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Porter, THE RECOVERY OF VIRTUE: THE RELEVANCE OF AQUINAS FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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literature, namely, the objection of Patrick Nowell-Smith that obedience to divine commands represents an *infantile* form of morality. Thus Mouw has a chapter entitled “Commands for Grown-Ups.”

Overall, Mouw’s *The God Who Commands* should provide continued impetus for discussion of an ethics of divine commands.

NOTES

1. St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, translated by E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1964), p. 215.

2. *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, translated by Sr. Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 91.

3. Hymn “Father, we thank thee who hast planted.”

4. Hymn “On this day, the first of days.”

5. *DAILY PRAYER, The Worship of God*, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 5, Prepared by the Office of Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 192.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics, by **Jean Porter**. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990. Pp. 208. \$24.95 cloth.

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The author sets out to interpret Aquinas’ theory of morality as it is found in the *Summa Theologiae*—a work, she notes, which represents his “mature theological synthesis.” Porter emphasizes from the outset that a chief value of Aquinas’ theory is its unity, and its way of holding together a wide array of different concepts, as well as its power to suggest interconnections among the various themes and problems with which Christian ethicists still must deal. Achieving a synoptic view of Aquinas’ theory of morality is no easy matter, for the *secunda pars* of the *Summa* is enormous, consisting of over three hundred questions, which comprise over fifteen hundred articles. This presents problems not only in the order of magnitude, but also interpretive problems concerning how to weigh and interrelate the quite different ways Aquinas treats such subjects as the virtues and the relation between human action and the final end. The interpreter is challenged to find a strategy for how to go about giving a balanced exposition of Aquinas. Porter tackles the

problem, first, by limiting her attention to the “more strictly philosophical components,” and hence bracketing the more properly theological ones. Second, she focuses upon aspects of Aquinas’ theory which, she argues, are most illuminating to contemporary debates in Christian ethics: namely, “the conception of the natural end, or good, of the human person, seen in relation to his theory of goodness in general.” This strategy pays off in some areas better than others. As I will point out later, the bracketing of theology poses certain difficulties.

The book begins (Ch. 1) with “a very compressed account” of the competing theories and loose-ends in contemporary Christian ethics. Porter takes up the MacIntyrean theme of the “fragmentary character” of modern moral discourse. Various Christian theorists, she observes, emphasize one or another conceptual piece of the moral life (e.g. charity, precepts, basic goods, etc.) but are not able to advance a unified account of these elements. Her brief analysis in the introductory chapter sets the stage for the next two chapters in which she examines Aquinas’ general theory of goodness and his understanding in particular of the human good. Here, the author hopes to find something that might contribute to a recovery of an “integral account” of natural goodness and human virtue. She proposes that: “...as I read him, Aquinas does indeed affirm many of the theses with which he is traditionally associated, and which seem most seriously problematic today, including the necessity of a metaphysical theory of goodness for moral theory, the existence of a hierarchy of being, and the claim that some kinds of actions are never morally permissible.”

The two chapters on metaphysics and anthropology (Chs. 2 & 3) represent the centerpiece of the book. Porter covers a broad set of topics in these chapters: the good as a transcendental; the good as perfected being; the good as perfected action; the plurality and unity of the goods; the order of human inclinations; and proximate and final meanings of happiness—to mention a few of the most important ones. Interwoven throughout the exposition and interpretation of these topics, Porter discusses standard problems which arise in connection with the relationship between Aquinas’ metaphysics and anthropology on the one hand, and his moral theory on the other: e.g., whether human fulfillment is brought about merely by natural processes; the self-evidence of the order of human inclinations to the goods; whether speculative frameworks are incommensurable paradigms; the is-ought problem; the relation between human self-love and the moral order; whether the *finis ultimus* is a dominant or an inclusive good; whether narrative structures can adequately articulate the rationality of action in pursuit of the final end; whether such narrative structures and life-plans are incommensurable; and the problem of whether Aquinas’ metaphysical hierarchy underwrites a notion of intra-species hierarchies, which might be used to underwrite social and po-

litical structures of domination. The analysis throughout these chapters is quite impressive, even though the number of issues and problems covered require her, for the most part, to skate along their surfaces.

The next three chapters treat various aspects of Aquinas' understanding of the virtues: in relation to affectivity (Ch. 4), to law and justice (Ch. 5), and finally in terms of prudence and the theological virtues (Ch. 6). Once again, Porter interweaves her exposition and interpretation with present-day concerns. Of special note here is her account of the virtue of justice and exceptionless moral norms. Porter's brief, but illuminating, discussion of law is especially good. She argues that, for Aquinas, natural law is not just a source for what we might call private morality, but rather is "the basis of a rational public order." As Aquinas pointed out in his treatment of fornication, law is formulated with respect to what generally happens, not with regard to the odd exception (II-II.154.2). Law, to use the parlance of legal theorists, is always over-inclusive, and cannot be expected to address every particular harm or good in isolation from what is required to order relationships of equality in a just community. Porter's treatment of this issue is superb, and might help to rectify the tendency of some scholars to regard Aquinas' theory of natural law as an all-purpose set of moral prescriptions bearing upon individual action regardless of circumstances and the common good. And, I should add, Porter is able to clearly make these points without retreating from the position that moral good or evil can be intrinsically predicated of human acts.

The final chapter includes her brief and summary assessment of the significance of Aquinas' achievement. His permanent significance, she avers, lies "precisely in the fact that his thought contains the seeds of its own transcendence." Porter makes use of Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, where MacIntyre makes the point that Aquinas' thought is not just a set of already-completed doctrines, but a tradition of enquiry that dialectically engages and appropriates rival traditions. Porter's own remarks in the final chapter are very sketchy, and are suggestive rather than programmatic. Even if we cannot accept Aquinas' account as it stands, she says, his way of integrating the various moral, anthropological, and metaphysical elements can provide a model for a contemporary Christian theory of the moral life.

The Recovery of Virtue is about two hundred pages in length. Given the range and complexity of the material, and the fact that any one of these chapters could be a book-length study in its own right, Porter's work must, of necessity, address only the surfaces of the issues. In this respect, I have no serious criticism of the book, since she does what she promised; namely, helping the reader to take at least the first steps in acquiring a unified view of Aquinas' moral theory. Porter engages areas of Aquinas' moral theory

which are notoriously difficult. To her credit, she does not try to make his theory easier, or more palatable, by avoiding those things which are especially vexing to the modern mind. Nor does she iron-out the rough edges by offering idiosyncratic interpretations of the texts.

My chief criticism concerns her methodological decision to (generally) bracket theology proper. This is not to say that Porter avoids theology altogether, but I am not sure that Aquinas' method of unifying the central concepts of morality can be adequately understood without bringing theology to the center of attention. There are two areas in which her account probably needs to incorporate the theological point of view. First, her discussion of the final end as an "ideal of fully rational action," uses terminology ("ideal," "a life that approaches the ideal of human perfection") that is not Aquinas', and which might suggest that the problem of the *finis ultimus* is, for Aquinas, simply a problem of showing that human action requires the adoption of a heuristic, unified end. Porter rightly insists that the notion of a unified, ultimate aim is crucial to Aquinas' account of the rationality of action: "...not only Aquinas' moral theory, but by implication his metaphysics as a whole, will stand or fall with the way in which we answer these questions." As Porter realizes, it is necessary to proceed with caution on the subject of finality and the state of perfected activity. But does his metaphysical vocabulary stand or fall completely independent of theology? Can we (and did Aquinas) address the matter "as a whole" without theology?

It is easy to give an account of this issue that is either too strong or too weak. A weak account would seek to show that certain ends proximate to our nature are open to (or weaker still, not in contradiction with) supernatural direction of the agent toward God as final end. Whatever other things Aquinas has to say about this matter, Porter contends that "[t]he specific natural ideal of humanity remains the proximate norm of morality." From this, she more cautiously notes that action toward a supernatural end does not render the proximate, natural end(s) "otiose or irrelevant." This, of course, is true so far as it goes, but I do not believe that, bearing in mind his foregoing work in the *prima pars*, Aquinas' discussion of happiness in the first five questions of the *prima-secundae* authorizes such a weak reading. The preordination of the will (in contrast to freedom of choice) is not characterized by Aquinas merely as openness to a good (and certainly not an "ideal") that transcends finite goods; nor is he ambiguous about the doctrine that, objectively speaking, the final end is neither the human soul nor the goods immediately proportionate to its powers. On the other hand, a strong account might seek to show that the beautifying God is, without further qualification, the natural end of human acts. As is well known from the controversy surrounding *Humani Generis*, this kind of strong view leads to any number of problems concerning nature and grace which, I believe, should not be anachronistically

read back into Aquinas. And neither does Porter. She correctly observes that, according to Aquinas, God is not directly conceptualizable in this life, and therefore if moral reflection required a direct knowledge of the divine end, then moral reflection would be impossible. Once again, this also seems true so far as it goes.

The question is whether Aquinas' treatment of the *finis ultimus* (in the *Summa*), as well as other themes concerning the perfectibility of man, was intended to be an account of human knowers and agents completely bereft of any tradition of revelation, and hence whether he keyed his account of the concrete moral life and its norms to those principles of nature isolable through philosophical analysis alone. Therefore, when we consider Porter's statement that "[t]he specific natural ideal of humanity remains the proximate norm of morality," we need to go on to ask how to distinguish nature and nature-as-remaining-within-grace. Which of these meanings was Aquinas trying to explicate in the various sections of the *Summa*? Surely, this question has to be brought to the foreground before we can interpret with any confidence what Aquinas meant by natural standards of perfection.

If we were to follow Porter's own recommendation for reading the *Summa* as whole, it might make more sense to defer judgment about knowledge of the proximate and sufficiently final ends until we examine, among other things, Aquinas' analysis of the cognitive acts whereby we do know (in this life) the *primum verum*, which is given in the question on faith at the outset of II-II. This, however, would require us to remove the theological brackets. The problem of ends is, by Porter's admission, such an important and difficult issue that wading into it while bracketing theology is like trying to grapple with the problem with one arm tied behind the back. In any case, it will prove to be a frustrating method of reading Aquinas.

Second, the exposition and interpretation of Aquinas' teaching on virtue, as well as law, must take into account his understanding of sin (which Porter mentions only in passing), the historicity of revelation (Porter does not dig into the historical sequence of divine dispensations on law—a sequence around which he organizes the *de legibus*), and the infused theological virtues. Porter does have some things to say about the theological virtues; but, interestingly, it amounts to less than four pages. What she says about the theological virtues is quite correct. Nonetheless, I wonder whether we can embark upon an understanding of his teaching on virtue without removing the theological brackets. What weight, for example, ought we to give to his rather abstract and brief treatment of the natural virtues in I-II, given the fact that the cardinal virtues are not treated in any detail until II-II, after he has examined the *lex nova* and the infused theological virtues? In sum, I question whether the deeper tensions and cross-currents which stand at the core of Aquinas' creative synthesis can be brought to light without the contrasts

between philosophical and theological points of view, which zig-zag throughout the *Summa*. This is especially pertinent for a book that wants to explore the relevance of Aquinas' "mature theological synthesis" for contemporary Christian moral theory.

Having made these criticisms, I should conclude on a clear note of admiration and enthusiasm for Jean Porter's book. It covers more material within a brief compass than any other book of this sort. Her inclusion of the metaphysical and anthropological background to Aquinas' moral theory marks the book off favorably from other brief monographs on the subject. And, as I said earlier, her treatment of natural law and justice is deftly handled. We can look forward to reading more.