

THOMAS AQUINAS – CONSULTATION

Topic: Freedom
 Convener: Daria Spezzano, Providence College
 Moderator: Shawn Colberg, St. John’s University
 Presenters: William C. Mattison, University of Notre Dame
 Robert Barry, Providence College
 Nicholas Ogle, University of Notre Dame

The 2023 Thomas Aquinas Consultation began with a presentation by William Mattison of the University of Notre Dame on “Virtue and Freedom: Resources from Aquinas on Habit.” He addressed the question of how the virtues incline a person to flourish while at the same time guarding human freedom. From a Thomistic perspective, Mattison argued, virtues are habits, and thus they incline a person to act more promptly and with greater facility. But this raises a crucial question: namely, how is it that the “funneling” of action that occurs in habituation both perfects human activity and guards free choice? Based on his new book, *Growing in Virtue: Aquinas on Habit* (Georgetown University Press, 2023), Mattison addressed this question in detail. In particular, he offered an account of habit which both advanced practical reasoning through stable specification of a person’s powers, and which also necessitated (and did not simply permit) practical reasoning and the instantiation of the person’s habitual ends in concrete actions. Discussion raised the question of what the precise difference is between habit and disposition. For example, can animals have dispositions? Mattison replied that animals can have disposition but not habits strictly speaking. Thus, dogs can have stably disposed qualities, but these would not be specified by reason as habits. Someone raised the point that animals can have proto-moral or quasi-moral inclinations, to which it was replied that these might help to constitute proto-moral dispositions rather than habits as such.

The second paper, offered by Robert Barry of Providence College, was entitled “Freedom Under Original Sin.” Barry took up the following question: how do actual preexisting inclinations toward particular goods diminish or exclude the possibility of freely consenting to the deliberation and choice of the highest good? Relatedly and by contrast, he examined what habits make possible “the exercise of freedom to love God for God’s own sake” in the first moment that one attains the age of reason. Barry’s paper addressed that dynamic in the first act of reason a person exercises upon attaining the age of reason, delineating how it is that someone in that state is free, or not, to consent to the possible judgment that “God is to be loved for God’s sake” (ST I-II, q. 89, a. 6). It was noted that pre-existing inclinations make us more or less disposed to certain actions, which the will may or may not consent to. Discussion turned to whether there is a difference between consent versus voluntary and non-voluntary actions, and whether we choose evil when we could not have done otherwise than we did. Barry replied that the key moral distinction has to do with the voluntary, that consent is something which accords with one’s will, and that even moral wrongdoing does not pursue evil as such but seeks something under the aspect of the desirable or the good (which may be real or apparent).

The third paper was given by Nicholas Ogle of the University of Notre Dame, and was entitled “Aquinas on Free Choice and the Scope of Moral Responsibility.” In it Ogle defended a reading of Aquinas on free choice that views him primarily as an intellectualist, but one who nevertheless integrates voluntarist elements into his account. He then considered how this reading makes sense of some of the more puzzling aspects of Aquinas’ account of moral responsibility, including his discussion of the voluntariness of omissions and the culpability of actions performed with an erroneous conscience. Ogle argued that strictly intellectualist readings of Aquinas on free choice fail to provide an adequate psychological basis for affirming key conclusions of his moral theology regarding the scope of moral responsibility. For example, the will can present an obstacle to action, either by showing disinterest in what the intellect presents, or by focusing on something else based on one’s desires. In fact, the will has much control over deliberation and does not simply obey the intellect “like a dog fetching a bone.” The judgment “I should do this” does not necessarily lead to the choice to do this. The will can assent or reject to proposed courses; yet it is always reasons-perceptive. Hence, the conclusions of practical reason are ongoing and revisable. Discussion turned to questions of liability in law and how extensively intentionality was to be interpreted.

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