Timothy Chappell

Of course, there already is something of a *rapprochement* between analytical philosophy and Thomism in the area of ethics. It was 1978 when Philippa Foot, herself an atheist, wrote that "it is my opinion that the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral philosophy, and moreover that St.Thomas's ethical writings are as useful to the atheist as to the... Christian" (Foot, *Virtues and Vices* p.2). The standing of Aquinas' writings in, say, analytical philosophy of mind or of science may still be rather low nowadays—perhaps undeservedly so. But there is nothing marginal about Thomistic views in contemporary analytical ethics and political philosophy. This is partly thanks to older writers like Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Alasdair MacIntyre; more recently, it is thanks to well-known writers like John Haldane himself, to Robert and Marilyn McCord Adams, to Ralph McInerny, to John Finnis and Germain Grisez, to the American communitarians, and to many others. A younger generation of analytical writers in ethics with more or less substantial, and more or less direct, debts to St.Thomas is also emerging, or has emerged: for instance Robert George, Christopher Martin, David Oderberg, Hayden Ramsay, Henry Richardson, Daniel Westberg, and, if I may say so, myself.

So how might Haldane's proposed *rapprochement* be further advanced in ethics? Consider MacIntyre's verdict on "the Enlightenment project of justifying morality" (*After Virtue* pp.54–5):

> The moral scheme which forms the historical background to [Enlightenment ethical thought] had... a [three-part] structure: untutored human nature, man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-*telos*, and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other. But the joint effect of [secularisation] and the scientific and philosophical rejection of Aristotelianism was to eliminate any notion of [*telos*]...[this] leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear... hence the eighteenth-century moral philosophers engaged in what was an inevitably unsuccessful project; for they [attempted] to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other.

MacIntyre's Thomist critique has all sorts of phenomena of modernity in its sights—liberalism, humanism, individualism, capitalism, Kantianism, utilitarianism, rights theory. Above all, perhaps, his target is

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modern analytical ethics, for that is the place where these various isms are actually spelled out. The charge is that analytical ethicists are the inheritors of the Enlightenment confusions diagnosed in the quotation. Like the thinkers of the Enlightenment, they have little or no sense of their own historical position; also like those thinkers, they are necessarily involved in an "impossible and quixotic" task, because they are looking for justifications for morality of a kind that simply can't be found without the restoration of the notion of the human telos.

"Some project, some failure!" the defender of the Enlightenment project might retort. "Just look at what we have *achieved*. If the Enlightenment project means liberalism, individualism, rights theory and so forth, then never mind the theory's *pedigree*: look at its *results*. Judge it by the success of democracy and the enfranchisement of the oppressed and marginalised; judge it by the replacement of the workhouse by the welfare state; judge it by the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Or if the Enlightenment project means the ethical consequences of secularism and of the rejection of Aristotelian science—why think that reversing these changes, with *its* ethical consequences, could be desirable even if it were possible? Would you really rather have the Inquisition than the alleged liberal moral vacuum, dormitive virtues than quantum theory?"

Such defenders of the Enlightenment project– who will often also be analytical ethicists– will naturally suspect Thomistic ethicists like MacIntyre of an impractical reactionary romanticism all too common in Hegelians, of harking back to a golden age of "community" that was equally non-existent whether located in Athens or in eighteenth-century Scotland, and to which in any case no realisable political settlement could possibly even approximate. (Robert Wokler on *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* on the Scottish Enlightenment: "MacIntyre's elegiac tribute to a noble and indigenous tradition of practical reasoning seems sometimes to approximate a Scottish National Party broadcast of the songs of Ossian"– Horton and Mendus, edd., *After MacIntyre* p.118.)

Unfortunately there seem to be Thomists who are only too happy to justify these suspicions, and who, apparently without qualification, regard the Enlightenment as (in Sellars and Yeatman's immortal phrase) A Bad Thing. Such Thomists, while having nothing even remotely resembling an implementable political agenda of their own except a crude, backward-looking, pre-Reform Bill Toryism, will indict the Enlightenment as the source of dangerously liberal, individualistic, radical, socialistic and anti-Catholic ideas like these:

> That human laws are a product of human reasoning; that human law is based on rational agreements; that all humans are by nature equal; that in matters of justice the individual conscience is the only true authority,

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> and neither needs nor can have the mediation of another; that the election of leaders is the people's prerogative; that resistance to a tyrant is not sedition, because tyranny is itself seditious; that property rights are not absolute: property is held in trust for the good of the community; that the religious practices of other faiths must be treated with tolerance; that, since belief is a matter of choice, no one must be compelled to adopt a particular faith...

— I'll stop. Have you spotted the snag yet? The snag is that I have drawn every one of these "anti-Catholic Enlightenment ideas" by direct quotation *from Aquinas*.[1] This suggests the following moral: in political philosophy and in ethics, Thomism has not come to abolish the Enlightenment project, but to fulfil it.

One possible Thomist reaction to the incoherences of the Enlightenment project is to reject it root and branch; but this leads the Thomist into a pretty indefensibly reactionary position. Another possible reaction, both simpler and more decently serious, is this. If MacIntyre is right (and I think he is) that the ethics of the Enlightenment project, as exemplified by modern analytical ethics, lacks coherence because it lacks a good account of the human *telos*, then let's secure the magnificent achievements of the Enlightenment project in forwarding social justice and human well-being by giving it a good account of the human *telos*. After all, if MacIntyre is right, Thomists are uniquely well-placed to do this.

Not, incidentally, that it is exactly a new suggestion that Catholic theism and Enlightenment humanism might possibly have more fruitful relations with each other than (unfortunately) they have normally had. The suggestion is already there in Hilaire Belloc's little classic *The French Revolution* (1911). Let me leave the last word to him (pp.127–8):

> A man who knows both the Faith and the Republic will tell you that there is not and cannot be any necessary or fundamental reason why conflict should have arisen between a European democracy and the Catholic Church. When we examine those who concern themselves most with the deepest and most abstract side of the quarrel, we find [that] it is impossible for the theologian, or even for the practical ecclesiastical teacher, to put his finger upon a political doctrine essential to the Revolution and to say, 'This doctrine is opposed to Catholic dogma or to Catholic morals." Conversely, it is impossible for the Republican to put his finger upon a matter of ecclesiastical discipline or religious dogma and say, "This Catholic point is at issue with my political theory of the state."

1 The references, all to *Summa Theologiae*, are respectively: 1a2ae.97.2ad1; 1a2ae.97.1; 2a2ae.104.5.ad2; 1a2ae105.1c; 2a2ae.42ad2; 2a2ae.66.2; 2a2ae.10.11; 2a2ae.10.8.

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