

**INTRODUCING THE  
GOALS OF  
ARISTOTELIAN-  
THOMISTIC  
EDUCATION**

**Professor Tracey Rowland**

**FOSTERING PERSONAL AND  
SOCIAL VIRTUES IN  
EDUCATION**

The foundations of a Thomistic theory of education lay in its theological anthropology that correlates faculties of the soul with transcendental properties of being, theological virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The goal of a Thomist theory of education is to produce persons in whom these faculties, transcendental properties, virtues and gifts are well integrated.

The faculty of the intellect is correlated to the theological virtue of faith and the operation of the two together leads the student to the goal of truth. The pursuit of this goal is assisted by the Holy Spirit, especially through the offer of the Spirit's gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel and knowledge.

The faculty of the will is correlated to the theological virtue of love and the operation of this faculty and theological virtue together lead the student in the pursuit of goodness. The pursuit of this goal is assisted by other gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially, piety and Fear of the Lord, also called reverence.

The faculty of the memory whose operation was studied in some depth by St. Augustine and St. Albert the Great, both in a sense teachers of St. Thomas, may be correlated to the theological virtue of hope and the mutual operation of this faculty and virtue can lead the student to a deeper appreciation of the transcendental property of beauty. The Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude also operates in conjunction with the theological virtue of hope. The Apostle's experience of the transfiguration was a case study in the relationship between memory, hope and beauty.

These relationships between faculties of the soul, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love and the transcendental properties being (truth, beauty and goodness) and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord/reverence) do not operate in a vacuum but in a Trinitarian of *perichoretic* manner, influencing one another's movement like partners in a circular dance. The weakness of any one in the ensemble reduces the performance of the others.

The late Fr Benedict Groeschel argued that people tend to have a primary attraction to one or other of the transcendentals and he gave as an example, truth for St. Thomas Aquinas, Goodness for St. Francis of Assisi and beauty for St. Augustine. Through the educational process a person moves from a position of strength in his or her appreciation of one transcendental to an understanding and appreciation of the others.

There is also the transcendental property of unity. Scholars like St. John Henry Newman who regard themselves as heirs to the Thomist tradition, (even if, in Newman's case, he was not a scholastic), speak of the human heart as a site of the integration of all these faculties, virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit. When this integration takes place one can say that the transcendental property of unity is present.

The Thomist tradition has a long history with different tributaries and commentarial schools. Different scholars within the tradition will place accents over different dimensions of the framework. They sometimes offer slightly different accounts of how each of the faculties of the soul interact with one another - but all see the goal of education to be the formation of the different faculties of the soul – both the cognitive faculties and the affective faculties. As Joseph Ratzinger once remarked: 'love and reason are the twin pillars of all reality' and 'knowledge is never purely the work of the intellect' - 'it can certainly be reduced to calculation and experiment', however if it 'aspires to be wisdom capable of directing man in the light of his first beginnings and his final ends, it must be "seasoned" with the "salt" of charity'. In effect

‘this means that moral evaluation and scientific research must go hand in hand, and that charity must animate them in a harmonious interdisciplinary whole, marked by unity and distinction’.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, with reference to St. Paul’s notion of the natural law being written on the hearts of the gentiles, Robert Sokolowski has argued that the word *kardia* in the passage from St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* (usually translated in the Vulgate as *cor*), ‘does not connote the separation of heart and head that we take for granted in a world shaped by Descartes’.<sup>2</sup> Sokolowski concurs with the late German philosopher Robert Spaemann’s claim that in the New Testament the heart is taken to be a deeper recipient of truth than even the mind or intellect in Greek philosophy since it deals with the person’s willingness to accept the truth.<sup>3</sup> Again, different scholars within the long tradition will place the accents in different places but one way or another all agree on the importance of the integration of love and reason.

When one adds or amplifies the Aristotelian dimension in the Thomist tradition additional virtues come into play. Gottlieb Söhngen described the Aristotelian-Thomist account of the virtues as a triptych: ‘on the middle panel the three theological virtues (faith, hope and love), on one side panel the Platonic cardinal virtues (wisdom, temperance, courage and justice), and on the other side panel, the Aristotelian virtues with their heart-piece, the virtue of *Megalopsychia*’, otherwise described as magnanimity.<sup>4</sup> Within the Thomist tradition this concept of greatness of soul is not limited to those who take a prominent role in public life but is open to all. One highly significant element in the Aristotelian-Thomist “cocktail” is that of grace and greatness of soul is exhibited by those from all walks of life who have been receptive to the work of grace.

The fact that Söhngen placed the theological virtues in the centre of the triptych is important. Mark Jordan, a leading American scholar of the Thomist tradition, has described St. Thomas’s synthesis of classical and Christian virtues as an operation in subordinating Aristotle to Augustine. In other words, there is a synthesis of the classical with the Christian but the classical is subordinated to the Christian.

Significantly, for St Thomas, and thus what might be called classical Thomism, there are not two ends to human life, one natural and one supernatural, one mundane and one eternal. All of human life is a preparation for eternal life, that is, preparation for the beatific vision and participation in the life of the Holy Trinity. In this sense, it could be said that the highest goal of an Aristotelian-Thomist education is the preparation of the soul for the beatific vision.

There are however subordinate goals, especially the preparation of the student for participation in public life. In this context Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that education understood in a Thomistic sense should be a preparation for constructive engagement in conflict because it prepares a student for the task of critical and self-critical debate between rival standpoints.

The fact that the Aristotelian-Thomist intellectual system is built upon specific conceptions of the nature of truth and goodness and virtue means that it can critically assess other systems of thought with reference to where they stand in relation to these Aristotelian-Thomist base lines.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §30.

<sup>2</sup> R. Sokolowski, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006): 230.

<sup>3</sup> R. Sokolowski, “What Is Natural Law? Human Purposes and Natural Ends”, *The Thomist* 68 (2004): 507–29 at 525.

<sup>4</sup> Gottlieb Söhngen, *Humanität und Christentum* (Essen: Verlagsgesellschaft Augustin Wibbelt, 1946), p. 37.

Intellectual systems often developed into intellectual traditions. Some of the most powerful intellectual traditions are: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Thomism, Scotism, Kantianism, Liberalism, Calvinism, Marxism and Heideggerianism. MacIntyre argues that each tradition and the institutional cultures it informs will embody four principles:

1. A conception of truth beyond and ordering all particular truths;
2. A conception of a range of senses in the light of which utterances to be judged true or false and so placed within that ordering are to be construed;
3. A conception of a range of genres of utterance, dramatic, lyrical, historical and the like, by reference to which utterance may be classified so that we may then proceed to identify their true senses; and
4. A contrast between these uses of genres in which in one way or another truth is at stake and those governed only by standards of rhetorical effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

An intellectual training in the applications of these principles thus becomes one of the goals of an Aristotelian-Thomist education. This training prepares a student for life in the academy or as a public intellectual or a political leader. It gives the student an understanding of the building blocks of any tradition and makes it possible for students or graduate public intellectuals or other public leaders to stand back from an argument and identify each of its building blocks and make judgments about its practical applications in community life.

An immersion in the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition also gives a student an education in the Greek *Paideia* the Roman *Humanitas* and the Hebrew scriptures and history since Thomism represents a fusion of the cultural treasure of these three ancient cultures with the cultural treasure of Christianity. In this sense, it can be said that one of the goals of an Aristotelian-Thomist education is to supply students with cultural capital so that they are not marooned within the cultural horizons of their own time but can make judgements about their own time with reference to previous cultures, their history, traditions and cosmologies.

In his *Principles of Catholic Theology* Joseph Ratzinger wrote that it is not so much reason in general that is the distinguishing hallmark of the human person in contrast to other creatures, but the specific capacity for understanding and handing on a tradition. This is because cats and dogs, donkeys and dingoes, do have some faculty of reason. It is not the same as the human faculty for reason. It is a much more limited faculty. A dog can discern that the sound of a motorbike means that the postman is about to pull up outside his fence, but it can't teach his offspring to critically analyse competing systems of meaning. Only a human being can do this and the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomism offers an anthropology that explains how this is done.

The goals of an Aristotelian-Thomist education thus include: (i) an understanding of a Christian anthropology – that is, an understanding of the *humanum*, (ii) an understanding of an intellectual tradition, (iii) an understanding of the relationship between the goods of the mundane order, often collectively called the “common good” and eternal life, (iv) an understanding of three great ancient cultures and their influence on the development of Christianity and (v) with these understandings comes the possibility of an integration of faith, reason and love. These goals might in turn be described in deeper detail as the provision of an anthropology, an epistemology, a moral theology, a theological aesthetics, a meta-history and a soteriology where soteriology is not understood narrowly as theological doctrines about the nature of salvation, but more broadly as the nexus between the mundane and the supra-

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<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 100-1.

mundane, the relationship between time and eternity. The person who has understood and integrated all of this was described by Newman as a gentleman fit for professional and public life and by Balthasar as a “complete personality”. In this sense it might be said that the ultimate goal of an Aristotelian-Thomist education is the production of “complete personalities” or persons whose spiritual faculties are well integrated with the whole triptych of Aristotelian-Thomist virtues, women as well as men, and who have absorbed the intellectual elements of the tradition.

Tracey Rowland