must begin from first principles grasped by a kind of understanding and proceed to judgments which we can know by virtue of their inferential connection—in this case, typically a nondeductive connection—with first principles.[15]

With the foundationalist structure of practical reason in place, Aquinas asserts that nondeliberative practical reason—synderesis—must provide the ultimate starting points for practical reasoning. There must therefore be a cognitive act, the natural understanding of first practical principles, antecedent to the first component in our original basic schema (set out in Section II above). Deliberation (a cognitive process) presupposes intention of an end (an appetitive state), as the schema indicates. But synderesis (a nondeliberative cognitive act or state) must ultimately lie behind the intention of an end. In this structure, deliberation does not extend (ultimately) to our ends; synderesis accounts for our grasp of our (ultimate)

[13] Aquinas takes the demonstrative syllogism, a particular form of deductive inference, as the paradigm of theoretical reasoning. See my "Theory of Knowledge."

[14] See also *ST* IIaIIae.47.6.

[15] On the nondeductive nature of practical inference, see my "Practical Reasoning and Reasons-Explanations."

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antecedent ends. Deliberation's scope is therefore restricted to things that are for the sake of any ultimate antecedent ends that fall within synderesis's scope. For these reasons, attributing a restricted-scope account of deliberation to Aquinas seems above reproach.

B. The case for wide-scope deliberation

Aquinas claims that, strictly speaking, deliberation is only about things that are for the sake of an end and cannot be about ends themselves. But that claim can sound more restrictive than Aquinas intends it to be. He allows, for instance, that basic units of practical reasoning of the sort we have identified admit of being linked together in longer chains of practical reasoning.[16] In chains of this sort, deliberation will be about things that are *for the sake of* our antecedent ends, things which, in turn, *become our ends,* once deliberation has led us to choose them, and can be the starting points for further deliberation. Chains of reasoning of this sort provide a way for deliberation to be about ends, but only about *subsequent* ends, and then only *indirectly,* by being directly about things that are for the sake of distinct antecedent ends.

Aquinas also allows another, extended sense in which deliberation can be about *antecedent* ends, that is, about the ends presupposed by the process of deliberation. Some of our ends are abstract, general, or indeterminate in various ways. Practical reasoning that begins from an end of that sort must first specify or make determinate or identify the constituent parts of the end before it can proceed to consider concrete actions that might realize the end.[17] Aquinas's central discussion of the nature of happiness makes this point, too. All human beings desire happiness, the complete good, Aquinas believes. But the fundamental desire for happiness is wholly indeterminate; no one can pursue happiness without first forming a conception of what happiness, the complete good, *is,* what it consists in, what its essential components are (if it has component parts). Aquinas supposes that forming a determinate conception of happiness can be a process of practical reasoning in the form of deliberation, moving us from an antecedent desire for happiness to a more determinate desire for a life of civic virtue, say, or beatific vision, or a life with an appropriate balance of pleasure and virtue.[18] Moreover, it is reasonable to think that when one deliberates about happiness in this way, one is deliberating about *happiness,* about what happiness *is.* But since happiness is the antecedent end presupposed by deliberation in this sort of case, it will follow that Aquinas is committed to thinking that we can deliberate about our antecedent ends in these kinds of cases. Practical reasoning that begins

[16] Examples A and B in note 11 link together in this way.
[17] Example A in note 11 is a case of this sort.
[18] See example C in note 11.

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from a desire for happiness must, on Aquinas's view, begin with deliberation *about* happiness. And so he allows important cases in which deliberation's consideration of things that are for the sake of an end amounts to or involves consideration of the end itself in a certain respect. In important cases, then, deliberation not only can but must have wide scope.[19] The general point here is that deliberation needn't be solely about external means—causal, productive, or preliminary means—to some end. (I will have a bit more to say about these special cases in Section V below.)

Thus, Aquinas ascribes to deliberation sometimes a wide scope and sometimes a narrow scope. Now, these two accounts pretty clearly pull in different directions, but it is worth pointing out that nothing we have seen about them so far shows them to be strictly incompatible. Perhaps, for example, Aquinas intends to maintain that practical reasoning is ultimately foundational in its structure with nondeliberative synderesis explaining our access to first practical principles. But where other ends are concerned—ends that are not ultimate or first principles—deliberation can have a wide scope of the sort we have seen. In that case, deliberation could be about our antecedent ends just so long as it is not the *ultimate* story about our grasp of ends.

IV. Irwin's Conflict

Irwin argues, however, that when we attend to Aquinas's broader moral theory and the ways in which he employs his understanding of the nature and structure of practical reasoning in developing the theory, conflict emerges.

Aquinas's account of the cardinal virtues—prudence and the three moral virtues, justice, temperance, and courage—is built on the general account of practical reasoning we have been developing. The moral virtues are settled dispositions in the appetitive part of the soul that incline a person to the human good, where the human good consists in action or activity in accordance with right practical reason:[20]

> [I]t must be said that the end of the moral virtues is the human good, and the good of the human soul is to be in accordance with reason (as is clear from Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* IV). (*ST* IIaIIae.47.6)

[19] "We can derive things from the natural law in two ways: in one way as conclusions from its first principles; in a second way as specifications of certain general principles. . . . The second way is like the way that craftsmen in the course of exercising their skill adapt general forms to specific things. For example, a builder needs to adapt the general from of a house to this or that shape of a house." *ST* IaIIae.95.2, trans. Richard J. Regan, *Aquinas: Treatise on Law* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000).

[20] "Right practical reason" refers to practical reason that correctly identifies ways of acting that lead to or constitute genuine human good.

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Aquinas goes on in this passage to explain what he means by "in accordance with reason":

> Thus it is necessary that the ends of the moral virtues pre-exist in reason. For just as certain things exist in theoretical reason as naturally known (which *understanding* has to do with) as well as certain things—conclusions—that come to be known through them (which *theoretical knowledge* [*scientia*] has to do with), so certain things pre-exist in practical reason as naturally known principles. The ends of the moral virtues are of this sort because an end holds the place in the case of things that can be done that a principle holds in theoretical matters, as was held above. Moreover, there are certain things in practical reason that are like conclusions. Things that we get to starting from the ends themselves—things that are for the sake of the end—are of this sort. Prudence, which applies universal principles to particular conclusions where things that can be done are concerned, has to do with these sorts of things. For that reason it does not pertain to prudence to establish the end for the moral virtues. It pertains to prudence only to deal with (*disponere*) things that are for the sake of the end. (*ST* IIaIIae.47.6)

Prudence, then, is the virtue associated with deliberation, and since deliberation is only about things that are for the sake of the end, so is prudence. The right practical reason required for moral virtue, therefore, requires right deliberation about things that are for the sake of the end, and prudence is the virtue grounding right deliberation. But right practical reason requires more than prudence; it requires in addition that naturally known (correct) first principles be in the soul antecedently, on the basis of which prudence can proceed to a correct judgment about what is to be done. The natural understanding that grasps these practical principles is synderesis, as Aquinas goes on to explain:

> [I]t must be said that natural reason, which is called "synderesis," has established the end for the moral virtues . . . , not prudence, for the reason already given. (*ST* IIaIIae.47.6.ad1)

Thus, moral virtue requires synderesis and prudence. Moreover, prudence requires moral virtue, for correct apprehension of first practical principles is not sufficient for right judgment about what is to be done. If the appetites are not oriented by stable dispositions toward their ends, they can distract or deflect deliberation in its movement from right ends to judgments about things that are for the sake of those ends. Moral virtue and prudence, then, are codependent.

Consider now the following theses drawn from this brief account of the role of practical reasoning in virtue:

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(P) Prudence (the virtue associated with deliberation) is right practical reason about things that are for the sake of an end, not about ends.
(S_1) Synderesis (natural understanding of first practical principles), rather than prudence, apprehends the right ends (the ends of the moral virtues).
(V) Moral virtue requires being directed toward the right end (which distinguishes virtue from vice).

As Irwin points out, (P) and (S_1) together appear to commit Aquinas to a restricted-scope conception of prudence as far as the ends of moral virtue are concerned. Moreover, (S_1) and (V) entail

(1) That a virtuous person is directed toward the right ends (and is thereby distinguished from the vicious person) is explained by the activity of synderesis.

As Irwin goes on to argue, however, the details of Aquinas's understanding of synderesis undercut this result. That is to say, given Aquinas's conception of it, synderesis cannot play the role that (1) claims for it. This is because Aquinas accepts

(S_2) Synderesis (a) is possessed by everyone and (b) functions by natural necessity.[21]

If Aquinas accepts (S_2), then, given his commitment to (S_1), he is committed also to

(2) Everyone necessarily apprehends the right ends distinctive of virtue.

But if Aquinas's understanding of synderesis—expressed in (S_1) and (S_2)—commits him to (2), then it is clear that he cannot also endorse (1).

Moreover, (2) and Aquinas's view that the apprehension of the right ends distinguishes the virtuous person from the vicious one together entail

(3) No one is vicious,

which is a happy conclusion, but not one Aquinas would be happy to endorse.

[21] "The natural law directs human beings by certain general principles . . . and so the natural law is one and the same for everyone" (*ST* IaIIae.91.5.ad3, trans. Regan).

"Everybody knows truth to some extent, at least regarding the general principles of the natural law" (*ST* IaIIae.93.2, trans. Regan).

"We should say that the natural law regarding general first principles is the same for all persons both as to their rectitude and as to knowledge of them" (*ST* IaIIae.94.4, trans. Regan).

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There is one more important difficulty, as Irwin notices, if we introduce into this mix Aquinas's views about free choice.[22] Aquinas holds that a given volition or action is up to us, in our power, only if it is or is subject to what he calls free choice. Moreover, he argues that we have free choice only about things that are subject to deliberation. But these two claims, namely,

(FC_1) Something can be up to us, in our power, only if it is a matter of free choice, and
(FC_2) Something can be a matter of free choice only if it is subject to deliberation,

entail that a crucial component of moral virtue—whether or not we are disposed toward the ends of moral virtue—is not something that is up to us or in our power. That is,

(4) Our relation to the ends of moral virtue is not something that is up to us, in our power.

This is because (by [1]) whether or not we apprehend the right ends (which apprehension is necessary for moral virtue) is determined by synderesis. But because synderesis is nondeliberative natural understanding (by [S_2]), its products do not result from deliberation. Thus, our apprehension of the right ends is not something that is in our power. Moreover, because synderesis is *natural* understanding, its functioning and its results are necessitated (by nature). So, again, they will not be in our power. But these results—expressed in (4)—are not acceptable to Aquinas, who holds that it is up to us whether we value the ends of virtue.

So there are *several* conflicts that emerge from Aquinas's particular use of his account of practical reasoning in his theories of prudence and moral virtue. Irwin finds the root of the difficulties in Aquinas's two different accounts of deliberation, one of which gives a wide scope to deliberation and the other of which restricts deliberation's scope. Given those two accounts, it is open to Aquinas to take a wide- or restricted-scope view of prudence, the deliberative virtue. (P) itself is open to either interpretation. But Aquinas opts for a restricted-scope view of prudence (at [S_1]), assigning to synderesis alone the role of setting the ends of moral virtue, a role that synderesis (as Aquinas understands it at [S_2]) is unsuited to fill. In fact, Aquinas's double-mindedness about the scope of deliberation is mirrored in a double-mindedness about synderesis. The conception of synderesis expressed at (S_2) must understand synderesis's deliverances to be "thin," highly general, nonsubstantive. That must be the case if synderesis is possessed by and functions by nature in *everyone,* virtuous, vicious, and moral

[22] These views are developed by Aquinas in *ST* IaIIae.6–13.

middlings alike. But the conception of synderesis expressed by (S_1) requires that its deliverances be "thick"—substantive enough to distinguish the right ends constitutive of moral virtue. So (S_1) and (S_2) express, respectively, a thick and a thin conception of synderesis. And here we are, back to the issue of thick versus thin foundations for practical reasoning.

In the discussion of prudence and moral virtue we have been tracking with Irwin, Aquinas appeals to thick synderesis to do the work left undone by restricted-scope prudence. Aquinas would have done better, Irwin thinks, to give prudence wide scope and give up the thick conception of synderesis. Abandoning (S_1) and giving (P) a wide-scope reading would have left Aquinas with a consistent set of fundamental principles and a more attractive theory of practical reasoning. According to Irwin,

> Aquinas relies so heavily on a wide conception of deliberation in his claims about free choice, happiness, and the specification of the general principles of natural law that he ought also to rely on it to answer the questions about virtue and prudence.[23]

V. Aquinas Unconflicted

What Irwin thinks Aquinas *ought* to have done, I think Aquinas actually *does.* That is, I think Aquinas does assign prudence wide scope in setting the ends for moral virtue, and so has no need to—and does not, in fact—appeal to a thick conception of synderesis. Aquinas does not make it as easy to see this as he might have done, and thus he leaves himself open to misunderstanding. Nonetheless, I think that a close look at a crucial text or two will show that we are not forced to read Aquinas as Irwin does. In order to make my case, I will need to say something about (P), (S_1), and (V), starting with (P).

A. Regarding (P)

Aquinas clearly asserts (P). But he also clearly holds that (P) is compatible with prudence's having wide scope. Prudence (and deliberation generally) must have an antecedent end from which to begin. But our reasoning can be about that very antecedent end in certain sorts of cases, namely, when the end is general or indeterminate and we reason about how to specify it, or when the end is formal or abstract and we reason about what it consists in or how it might be concretely instantiated.[24]

[23] Irwin, "The Scope of Deliberation," 41.

[24] As in examples A and C in note 11. Example A is a case in which the end intended is intended under a general description; example C is one in which the end intended is intended under an abstract or formal description.

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The idea in these sorts of cases is that there is a sense in which a description of an end in purely formal terms and a description of it in terms of what satisfies or instantiates the formal description are different descriptions or conceptions of one and the same end. Similarly, there is a sense in which the description of an end in general terms and a description of it that specifies it are descriptions of one and the same end.

To illustrate, consider a case involving prudence where issues of temperance are in play. Let the intended end be *acting in accordance with right reason,* and let prudence deliberate about what acting in accordance with right reason consists in, reaching the judgment that right reason requires, in general, eating healthily and, in this particular case, declining the double chocolate cheesecake.[25] This case, like the others we have looked at, has the right sort of features to count as a case in which prudence has wide scope. I will put this case to work in just a moment. But the first point to see is that Aquinas's asserting (P) is neutral with respect to whether he assigns prudence wide or only restricted scope, or commits to a thick or only a thin conception of synderesis.

B. Regarding (S_1)

Now consider (S_1). Aquinas clearly asserts that synderesis apprehends the ends of the moral virtues. But now suppose that prudence has wide scope with respect to the ends of moral virtue, as in the case I have just described of the double chocolate cheesecake.[26] Given these assumptions, it seems that synderesis's apprehension of the ends of moral virtue would be compatible with prudence's having wide scope with respect to the ends of virtue *provided* that the ends that synderesis apprehends are formal or general or indeterminate and that prudence reasons about what these ends consist in or how they are to be specified.

If, as in the case before us, the end apprehended by synderesis were *acting in accordance with right reason,* then there would be room for prudence to reason about what course of action in general or in some particular circumstances might be one that is in accordance with reason. Not only might prudence reason in that way, it seems that it must. For without some specification or determination of the end *acting in accordance with right reason,* one cannot get started pursuing that end. In order to pursue it, one has to do something specific. Supposing that the prudent person in this case reasons as I have suggested and chooses ultimately to decline the cheesecake, then prudence will have found a way of pursuing the end presupposed by

[25] INTENTION: to act in accordance with right reason
DELIBERATION → JUDGMENT: right reason requires eating healthily
CHOICE: to eat healthily
INTENTION: to eat healthily
DELIBERATION → JUDGMENT: eating healthily requires declining the cheesecake
CHOICE: to decline the cheesecake

[26] See previous note.

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the person's reasoning, the end of acting in accordance with right reason. Prudence will have identified something for the sake of that end but also will have successfully reasoned *about* the end (in the sense of having settled what the end itself consists in, in general or here and now).

This way of characterizing the ends that synderesis apprehends—as sufficiently formal or general—is just to say that wide-scope prudence is compatible with synderesis, provided synderesis is conceived of as appropriately thin.

So why think that Aquinas commits to a thick conception of synderesis? Irwin claims to find Aquinas committing himself to *both* a thick and a thin conception of synderesis in this passage:

> [I]t must be said that [i] being conformed to right reason is the proper end of each moral virtue. [ii] For temperance aims at this, so that a person does not turn away from reason on account of his concupiscences, and similarly in the case of courage, so that a person does not turn away from the right judgment of reason on account of fear or bravado. [iii] This end has been established for human beings in accordance with natural reason. For natural reason dictates to each person that he should act in accordance with reason. [iv] But how and by means of what things a person attains to the mean of reason in his acting pertains to the arrangement of prudence. For although attaining to the mean is the end of moral virtue, the mean is found through the right arrangement of things that are for the sake of the end. (*ST* IIaIIae.47.7)[27]

Irwin claims to see the *thin* conception in Aquinas's claim, at [iii], that "natural reason dictates to each person that he should act in accordance with reason" but the *thick* conception at [ii]: "temperance aims at this, so that a person does not turn away from reason on account of his concupiscences, and similarly in the case of courage, so that a person does not turn away from the right judgment of reason on account of fear or bravado." This bit at [ii] points to thick dictates of synderesis because it identifies ends that distinguish the virtues from one another.

But I think the passage need not be read in the way Irwin suggests. Natural reason (that is, synderesis) dictates acting in accordance with reason (at [iii]); this is a thin dictate. And Aquinas tells us at the beginning of the passage (at [i]) that this thin dictate articulates the proper end of

[27] I have inserted the lowercase roman numerals in order to be able to refer to parts of this passage in the discussion that follows.

Irwin translates the passage a bit differently at [ii]: "For temperance aims at this, namely, that a human being should not deviate from reason because of appetites; and similarly, <the aim of> bravery is that a human being should not deviate from the correct judgment of reason because of fear or rashness" (Irwin, "The Scope of Deliberation," 27–28). Irwin's "namely" in the first half of [ii] renders Aquinas's *ut*. I take it differently, as introducing a result clause, with "so that." See the discussion that follows in the text.

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each moral virtue. (The demonstrative "this" at the beginning of part [iii] refers us back to part [i], not to what has just been said in part [ii]. The clarifying second sentence in part [iii] makes that clear.)

Now, what are we to make of the bit of the passage (part [ii]) that mentions the specific virtues of temperance and courage? I think we need not read it as Irwin does, as identifying two thicker dictates of natural reason, one for temperance (*that a person does not turn away from reason on account of his concupiscences*) and one for courage (*that a person does not turn away from the right judgment of reason on account of fear or bravado*). We can read the two parallel "so that" (*ut*) clauses as result clauses rather than as parts of the intentional objects at which temperance and courage aim. So part [ii] might be read as telling us that temperance aims at acting in accordance with reason where the *result* of *temperance's* aiming in that way will be that the temperate person does not turn away from reason on account of his concupiscences. Read that way, part [ii] of the passage, consistently with the rest of the passage, identifies only a thin dictate of natural reason. Aquinas need not be switching here back and forth and back again, from thin to thick and back to thin conceptions of synderesis and its results. Moreover, Aquinas refers elsewhere and often to versions of this thin dictate.[28] That provides more evidence that the consistent thin-dictate reading is correct here.

It should also be said that part [iv] of the passage can be taken as confirming the wide-scope prudence hypothesis I have been suggesting. Temperance (and each of the other virtues) aims at the mean of reason. That (namely, *the mean of reason*), like the expression with which it is meant to be synonymous, *acting in accordance with right reason,* is purely formal. And what Aquinas says here in part [iv] is that specifying the mean of reason is the work of *prudence.* So when prudence determines *what the mean actually consists in* in circumstances where concupiscences are in play (in general terms or in a particular situation), prudence will be determining what the end of the virtue of temperance consists in. Hence, prudence will be exercising its wide-scope powers on a thin end presupposed by prudence and apprehended by synderesis. That is, in fact, the picture I have sketched in the double chocolate cheesecake case we have been considering.[29]

Thus, (S_1) requires clarification:

[28] "It is the law for human beings, which is allotted by God's ordination according to their condition, that they act according to reason" (*ST* IaIIae.91.6, trans. Regan).

"The virtue of the irascible and concupiscible powers consists of being duly obedient to reason" (*ST* IaIIae.92.1, trans. Regan).

"Things to which nature inclines human beings belong to the natural law, as I have said before, and one of the things proper to human beings is that their nature inclines them to act in accord with reason" (*ST* IaIIae.94.4, trans. Regan).

"It is correct and true for all persons that they should act in accord with reason" (*ST* IaIIae.94.4, trans. Regan).

[29] See note 25.

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(S_1^*) Synderesis (natural understanding of first practical principles), rather than prudence, apprehends the (thin) right end of the moral virtues, namely, acting in accordance with right reason.

C. Regarding (V)

If we take Aquinas's conception of synderesis to be consistently thin, then we need to say a bit by way of explanation with regard to (V). Moral virtue requires being directed toward the right ends, and the right ends distinguish the virtuous person from the vicious person. If we follow out the line I have been pushing, then we might say this: There are two sorts of right ends, call them thin and thick (or thin and thicker) ends. The moral virtues aim at a *thin* end—the mean of reason, or acting in accordance with reason. But this thin end does not distinguish virtue from vice because, Aquinas supposes, everyone aims at this thin end. Moreover, given (as I have argued) that this thin end is apprehended by synderesis, which all of us have in common, this is the result we would expect.

But the moral virtues also aim at *thicker* ends—specifications and determinations of *the mean of reason.* These thicker ends will distinguish virtue from vice. The vicious person will, like everyone else, aim at acting in accordance with reason, but will be misguided about what acting in accordance with reason actually consists in, and hence will care about and be directed toward the wrong thick ends. But these thicker ends, insofar as they are specifications or determinations of the thin end of *acting in accordance with reason,* will be determined or specified by deliberation—prudence in the case of the virtuous person, bad deliberation in the case of the vicious person. It seems to me that part [iv] of the passage we have just looked at supports this way of looking at it.[30]

Thus, (V) requires clarification:

(V*) Moral virtue requires being directed toward the (thick) right end (which distinguishes virtue from vice).

Now, when (P), (S_1), and (V) are understood in the ways I have suggested, they do not conflict; that is, they do not lead to the contradictions Irwin identifies. We should conclude, therefore, that Aquinas himself consistently endorses wide-scope prudence and a correspondingly thin conception of synderesis.

[30] See also *ST* IaIIae.94.3, trans. Regan: "Since the rational soul is the specific form of human beings, everyone has an inclination from one's nature to act in accordance with reason. And this is to act virtuously. And so in this regard, all virtuous acts belong to the natural law, since one's own reason by nature dictates that one act virtuously. But if we should be speaking about virtuous acts as such and such, namely, as we consider them in their own species, then not all virtuous acts belong to the natural law. For we do many things virtuously to which nature does not at first incline us, but which human beings by the inquiry of reason have discovered to be useful for living righteously."

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VI. Conclusion

I want to conclude by calling attention to a moral that might be drawn from my reading of Aquinas's foundationalism about practical reasoning. It is this: If Aquinas consistently maintains that synderesis's dictates are thin—and, as I have told the story in my brief account, they are exceedingly thin—then the grounds for finding in his foundationalism the basis for a robust kind of intuitionistic moral epistemology are also exceedingly thin. On my reading, the deliverances of the natural understanding that belongs to practical reason are perhaps purely formal but certainly entirely general and, for that reason, practically useless by themselves. The real work of practical reason begins with deliberation, and deliberation, Aquinas tells us, is complex, messy, contingent, and not intuitionistic. In this respect, the foundationalist model and the analogy with theoretical reasoning which he deploys tirelessly can mislead. The practical foundations Aquinas's account provides are, in fact, quite meager. That is not to say that there are none or that he does not really believe the model or the analogy. It is to say that we should not bring to the model or the analogy robust expectations (perhaps acquired elsewhere) of what moral foundations will be like and what substantive work they will do for us in moral theory.

This particular moral, in fact, precisely parallels a moral I have drawn in another, related context.[31] Aquinas argues in the treatise on happiness (*ST* IaIIae.1–5) that some one desire, a desire for a single ultimate end, is presupposed by and provides the foundation for all our end-directed thought and action. That looks like an untenably strong claim about our fundamental desires. Properly understood, however, this claim turns out to be quite thin: he means only that all our end-directed thought and action is directed toward a purely formal ultimate end, living the best life. The real work in pursuing the best life begins with reasoning about what the best life consists in. And that is a question for practical reasoning itself—wide-scope deliberation—not something given to it as part of its ultimate, unquestioned and unquestionable foundations.

It seems to me, then, that Aquinas's understanding of practical reasoning and its scope and limits is consistent throughout his theory of ends and his theory of the virtues. Deliberation has wide scope. Nevertheless, there are some ends that are presupposed even by wide-scope deliberation. Those ends, however, are exceedingly thin.

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[31] See my "Ultimate Ends in Practical Reasoning."

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