

## EXPERIENCE IN THE ETHICS OF AQUINAS

Prof. Thomas Hibbs (Department of Philosophy, Boston College) discussed the topic of "Experience in Aquinas' Ethics." Brief responses were then provided by M. Cathleen Kaveny, clerk of the Ninth Circuit Court in San Francisco, and Prof. Jean Porter (University of Notre Dame).

Hibbs' presentation covered three areas of Thomas' ethics: textual and etymological bases of "experience," the connection between ethics and experience, and the significance of distinctively Christian experience in Thomas' ethics.

Hibbs first traced the Aristotelian background to Thomas' use of *experimentum* and *experientia*, giving particular attention to the route from *sensus* through *memoria* and *experimentum* to *ratio*. The well-known claim that the intellect is a potency that can be made actual only through interacting with the sensible world grounds the significance of embodiment, concrete experience, and imagination for Thomas' ethics.

Turning to ethics and experience proper, Hibbs noted that Thomas' claim that the first principles of the natural law are *per se nota*, or self-evident, should not be understood in an intuitionist or conceptualist manner. The basic precepts are self-evident only to those who know the meanings of the terms, which are in turn grasped only through experience. Although the most common precepts are known by all, Hibbs noted, the variability and contingency of particulars can make exceedingly difficult the application of universal principles to concrete circumstances. Prudence appraises the relevant circumstances and determines an action that is appropriate to experience in all respects.

The main presentation culminated in a discussion of the role of distinctively Christian experience in Thomas' ethics. Many theologians criticize the *Summa* for subsuming distinctively Christian experience within larger philosophical categories. Hibbs maintained, on the contrary, that a distinctively Christian account of experience and of pedagogy informs Thomas' ethics, including his discussion of the moral law and charity as the form of the virtues.

According to Hibbs, the structure of the *Summa* reveals the centrality of Christian experience for Thomas' ethics. Thomas' placement of the "Treatise on Law" between his treatments of sin and grace was intended to promote awareness that knowledge of the law engenders a personal experience of sinfulness, of humility, and of the need for grace (see *ST* I-II, 98, 2 ad 3). According to Hibbs, the structure of the *secunda secundae*, within which the theological virtues and gifts form the organizing principles, applies and illustrates the teaching that grace perfects nature. Thomas' transformation of Aristotle's ethics is exemplified in the contrast between the acquired virtue of wisdom, which is purely speculative, and the gift of wisdom, which is rooted in charity

and which governs both speculation and practice.

Hibbs observed that in Thomas' ethics the gift of wisdom results from an experiential suffering of divine things (*patiens divina*); the wise, Thomas holds, do not judge according to abstract principles, but according to "sympathy or connaturality." Contemplative experience thus plays a central role in the inspiration of love and service. Hibbs concluded that Thomas' analysis of the "states of life" offers a distinctively Christian contribution to the ancient and medieval debate over the nature of the good life and the relationship between the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*.

Both respondents were in agreement with the main lines of Hibbs' presentation and both sought to expand themes already broached. Thus Porter suggested that exercising the virtue of prudence includes a range of skills, including independent judgment, whose complexity and comprehensiveness could have been further developed by Hibbs. Porter claimed that understanding the role of experience in Thomas' ethics might also profit by attending to the differences between the acquired and infused virtues, and between the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a line of inquiry already registered in Hibbs' discussion of the relation between the virtue of charity and the gift of wisdom.

Cathleen Kaveny, the second respondent, elaborated on Hibbs' treatment of Thomas' understanding of the role of experience in moral decision making. Focusing on the role of circumstances in the specification of human acts, Kaveny developed an interesting application of the twofold Thomistic concern for particularity and universality of moral judgment in the context of current judicial sentencing practices and regulations in the federal courts. The virtues comprising Thomistic prudence, e.g., foresight, memory, circumspection, etc., have typically been exemplified in sound judicial sentences. Recent mandatory sentencing codes at times disallow the weighing of special circumstances surrounding particular cases that Thomas recognized was so important for exercising the virtue of prudence.

STEPHEN J. POPE

*Boston College*

*Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*