Thomism and Practical/Public Philosophy

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It is well known that studies on public philosophy and public ethics have greatly increased in number over the past twenty years, fostered as they have been by the *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie*, which has mainly interested the practical philosophy of Aristotle and Kant. For a while now, the question of practical reason has been placed at the center of the debate, with contributions from the main schools: phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, neo-Aristotelianism, neo-Kantism, critical Rationalism, analytical philosophy, etc. Regardless of the final judgment made on that debate, whether or not the results are to be judged positively or not, or whether they have underlined the serious limits of contemporary research into moral philosophy, it must be stated that the Thomistic school has not significantly contributed to it except marginally. And yet it would seem that this school possesses solid arguments for a revival of practical philosophy linked with ontology and anthropology, which method has normally been set aside by many contemporary moral philosophies. What is more, the collapse of Marxism has accentuated the need for a long-term confrontation between Thomistic-Christian ethics and the rationalist, "liberal" and emotivistic ones. I would like to thematize the above arguments, beginning with a few reflections on the relationship between ethics and metaphysics and on the status of practical reason.

I. Metaphysics and Ethics

Over a pluri-millenary period, the task of ethics can fundamentally be reassumed in replying to the three questions around which moral discourse rotates: (a) what is good and what is evil, and why? (b) what is the *summum bonum* for man? (c) how must one live, given that he who acts well perfects himself, while acting badly he degrades himself? The very meaning of these interrogatives establishes the nature of ethics as a knowledge of a speculative-practical type: speculative in its structure and practical in its object (human action) and its aim (directing action).

Since the Enlightenment, the answer to these interrogatives has become a real riddle, despite the great vitality which qualifies contemporary ethics. This is mainly due to the crisis of the notion of the Good.

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The passages thanks to which the question of Good, of vital importance in Greek and medieval thought, has ceased to occupy a satisfactory place in modern philosophy are sufficiently known. I am not simply referring to the substitution of the scheme of virtues with that of the passions inaugurated by Hobbes, nor to the much less developed treatment of the problem of the Good in the great modern philosophers. In these, there has been such a shift that the central problem of practical philosophy is no longer the teleological orientation of human action toward the Good, but rather the critical-justificatory discussion on moral obligation, values, norms or, more simply, the means of the *Pursuit of Happiness*. Equally linked to this shift is the abandoning of the problem of the *summum bonum* for man already remarked on by Kant: "The question of the *summum bonum* seems to have fallen into disuse, or at least it has become a merely secondary question."[1]

Noncognitivist currents have adopted procedural and "weak" versions of the theory of the Good. It is not clear what the area of the universal on which it bases itself might be, faced as it is with a conflicting plurality of ethical codes. The call to democratic pluralism and democratic tolerance is insufficient, as it does not constitute a rational criterion of choice, but merely a variable empirical parameter. Without a common rational base, it is difficult to avoid tolerance for all positions. Versions of "neo-Enlightenment" public ethics are alive today in the dichotomy between the area of the universal (progressively minimal) and tolerance for every code (progressively maximal).

In underlining the function of theoretical philosophy, do we assume overly onerous obligations for public philosophy? In order to answer this question, it might be helpful to distinguish between the philosophical level and the practical level. In the former it is necessary to assume "metaphysical obligations," because this is in keeping with the nature of philosophy as an attempt to see the very nature of reality: only what is valid in principle for everyone can pretend to be considered obligatory for everyone. In the field of concrete action the problem is a different one, because to live and cooperate within society it is not indispensable, although desirable, for everyone to share the same speculative principles. It might well be sufficient to agree to, albeit for very different reasons, a certain "practical frame" of norms and values.

After Kant, it has become a commonplace to separate metaphysics and morals. Positivism and neopositivism have accepted this assumption: for these currents, "nature" is only physical nature, a vast complex of phenomena subjected to determinism and therefore deprived of any relationship with morality. Without this notion of nature, in which the

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1. *Critica della ragion pratica* (Bari: Laterza, 1963), p. 82.

Kantian heritage is very tenacious, and from which every ontological connotation and finality have disappeared, it would not be possible to maintain Hume's "great division" between "is" and "ought." We do not oppose the world of (human) nature, of being and *telos* to the world of morality and freedom, but we root the latter in the former: the world of freedom/morality necessarily presupposes that of being, at least that of human nature of which freedom is one of the attributes. It is therefore necessary that practical reason requires theoretical reason for several grounds: (1) moral good is a particularization of ontological good; (2) the notions of value, aim, norm, law, merit and freedom, that is all the fundamental systematic notions which along with the notion of the Good give structure to ethics, possess analogical meaning and are at least in part studied by metaphysics; and (3) what is more, existential moral truth is measured in reference to the rectitude of will, directed toward the real aims of human life. And these are not known to practical reason without the intervention of theoretical reason, which reveals some of the premises regarding the being and the absolute, which qualify as meaningful the search for an aim.

II. Speculative Knowledge and Practical Knowledge

Moral philosophy therefore presupposes speculative philosophy and ethics metaphysics. This does not imply that the former be reduced to only a partial aspect or a mere deduction of the latter, because the respective paradigms of rationality are different, given that practical knowledge is subdivided into numerous levels so as to match the extremely complex structure of moral experience. Once this has been admitted, there still remains the fact that metaphysics is, for practical knowledge, an illuminating support which discloses its sense. In his *Scienza nuova prima*, Vico observes that there cannot be a science of moral things without the fundamental help of the truths conquered by metaphysics. This is linked with the unity of the intellect: the speculative intellect, the aim of which is the consideration of truth, and the practical intellect, aiming at ruling human action, are not two separate faculties but a single one. *Intellectus speculativus per extensionem fit practicus*, said the Scholastics.

The difference between speculative knowledge and practical knowledge can briefly be summarized as follows (the scheme, in fact, should be divided up even further):

(1) (relative) autonomy of *praxis* from *theoria*;
(2) difference between *praxis* and *techne* (between ethical-po-

litical-practical knowledge and technical knowledge);
(3) value of practical knowledge, which lies between the necessary knowledge of speculative cognition and purely opinable knowledge (*doxa*);
(4) difference both in the aims (knowledge for the sake of knowledge in theory; knowledge for the sake of action in practical philosophy) and in the argumentative procedure (apodeictic=theory; topical-dialectical=practical knowledge).

The rift between metaphysics and morals, between ontological nature and freedom, renders the situation of ethics very precarious. The terminal point of the process is the thesis of "ethics without truth," which, incidentally, is the equivalent of a death sentence in reference to both morality and moral philosophy. On the other hand, the refusal of the Aristotelian tradition in moral philosophy, a central event in the moral science of the last few centuries, began at a theoretical level with the critique and the abandoning of the notions of *telos*, of human essence with its aim / *telos*, and of the possibility of knowing good. In Aristotle, the framing of practical knowledge requires the availability of theoretical knowledge, without however having to accept the thesis according to which the former is merely deduced from the latter. That it is not possible to recover practical Aristotelian knowledge without also taking up his metaphysics has been affirmed, for example, by Manfred Riedel. Phronesis/prudentia is not, by itself, able to build up practical knowledge. The rehabilitation of practical philosophy along Aristotelian lines has attempted to go beyond this aspect. But in the long run, it is fruitless to consider as valid Aristotelian practical philosophy when Aristotelian metaphysics has been dismissed as dead.

III. The Basic Scheme of Moral Science: Some Indications

There are four contributions that must come into play in the constitution of ethics as a science: an anthropological notion, articulated according to the two aspects of human nature—"as-it-is" and "as-it-ought-to-be-if-it-were-aware-of-its-essence-and-reached-its-*telos*"; a notion of the Good; a set of norms on good and evil. By operating on these levels, what is constituted is, for the essential or at its peak, moral science. We must be careful, however, that the various phases of practical rationality, which also incorporates the institution of the relationship between *phronesis*, virtue, eudaemonia, etc. are not exhausted. The moral science scheme, mentioned above and handed down up to the Enlightenment, is essentially given in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and is teleological.

It is well known that much of the Aristotelian argumentation is polarized by the determination of the best *telos* for man. An anthropological notion is also introduced, or rather the idea of human nature, along with the doctrine of the rational parts of the soul and of its more noble part which is open to the divine. The indication of "man-as-he-ought-to-be" is another strong aspect of the scheme, which also presupposes the doctrine of the act and of power: the movement from "man-as-he-is" to "as-he-ought-to-be" is a growing actualization. In its turn, good, which is what all things desire, is the aim. By attaining it, man accomplishes and actualizes his essential nature. Markedly teleological, Aristotelian ethics left somewhat in the background the concepts of value and absolute obligation, which had already been hinted at by Plato and which later received new light from Christian ethics.

It is intuitively acceptable that to leave out one or more of the four contributions cited above from the building of ethics would be equivalent to disorganizing it and throwing it into confusion. Yet this is how many Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ethics operated, generally using their weapons against the concept of human *telos* and of "man-as-he-ought-to-be-if-he-were-to-realize-his-essence" (which is a notion that some thinkers have attempted to stifle in ethics), and against a certain metaphysics of good and of value. From this point on, the task of moral science became the burden of Sisyphus, as there is no rational mediation capable of linking the two residual levels, which therefore remain extraneous to one another and reciprocally unintelligible: what have man as he is and how he acts, in fact, to do with the universe of moral norms? What origin, foundation or sense does this possess? The task of ethics becomes a desperate one because moral laws cannot be deduced from empirical facts (and in this Hume was quite correct), if not in the statistical form of customs and average social behavior. But in this case, we are no longer at the normative level of moral philosophy, but rather in the field of the sociology of morality.

Kant, who inherited the outline of the moral problem from the Enlightenment, adding his objections regarding metaphysics and finality, tried to escape an almost impossible situation, without however being able to completely conceal the *impasse* in which moral philosophy found itself. Once speculative reason failed to give its support in knowing the *telos* and the Good, there was nothing for it but to base the imperatives of moral law on themselves, that is on the self-legislation of pure practical reason. This was a coherent solution, given the premises; that it is also a solid solution is another matter. In Kant, the project still maintains a certain stability, because it was secretly nourished by the influence of the Christian moral tradition, which was still rather diffuse

in his era and which outlined a sufficient profile of the *bonus vir* and his virtues. But after him? Basing morality on itself means exposing oneself to the temptation of reworking it *ad libitum* and of denying it, in the end, any cognitive value. The two paths have not infrequently been followed by post-Enlightenment moral philosophy. Among the most noteworthy consequences of the process there is the risk of a dissolution of the practical character of moral philosophy, represented by the "knowledge to direct action" sequence. In the noncognitivist position, moral philosophy cannot know; therefore it cannot expect to direct action except on emotivist and irrational bases, which would no longer be a "directing" but rather a "letting" things occur as they occur. Loss of the practical character of ethics is a direct consequence of the loss of its cognitive character.

IV. The Impasse of Modern Ethics and Nietzsche

The project of modern moral science, regardless of its variegated and extensively diversified nature in many details, is unified at least negatively, as it has more or less moved away from the principles of moral science itself. Hume based morality on the passions; Kant on the self-legislation of pure practical reason; Kierkegaard on the general (ethics for him is the general, and in that he remained dependent on Hegel in his opposition); Scheler on emotional intuition; Sartre on freedom; Moore maintained that the idea of good was undefinable. Opposed to one another in several assumptions and notions, each criticizes the others and yet all of them refute the linking of metaphysics and ethics, nor do they succeed in giving back to reason its command over ethics. "From then on," writes Alasdair MacIntyre, "the ethics of culture which preceded us (and therefore also our own) lost all logical basis and publicly acceptable justification. In a world of secular rationality, religion could no longer give such a background and common foundation for moral discourse and action; and the fact that philosophy had failed in its attempt to furnish what religion was no longer able to give was one of the most important causes for its loss of a fundamental cultural role and its transformation into a marginal, strictly academic issue."[2]

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2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dopo la virtù* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988), p. 68. For the current paper, I have drawn inspiration from MacIntyre's diagnosis, according to which the Enlightenment project of a justification of morality was destined to fail because of the intimate incoherence of the underlying conceptual scheme, but I have added to his diagnosis an essential point which *Dopo la virtù* overlooks or in any case leaves too implicit: that is, the beginning of the dissolutive process in the Aristotelian

The crisis of modern moral science, which had gained ground in the eighteenth century and reached its peak in the nineteenth, came about in two phases: in the first, there was a disintegration of classical moral science, and in the second philosophy was no longer able to substitute it with another, equally powerful one capable of legitimately replying to the vital questions posed by moral experience. Many versions of moral science were born, each of them in disagreement regarding the task of reason in moral experience, whether, that is, its role should have been executive or auxiliary, on the function of the passions, interests, and so on. Ethics was split into two directions: one logical-normative, the other empirical-positivist.

The heritage we are faced with in ethics is the crisis of rationalism, which in various versions leads to a complete dualism between "is" and "ought," which it declares itself incapable of mediating. At this point, rationalism is reversed into the irrationalism of ethics without truth and ethical emotivism, with which it eliminates itself: the use of reason is invoked in order to suppress reason. And the choice for reason is intended as an act of faith: in this case it will be necessary, as in Popper, to speak of the irrational basis of rationalism.[3]

But the person responsible for pushing the *destructio* of ethics to its extreme was Nietzsche with the conjoined use of the genealogical method and that of suspicion. In his writings, the modern *volo* reaches its terminal stage, marked as it is by the abandoning of the capital doctrine of *nous/intellectus*. Nietzsche has demonstrated in negative that moral reason crumbles if the light of the theoretical one is extinguished and if the intentional opening out of the *intellectus* to being does not take place.

V. Recent Attempts at Renewal:
Hermeneutics and Ethics of Discourse

Hermeneutics and the ethics of discourse currently constitute two paths followed by moral research. The former has promoted, with

tradition and the incapability of the *novatores* to establish ethics were due to the crisis of theoretical reason, with the consequent decline of the intellectual perception of Good/Value.

3. Let us cite just one of Popper's many assertions: "It . . . is certainly impossible to demonstrate the correctness of any ethical principle or talk in its favour as if it were a scientific assertion. Ethics is not a science. But even when there is no scientific-rational basis for ethics, there is however an ethical basis for science and rationalism" (K. R. Popper, *Die öffene Gesellschaft* [Bern-München, 1970], 2: 283). According to Popper, all of the discussions on the definition of the Good or on the possibility of defining it are absolutely useless.

Gadamer's fortunate *Warheit und Methode*, the rehabilitation of practical philosophy, maintaining the actuality of Aristotelian ethics and its concept of *phronesis*: in this it has found allies in the work of Hannah Arendt, Wilhelm Hennis, and Joachim Ritter. The hermeneutic method tends to interpret documents and traditions belonging to the past, adroitly giving them life and grasping their potential meaning for the present. However, as the direct access to being is still precluded along this path, it is only with difficulty that the hermeneutic method in ethics can go beyond a wise comprehension of the situation, a discerning homage to rules arising from the past, or a recuperation of the link between reason and decision. It can conciliate reason and decision by virtue of phronetic or prudential knowledge capable of guiding action; but only within a cultural horizon assumed as given and almost untranscendable, in which the act of interpreting is for the most part never closed off and always in process. Gadamer claims: "A definitive interpretation would in itself be a contradiction."[4] One might well ask: Where would the contradiction be? His hermeneutic method adopts a "weak" neo-Aristotelian paradigm because in taking up elements from the Aristotelian practical philosophical, hermeneutics has detached them from the overall scheme of his speculative philosophy, which is no longer held to be acceptable. The division that separates what once formed a unity runs the risk of invalidating the very recuperation of practical discourse. It is not clear if Gadamer's hermeneutics, in its resolute opposition to the models of rationality proposed by positivistic scientism, is able to find an access to being which is different from the infinite process of interpreting, mediated by the various cultural languages (juridical, theological, artistic, classical texts).

Despite their merits, the communicative ethics themselves, based on a pragmatic-universal method (Habermas) or a pragmatic-transcendental one (Apel), assume as given a ground which is not subject to careful scrutiny: the complete disconnection of ethics from metaphysics. And in this, as in other factors, they are still part of the Kantian school. Both are aware of having tried to reformulate Kantian moral theory on the problem of the foundation of norms through the categories of the theory of communication. Despite these common intents, there are three points which divide Apel's and Habermas's ethics from Kant: it relinquishes the distinction between the intelligible and the phenomenic; it goes beyond the interiorizing and monological Kantian framework, aiming at a public intersubjective discourse; it thinks it has resolved the foundational problem of ethics eluded by Kant via a deferment to the "fact of reason" (the experience of being obliged by duty).

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4. *La ragione nell'età della scienza*, p. 83.

The specific performance assigned by Apel to the ethics of discourse is that of a rational "final foundation" of the *moral point of view*, and along with this that of a "confutation of moral skepticism and relativism."[5] His position, and that of Habermas, is *cognitivist* (but in a restricted sense as it excludes the discourse on *telos*, virtues, and happiness from the arguments that can be treated in ethics), *formalistic* because it does not indicate material contents and norms, universalist, *anti-relativist*, and, within certain limits, *deontological*. These are also the characteristics of Kantian ethics, which also adds a particular emphasis to duty and intention: do what you have to do, whatever happens. As for the foundation of material norms, this is left to "practical discourses" (Apel), despite the reformulation of the categorical imperative according to an ethics of responsibility carried out by Apel. The traits we have just listed, which represent the advantages of the ethics of discourse, do not, I think, make up for its limits: procedural ethics, completely cut off from metaphysics, light years away from our substantial moral intuitions.

VI. Ethical Neo-Aristotelianism (MacIntyre) and Thomism

In his *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre has undertaken a brilliant study of moral philosophy through the history of philosophy. His text has been amply read and commented, and this precludes the necessity of a wide-ranging introduction. Going straight to the point, I would like to state what I consider to be the positive points and the less convincing aspects of his diagnosis.

The following should be ascribed to the positive aspects: (1) the close and documented critique of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment moral philosophy; particularly noteworthy are the diagnoses of analytical philosophy and ethical emotivism; (2) the suggestion that the Aristotelian ethical tradition should be recovered once more in one of its various forms as the suitable path in order to elude the bankruptcy of contemporary moral science; (3) the idea that a moral scheme as tested and ancient as the one set out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* must have grasped some essential note in human moral experience if, despite its age, it comes up again and again and has been integrated, albeit with some corrections, into Christian thought; and (4) the underlining of the condition of undecidability in contemporary moral discourse.

As for the less convincing aspects in MacIntyre's discourse, they might be summarized as follows:

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5. K. O. Apel, "Limiti dell'etica del discorso?" in *Etiche in dialogo*, ed. K. O. Apel et al. (Genoa: Marietti, 1990), p. 31.

(1) the connection between ethics and metaphysics is never explicitly thematized, even if there are interspersed hints which offer the possibility of further analysis. The failure of the Enlightenment moral project does not begin with the abandoning of the paradigm of Aristotelian ethics, but with the attack on metaphysics and concepts such as *telos*, nature, and good, necessary for the constitution of ethics. Let us spend some time on the concept of the Good, the analysis of which depends, precisely, on metaphysics. In reference to this, the horizon is the same as the one put forward twenty years ago by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, that is, the irrelevance and perhaps the unsolvability of the problem of good in public philosophy, the need to assume a *thin* theory of it and, above all, the priority of the Just over the Good. In reference to this, Michael Sandel has spoken of Rawls's liberalism, calling it precisely "deontological liberalism." Rawls's entire work is based on this frequently reproposed assumption, which overturns the essential sequence of the systematic concepts of moral philosophy. This is: Good-Obligation-Right-Just. Therefore, the Just is never the fundamental notion of practical reason.

(2) the theory of *lex naturalis* as the fundamental law of human morality has been omitted. Here, neo-Aristotelianism is a little undefended because in the *Nicomachean Ethics* there is not a complete philosophy of what is in force according to nature and not according to convention. In order to develop this theme it would have been necessary to direct one's attention to Christian philosophy and especially to Aquinas's thought.

In the Thomistic doctrine, the concept of *lex naturalis* is elucidated according to the notions of *participatio, vis illuminativa et directiva, inclinatio* and *connaturalitas*, which are determined in metaphysics and anthropology. The philosophy of natural law, situated at the crossroads between ethics and metaphysics, requires a corresponding deepening of both fields.

According to Walter Lippmann, "public philosophy is known as natural law"; on the other hand, the aim of political society is the common good. We can therefore consider the two notions of common good and *lex naturalis* as the ultimate cardinal points of public philosophy, whose tradition found its apex in the Declaration of Independence and, in our era, with the writings of W. Lippmann, J. Courtney Murray, J. Maritain, etc.

MacIntyre's work is a good start for the renaissance of moral science and public philosophy. But in order to lead this renaissance to a good end, it is necessary that Aquinas's metaphysical wisdom and his school bear their fruits. The future of Thomism also depends on the Thomists: over the past decades they have perhaps not given sign of sufficient courage, farsightedness and presence within the debate. About 60-70 years ago, the difficulties of public philosophy arose from the harsh blow afforded by totalitarianism. Now, with the end of that phase, they derive from within nontotalitarian cultures and countries. Public neutrality and public agnosticism are not a good deal for democracy. The renaissance of political science and practical reason will be a "resurgence" (revival, renaissance), or rather a new dawn of values, a purification of tradition, a return to a violated ideal order. Even public philosophy, just like peoples and nations, can be restored and flourished again only thanks to a deepening of its own tradition.