CHAPTER 00

BIOETHICS BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

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A primary concern of practical contemporary philosophy is to discover an ethical rationality, which makes possible the justification of determined decisions in the context of a multicultural society, eager to respect diversity within a common political frame. Bioethics is a field in which this necessity is perhaps especially pressing. However, the proposals that have come forth in this sense, along the lines of promoting a "minimalist ethics"– be it in principle (Beauchamp and Childress 1994) or in practice (Engelhard 1986), are open to criticism, and do not appear to be sufficient. I would like to explore another path, more in tune with the ethics of virtue and the classical doctrine of Natural

Law. Yet, before that, I expound the reasons that advise against tackling the question of multiculturalism merely from the perspective of minimalist ethics.

HOW CAN ONE EFFECTIVELY RESPECT CULTURAL DIVERSITY WITHIN A COMMON POLITICAL FRAME?

The debate regarding multiculturalism results from having assumed the presence of diverse cultural communities in the heart of Western societies to be a politically relevant fact. For this purpose, it is important to note that the focus of the debate is not merely on the political implications arising from the coexistence of *individuals* from different cultures, because, in that case, we would speak simply of pluralism. Indeed, whenever we speak of "pluralism," we are essentially referring to the fact that at the core of a single society there exist individuals that have different ideas, points of view, or visions of the world. However, the term "multiculturalism" designates something more: not the diversity of individualities as much as the diversity of cultural communities. In turn, Charles Taylor has argued that the special positive evaluation of cultural diversity in practical discourse along the last years – reflects our conviction that belonging to a particular community affects one's way of being in the world, and the configuration of individual identities, in a way qualitatively different to the fact of having specific ideas or opinions (1992, 64).

At birth, man receives almost everything from society and culture. His growth and development as a human being takes place in the context defined by a network of human

relations, institutions, practices, language, traditions, and values that progressively shape his way of being in the world. Reflection and study help to make conscious in part our way of being in the world. The greater part, however, usually remains dormant, structuring his normal way of understanding reality and explaining it. Often it is the contrast with other ways of being in the world – with other cultures – that sparks the process of reflection and study: what makes normal and dormant knowledge become formal in an objective way. That is what is occurring at this time, continuing one of the plot lines of Romantic thought.

Indeed, the consideration of culture as a particularly relevant factor in the configuration of one's own identity is one of the fundamental contributions of Romanticism to our culture (Taylor 1993). In this way, Romanticism complemented the abstract defense for equal dignity of all men, handed down by the practical philosophy of the Enlightenment. Certainly, the Romantic tendency to identify political and cultural unity also brought sharp problems of a political nature. Since the end of the 19th century, these problems have periodically found an echo in the confrontation between socialist internationalism and different nationalist movements: just one of the practical manifestations of the Romantic conflict between universal reason and historical reason.

The conflict in question has taken a new stance in present times. Partly as a natural consequence of the migratory movements coming from other geographic areas, cultural diversity has come to implant itself at the heart of Western societies and it has done so on terms different from those of long ago. The new cultural communities indeed do not claim a full integration into Western society, whose values very often they do not

completely share. They wish only to enjoy certain, more secure, aspects of the Western culture without giving up their traditions or their particular vision of the world (González 1998a). Now, be it just because belonging to a concrete cultural group holds a great importance for people, be it simply out of respect for the political will of these minorities, or by both reasons at the same time, practical contemporary philosophy has taken on the challenge of the reconciliation of political unity and cultural diversity. This is the challenge specific to "multiculturalism."

Community and Association

A possible way to confront this question is taking up the distinction between community and association that Tönnies made famous. Accordingly, the term "community," would designate the social forms originated in the natural will of men, and the term "association" would designate the social forms originated in rational-instrumental will. In this way – writes Tönnies – "community is characterized by social will as harmony, rites, customs, and religion; association through social will in the capacity of conversation, legislation, and public opinion" (1979, 277).

Based on a similar distinction, Aristotle's *Politics* is usually regarded as an example of the political communitarian approach, contrasting with the modern one, which would be closer to the association model. Certainly, this division should not be done without further clarification.

According to John Rawls, for example, a well-organized democratic society does not totally adjust to the model of community or to the model of association we have just described. It distinguishes itself from community because it does not assume a shared philosophical, religious, or moral doctrine. It also distinguishes itself from simple rational association for two reasons: first because entry into it takes place at birth and not by personal decision, and second because society does not have final objectives and ends in the same sense as associations have (1993, 40-3).

On the other hand, within the Aristotelian approach there is room for a distinction similar to the one noted by Tönnies, a distinction that Hannah Arendt learned to recognize when she contrasted the peculiarity of familiar community with the political community. For Aristotle, indeed, the familiar community consists of natural elements at its basis, and aims at the satisfaction of basic needs of life; by contrast, political community consists of words and actions, and aims at the pursuit of the good life. One can interpret the difference between life and good life as that between living, worrying about what is necessary for life, and living to achieve meaningful purposes. For Aristotle, the *polis* becomes the realm in which man, freed from basic needs, performs noble actions and the heroic deeds of freedom. Hence one understands that in the ancient world politics could be considered the way of life of the free. Actually, according to Hannah Arendt, the distinction between *public and private* in the classical world pointed at the distinction between the realm of freedom, and the realm of the necessary, the latter carrying a certain *deprivation* of recognition and freedom (1958, 61-5).

Yet, passage into modern age was marked by the transformation of that perception of politics. Certainly, Aristotle's broad conception of politics as the way of life of the free had been lost long before modernity. Yet, Hobbes' reduction of politics to a theory of power and of the State marked an explicit and drastic split with the ancient tradition. Likewise, modernity was accompanied by a progressive colonization of the public sphere by the economy, which, for Aristotle, had been confined to the domestic sphere. Therefore, the relationship between private and public is inverted. On the one hand, the public space becomes a space for fighting for one's survival: the very emergence of "political economy" in modern times is significant in this sense. On the other, the good life is now situated in the private sphere: the social paradigm of ethical life moves thus from the *town square* and the battlefield to the bourgeois home (Taylor 1989, 13).

THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IN THE DEBATE ON MULTICULTURALISM

The trend in question, which is interesting for many reasons, is relevant for our topic. The debate on multiculturalism rests on a modern understanding of the relationship between the private and the public. Accordingly, the activities that dominate the public realm are generally reduced to transactions of money and power, while the private world is supposed to assume the dimensions that give meaning to life (Llano 1988; 1991). In this sense, and taking into account the reduction of the public sphere to transactions of power and money, a cynical reading of the multicultural problem would sound like this:

how does one guarantee that people proceeding from distinct cultural communities, maintaining their cultural diversity, can have similar political and economic advantages?

To avoid formulating this problem in such rude terms, we have to realize that political unity also involves a common ethics. Now, people tend to assume that a common ethics is a threat to cultural diversity. This is why proposals of universal yet minimalist ethics seem so reasonable at first glance, especially if they present themselves as neutral. In this regard, and in the concrete field of bioethics, the case of Engelhardt is paradigmatic. For this author, the mission of bioethics as a secular knowledge is to provide a neutral framework for dealing with moral problems in biomedicine, where doctors, nurses, patients, and individuals, in general, maintain diverse moral points of view (1986, 12). According to Engelhardt, such secular bioethics should not accept any concrete vision of a good life, or any particular beliefs about the nature of the good. Rather, it should be an empty and abstract frame, thought up for facing practical problems derived from the coalition of different ethical views (1986, 53). The same could be said of Max Charlesworth's approach, which considers that liberal commitment with the idea of moral autonomy, and the ethical pluralism arisen therefrom, is a "meta-partidist" position (1993, 29).

However, that the ideal of an "empty frame," or, in general, the "ethical minimum," is sufficient to privilege a particular culture over others is something we forget too frequently. At least, it is a position that is not considered in all its implications. Responsible for this neglect is the fact that the very approach to this problem rests on a

mistake about the meaning and scope of the word "culture," namely: considering that culture can be treated as a private dimension of existence.

In this regard, it seems important to note that what we call "culture" cannot be confined to the sphere of the private because all culture, to the extent it is alive, fights to become present in public life. Actually, culture not only reclaims public recognition but aspires to configure the same public sphere (Llano 1999). Political grievances of minority groups can be interpreted from this perspective. The proposal of a mimimalist ethics for the public realm, derives from a liberal understanding of the relation between the private and the public sphere (O'Neill 1997, 14-33). In this proposal, it is falsely assumed that a universal formal morality could be really compatible with the particular ethical views of certain communities, provided that these remain closed to the private sphere.

Yet, if we adopt a practical point of view, that is, the point of view of the agent, one must recognize that a similar double set of morals becomes possible only by making use of a "profound" superficiality. The reason is that such double standard is incompatible with the unity of practical reason, and also with the dynamism proper to all culture. Indeed: as Ruth Benedict pointed out, "once a system of values is accepted and set for living, the individual cannot keep separate for long a parcel of his life, in which he thinks and behaves according to an opposite system of values, without the danger of falling into inefficiency and chaos. Within a society, men try to look for a greater conformity, a justification, and some common motivations. Without this degree of coherence, all the network would crumble"(1974, 19).

Now, the deepest factor leading to cultural homogeneity is the unity of practical reason. Because of this unity, human beings living between two cultures cannot artificially sustain the difference between those cultures for long. The appeal to, or the imposition of, a minimalist ethics constitutes a sort of artifice, whereby one assumes a vision of the private and the public, not necessarily in agreement with that of cultural minorities. In this sense, the proposal, apparently impartial, of a formal morality for a multicultural society, i.e. a morality which should be superimposed upon the ethics of a particular community, is the proposal of a double morality, which contradicts the unity of practical reason, and eventually leads to cultural uniformity.

A NATURAL PATH TO DEFEND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

If we consider cultural diversity in the context of a single society with values worthy of being preserved, the path is not the imposition of a minimum ethics: the path to defend diversity follows, rather, by strengthening cultures from the inside. To a great extent – although not exclusively - such reinforcement is a matter of ethics. Here the word "ethics" means something more than a reasonable alternative to violence (Engelhardt 1986, 39). Ethics, in the sense that we use the term here, refers above all to the intrinsic improvement of man. Such improvement is not as relative as it might appear at first glance. Of course, the diversity of cultures brings with it different standards of what is a good man. Nevertheless, the internal consistency of any culture essentially depends on not contradicting its natural basis. Just as Spaemann observes, "culture is

humanized nature, not abolished nature" (1989, 215; 1991, 245). In those words, the term "nature" could both designate – although in a different sense – as much human nature as Nature as a whole, i.e. the natural ecosystem.

For our purposes here, "nature" will merely designate the desiderative dimension implicit in our practical conduct: nature as a desiring principle, as *ôrexis*. That is how Aristotle uses it in ethical contexts. Accordingly, the human being is taken as a wishful being right from the start. While this is a characteristic common to other natural beings, in humans we find natural tendencies whose satisfaction does not depend simply and plainly from nature. Indeed, unlike what occurs in animals, human tendencies are presented as inconclusive or relatively indeterminate. That relative indetermination can be attributed to the fact that human biology partially reflects a feature of reason – its opening *ad opposita* – a feature that Aristotle puts explicitly in contrast to the determination *ad unum* proper to nature.[1] Now, this "relative indetermination of our biology" explains that the satisfaction of human tendencies cannot take place merely "by nature," but require the intervention of an instance that is no longer simply natural (in the sense of *ôrexis*) – the *prohairesis*, the *electio*, or choice.[2] Accordingly, Aristotle does not define man simply in function of the appetite, but in function of choice: "Hence choice is either derivative thought or intellectual desire, and such an origin of action is a man" (1925). In his account we notice, very clearly, the practical continuity between nature and reason, or the radically moral dimension of human nature. According to Aristotle, man is the being that lives choosing; not only desiring, but desiring intelligently. Intelligence is certainly necessary because man's tendencies are not integrated in advance; its

integration is rather a task entrusted to practical reason, which tries to accomplish this task with a view not merely in survival, but in leading a good life.

Certainly, good life assumes life, and with it the satisfaction of basic needs. Yet, even at this level man behaves differently from animals. The very fact of being intelligent allows man to face his biological needs with a a view in the future.[3] To that corresponds economy, the art of administering goods. Economy unveils a characteristic of man that is not found in animals: man is a being capable of having. In the thought of Aristotle, "to have" is a prerogative of human beings: animals, properly speaking do not possess anything. By contrast, man possesses in various ways[4]: through the body, certainly; but also through knowledge and in a vary particular way through habits (Polo 1996a). Through the body, indeed, we possess material goods; through knowledge we possess reality in an intentional way; finally, we possess ourselves and the world through habits. In this way we inhabit the world – that is, we create culture.

In fact, if one can define culture as "humanized nature," it is important to point out that the humanization of nature depends essentially on the development of habits. These, as Aristotle indicates, can be of three types: intellectual, ethical, and technical.[5] The diverse development of these three kinds habits, allows us to recognize not only what distinguishes a particular culture from others – or the differences that, as Elliot observes, are being noted throughout time in the heart of a same culture[6] - but also the partial superiority – which is never absolute – of some cultures above others. There are cultures superior to others from a technical point of view, and cultures that realize some particular moral values more clearly than others. To the extent that each culture represents a

particular and effective way of inhabiting the world, "culture is formally plural, because it is not susceptible to success, of a definitive culmination" (Polo 1997, 144).

Now, the consistency and perdurability of a culture depends, in a great measure, upon the solidity, not only of its institutions but also of the intellectual and moral habits developed by its people. The intellectual habits, indeed, make possible the achievement of a vital synthesis between the new and the old, fostering the continuity between progress and tradition. The moral habits, in turn, make possible the integration of scientific and technical knowledge into the practical context of human life. From this perspective it is easy to see that scientific and technical habits should be accompanied by a proportionate ethical growth. Otherwise the integration to which we referred is not possible. Ethical integration, indeed, is a matter of growth, because ethical demands are derived from life, and there is no middle point between growth and decadence (Polo 1996b).

From this perspective, protecting a culture cannot mean anything other than enabling or favoring the growth of the habits of its people. As it has already been said, the development of intellectual habits make possible the integration of knowledge and technique into the context of practical life. Moral habits, in turn, provide internal consistency to every community. It is evident, indeed, that if the members of a community are united by the ties of justice, solidarity, reciprocal help, loyalty, etc., the internal consistency of that community will be greater. Now: the development of moral habits is, for its most part, the work of the individual members of the community. But politics can help to this end, for instance, by protecting the natural floor, upon which

moral habits develop. At this point, the appeal to Natural Law becomes opportune. However, in view of the numerous objections that this doctrine has received throughout the history of ethics, it is necessary to specify which Natural Law we are dealing with.

WHICH NATURAL LAW?

Objections to the doctrine of Natural Law are well known. Many of them truly hit upon some accounts of this theory. Yet, I tend to think that, for one reason or another, the version offered by Thomas Aquinas avoids these objections. I also think that it contains some fruitful insights for the current debate on multiculturalism.

Objections to Natural Law

Some objections to the Natural Law doctrine point at the very presence of the term "natural" in what is supposed to serve as a moral criterion. In these objections it is assumed that there is a radical separation between the natural and the moral, so that the mere mention of a natural criterion for morality should be immediately rejected as a sort of naturalism. These objections can be traced back, in different ways, to Kant and Moore. Both authors, however, work with a concept of nature previously reduced to its empirical aspects: the concept of nature employed by modern science. Such concept of nature – ultimately identical to the facts of Hume – is the result of an abstraction, by reference to which morality could no longer make any reference to natural ends. Instead morality should have to be interpreted in purely formal and prescriptive terms; it is what happens

in Kant (González 1999a) and, in another way, in Moore (Simpson 1987, 14). Yet, even the appeal to nature as source or criterion of morality, at least as suggested in Thomas Aquinas' work, would not regard nature, as such, as the only source or criterion of morality. In general, Aquinas refers to the correct moral behavior as *secundum rationem* behavior. In other words: the direct reference is to reason, not to nature. Of course, Aquinas' practical reason is not pure practical reason: unlike Kant's practical reason, Aquinas' takes into account some previous conceptions of the good, ultimately rooted in our human nature.

Objections to Natural Law are also frequently nourished by the confusion that surrounds the term "nature." This, when not merely a name to designate each one's deepest moral convictions (Hare 1993, 120), is taken to be a term susceptible to many meanings, none of which would justify the supposed normative character of nature. Hume's objections go along these lines (1967, 475). Stuart Mill, for his part, rejects the normative meaning of nature arguing that it would be incompatible with human creativity; he also points out that taking nature as a moral criteria, would be an invitation to immorality rather than to morality (1969, 401-2). Moore expresses himself in similar terms.[7] Finally, John Dewey also adds to the line of objections by considering the appeal to nature as a moral criterion incompatible with the possibility of social change (1988, 258).

Now, those objections assume a consideration of nature, which does not succeed in recognizing the peculiarities of human nature, implied in the concept of a "rational nature". To affirm that human nature is rational, indeed, does not only mean that man is

endowed with reason, but – just as we noted earlier – that his very biology is radically affected by the essential characteristic of rationality; the opening *ad opposita*. Among other things, this means that, in the strictest sense, man does not possess instincts, but rather inclinations. The difference between an instinct and an inclination lies precisely in the culmination of the first occurring by nature, whereas, in the second case an act of freedom is needed. On the other hand, it is evident that the harmony between inclinations is not guaranteed by nature. For this reason man has to learn to lead his life. Human life does not culminate biologically but, rather, by its very nature, it requires a moral continuation. Neither creativity nor the possibility of social change are put in jeopardy.

Finally, another group of objections point at the metaphysical and theological assumptions of this doctrine. Those assumptions, it is argued, would impede the recognition of nature as a moral criterion by those not sharing them. This is, for example, the objection of Engelhardt (1986, 37), and could also well be that of Rorty (1991, 15) or of Habermas (1992, 24; 1998, 71), with their reiterated appeals to postmetaphysical thought. In regards to this I would like to underline that Aquinas's Natural Law has certainly a metaphysical foundation. However, his thought on Natural Law designates, more than anything else, the natural way of reasoning on practical matters. A way of reasoning based upon the very structure of our practical reason.

Natural Law and Practical Reason

Martin Rhonheimer has thus argued that natural law is the law of all practical reason (1987; 1994a). For the purpose of understanding the reach that this expression has for our topic, it is necessary to show its connection with nature and habits as noted above. In this regard, it is fit to remind a key feature of between classical practical reason in contrast with modern practical reason – both in its Kant and in its utilitarian version – namely: its connection with nature. This connection is evident in the case of Aristotle, at least if we deepen in the concept of virtue, and it is also found present in Aquinas, although with an important difference which I will point out later.

The connection of practical reason and nature in the case of Aristotle is an essential one. We could even say that without a reference to nature there is no practical reason for Aristotle. This could be shown by putting some texts together. Thus, after having referred to the different types of life, Aristotle writes in Chapter 7 of his first book of *Nichomachean Ethics*: "there remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle (of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought)."[8] Further on, in Chapter 13, speaking on the parts of the soul, he gathers this thought saying: "Therefore the irrational element also appears to be two-fold. For the vegetative element in no way shares in a rational principle, but the appetitive and in general the desiring element in a sense shares in it, in so far as it listens to and obeys it; this is the sense in which we speak of paying heed to one's father or one's friends, not that in which we speak of 'accounting' for a mathematical property. That the irrational element is in some sense persuaded by a rational principle is indicated also by the giving of advice and by all

reproof and exhortation. And if this element also must be said to have a rational principle, that which has a rational principle (as well as that which has not) will be twofold, one subdivision having it in the strict sense and in itself, and the other having tendency to obey as one does one's father."[9]

Now, the comparison of both texts allows to distinguish practical reason and theoretical reason. While the latter "thinks and considers", the former tries to persuade the desiderative part of the soul. This desiderative part of the soul is included in the concept of nature. Keeping in mind the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, Aristotle introduces that between intellectual and moral virtues: "Virtue too is distinguished into kinds in accordance with this difference; for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a man's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise excellences (virtues)."[10]

The connection of practical reason and nature as *ôrexis* is essential to understand in depth the Aristotle concept of moral virtue. If now we remember the intrinsic connection that, according to Aristotle, exists between prudence and moral virtue, we will have the basic elements for understanding, in their just terms, the Thomist doctrine of Natural Law. Let us pause for a few moments, however, on the examination of the connection between moral virtue and prudence.

In Chapter 12 of Book VI, devoted generically to the study of intellectual habits, Aristotle observes: "Again, the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom (prudence) as well as with moral virtue; for virtue makes the aim right, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means."[11] Now, the "means" that bring about the end, are not simply things but actions.[12] For this reason it is not strange that, not much later, Aristotle also observes that "virtue makes choice right,"[13] since without choice no action can take place. On this point it is warned that prudence is inseparable from moral virtue, although prudence implies also a certain ability: "there is a faculty (aptitude) which is called cleverness, and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it" – and he concludes: "Practical wisdom (prudence) is not the faculty, but it does not exist without this faculty."[14] Yet, what we need to underline here is that there is not prudence without moral virtue, so that "it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom (without being prudent), nor practically wise without moral moral virtue."[15]

At the same time, Aristotle maintains with equal firmness that moral virtue cannot exist without prudence. The circularity that we detect here, characteristic of practical matters, is appeased in large part by the difference that Aristotle introduces between natural virtue and moral virtue. According to Aristotle, natural virtue is a disposition in agreement with prudence (*phronesis, prudentia*); whatever disposition natural is to a certain class of good deeds. Moral virtue, by contrast, is not only a disposition agreeing with right reason, but "the state that implies the presence of right reason," that is prudence.[16] Prudence, for its part, is responsible for discerning in practice which are the

virtues that must be put into effect in any given moment (González 1998b, C. 3). Thus, the difference between a person with many natural virtues without prudence and a person with few natural virtues with prudence (and therefore with moral virtue) is that the second possesses the fundamental rectitude that permits, first of all, to not act against virtues, and secondly, to try to get them all, in spite of the fact that he may not possess excellent natural dispositions for a certain class of good works.

To review those concepts of Aristotle ethics is important to understand the Thomist doctrine of Natural Law and get right the words of Aquinas when, in the context of an article about Natural Law, he observes that "law is something of reason."[17] This affirmation is crucial to understand the mark of a conception that is essentially, and without prejudice of other influences, a deepening in Aristotle's doctrine on practical reason (Rhonheimer 1994b). We need to underline this point because it is precisely the practical character of the law that got lost in the renaissance versions of this doctrine (Finnis 1980), and even in the modern moral philosophy until Kant.

Kant, in effect, is responsible for the recovery of practical reason for modern moral thought. But, as it has already been pointed out, he understands practical reason without any reference to nature; his is a purely formal practical reason. Now, this purely formal practical reason is precisely at the origin of the dialectic between universal reason and historical reason that occupies moral philosophy since then. In this regard, it seems to me that the only way overcome this dialectic involves recovering the reference to nature and habits in the sense that I have pointed out. In addition, with this reference to nature and

habits in mind, we may be able to root ethics back in culture, without losing sight of the universality of morals.

Natural Law and Multiculturalism

Aquinas certainly assumes Aristotle's legacy, although he does not do it without personal discernment, and thus recognizing the deficiencies of the Aristotelian approach. Likewise, he takes into account the Stoic contribution of a universal morality, also underlined by Christianity. Now, what interests us here is not so much the origin of these ideas as their explicative capacity and their possible validity for our present situation, in which we must aim for a synthesis of a universal morality and respect for a cultural diversity. The synthesis in question will be necessarily different from the one achieved by Aquinas in his own times. However, essential philosophical intuitions, as those that underlie the problem of the One and Many, remain the same. This is what we should appreciate in his doctrine of Natural Law.

In effect, if we understand in depth the nature of practical reason we will understand that there are many possible morals – not because each culture has its own but, rather, because each man has his own. By "morals", in this context, I do not mean a code of universal norms but *the practical itinerary of each man*. To understand morals as an itinerary it is necessary to adopt a practical point of view – that is, the point of view of the human agent who finds himself living and acting.

From this point of view, one can say that each man faces his life as a conscious search, at times more intense than others. The search in question may be less dramatic if

it is carried out from the heart of a tradition, instead of being carried out along its margins. The reason is that every tradition can be regarded as an accumulated wisdom that has shown itself to be efficient throughout a long or short period of time. Yet, even within a tradition, every person has to find her own path.

Now, if morality has to do with real life at all, it cannot be understood apart from that existential search. Furthermore: the intrinsically moral character of human life is particularly manifested in the search itself. The search is perceived as the principal moral task; thus, an abandonment of the search would be perceived as a failure or an existential crisis (González 1999b). Accordingly, just as each man is confronted with the task of living, he is also confronted with a moral task. And the way he deals with this task is to be perfected and corrected (Inciarte 1973, 203) through life's itinerary.

To understand morality in these terms requires, in my opinion, a deep understanding of the nature of practical reason. I consider that the moral thought of Aquinas assumes this type of rationality. At this point, however, someone could certainly ask: "where is the presumed universality of morals here?" The answer to this question is implied in the previous paragraph. I understand, in effect, that the universality of morals is to be found in the crierion which we use to correct our actions. Such criterion is not an oracle. It is a habit; the habit of the first practical principles – also called *synderesis* –. According to Aquinas, synderesis is in charge of remedying the indetermination *ad opposita* characteristic of reason.[18]

The way in which this habit becomes operative in practice can be compared to the way the habit of first speculative principles operates. Indeed, as we are able to detect

contradictions in our reasoning and speech, so we are also able to detect practical contradictions when we take action. "Practical contradictions" is an expression I use here to refer to all ways of action that enter into contradiction with the very principles of human life, that is, of moral life.

These principles, that are not but the ends of different virtues, are the contents of the *synderesis,* not in vain qualified by Aquinas as *semina virtutum* (sower of virtues). Of such ends we have knowledge thanks to *synderesis*. Certainly, due to erroneous ideas or acquired vices, such knowledge can also be darkened in practice. However, Aquinas underlines that the habit of *synderesis* never disappears entirely.[19] At the same time, the practical knowledge it provides can be reinforced; it is reinforced, in fact, as long as moral virtue is consolidated in us.

Upon affirming that the universal dimension of morality lies in the ends of the virtues, however, it could appear that we have not reached much farther than Aristotle. This is not so. What is true, rather, is that the introduction of the *synderesis* as an intellectual habit in charge of prescribing to prudence the ends of the virtues means that, right at the very beginning of ethics, there is an intellectual principle. This aspect was not as clear in Aristotle. Yet, it is precisely the introduction of such an intellectual principle at the very roots of ethical thinking, what makes possible the constitution of ethics in a practical science (Wieland 1981). This should allow Aquinas to enter in a dialog with modern ethics more easily than Aristotle. Such a dialog would be likewise facilitated by the more normative tone buried in his appeal to the law as a first principle.

Yet, while it is true that what this law prescribes is the action in agreement with virtues, it is likewise true that any virtue has then a natural basis. This natural basis is disclosed by Aquinas when he points at the existence of some universal precepts which incorporate the tendential structure of our nature.[20] It is from this perspective that one can best interpret the reference to the natural inclinations in the classical place in which Aquinas refers to Natural Law:

> (...) The first principle in the practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz., that good is which all things seek after. Hence, this is the first precept of law: that good is to be done and ensued, and evil is to be avoided. All other precepts of natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical reason naturally aprehends as man's good (or evil) belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided. Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally aprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law (...).[21]

The text goes on by noting, firstly, the inclination toward life from which those precepts are ordered to protect life might be inferred. Secondly, Aquinas mentions the inclination to procreation and the education of children, etc., in conformity with which there would be other precepts directed toward the protection of those goods. And, finally, he refers to the inclination to know the truth, both in theory and in practice, thereby assuming the conditions of social life. Thus, in agreement with this inclination, there would be another series of precepts oriented to the protection of the search for truth. And,

as long as such a search has place in the heart of society, there would be also room for precepts which protect and promote the goods of peace and justice.

It is true, nevertheless, that although we are capable of understanding the goodness of such precepts when they are enunciated in a universal way, their meaning can be hidden from us whenever we descend to the specific situation. Aquinas, as it is known, did consider the possibility that moral knowledge can be darkened in determined historical moments due to human weaknesses and corruptions. He used Cesar's *War of the Galias* as an example. In that work, namely, Cesar refers that the Germans had come to regard robbery –which contradicts Natural Law- as something permissible.[22] We could as well assume that our culture presents some points of confusion, if not blindness, when appraising the morality of actions that, in a manifest way, contradict the good noted in each one of the specific natural inclinations.

It is evident indeed, that along the last century, our culture has accumulated numerous exceptions to each one of those precepts, giving ample room to the current debates in bioethics. For example: the first kind of precepts is widely questioned in the debate over abortion and euthanasia; the second is even more so because it directly refers to the core of sexual morality; finally, the third hardly finds an echo in a world that has decided to pact with theoretical and moral relativism as a way of life.

This is not the place to enter into these debates. Here I just note that they constitute a clear sign that Western culture has been defining itself for some time by its progressive estrangement from nature (Alter 1991) in the assumption that this estrangement redounds to a greater freedom for man (Spaemann 1978; 1983). The thesis of ethical liberalism,

indeed, is that there are not intrinsically evil modes of action, i.e. actions evil by its own nature.[23]

In this regard, a pertinent question – in continuity with the thought of Hans Jonas (1998) - would be this: are we really in conditions of guaranteeing the continuity of our culture appealing to reason untied from nature? Is it really possible to do completely without the meaning noted in our natural inclinations, at the time of, for example, social organization? Until now, ethical liberalism believes in facing the challenges by complicating legal machinery, or confining indefinitely its solution to technique. Nevertheless, reflection is necessary.

As noted earlier, moral liberalism consists of the idea that reason, untied from nature, favors greater freedom for man. Yet, is this really so? Does not it rather constitute a utopian pretension? Has our "freedom from nature" become so extreme? Could it not rather occur that nature treated in this will turn against us? Does Western culture weaken nature while others prepare to take hold of its reins?

Despite its quite "apocalyptic" tone, the last possibility should not be worrisome by itself. After all, throughout history cultures have inherited one another, not necessarily due to greater technical or military power, but because of intrinsic debilitation. Now: the estrangement from nature could have this effect. After all, man depends on nature, in one way or another. I understand that this is not a conservative thesis; it is not meant to criticize reform, social change, or progress. However, there are reasons to think that preserving the natural basis of our actions is the only way in which progress and social change can be beneficial to man. In the end, man cannot completely free himself from

nature. If nature is not incorporated into his moral judgment he will have to confront it by technical means. But technique cannot solve everything. At the the individual level, for instance, it is clear that technique alone cannot solve the internal integration of tendencies. There is no technical substitute for virtue, nor utilitarian substitute for truth.

Certainly, a moral and perfectionist argument like the one I have just employed is not an immediate political argument. However, morals and politics have in common, each in their own way, the end proper to practical reason: affirmation of man. In the case of morals, affirmation of man is direct and directly entrusted to the individual who, upon acting, looks out for his own good. This good, if it is to be called so, cannot be equated with individual interest, but must remain open to the common good. Indeed: from a moral point of view, the good of the individual is inseparable of the process of learning to see the common good as part of one's own good.

From a political point of view, however, the affirmation of man can only be indirect, since a true affirmation of man cannot take place without his cooperation or freedom. Accordingly, the maximum to which political action can aspire is to create favorable conditions so that man can affirm himself. Now, to the extent that we recognize that man is not an unfleshy subjectivity, we should take his nature into account. Human nature can be realized in a number of cultures. That is why in protecting human nature we are setting the basis for the protection, not of a particular culture – the liberal – but rather of every possible culture.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX, 2, 1046 b 5-7; 17-24.

2. Ibid: IX, 5, 1048 a 3-11.

3. Aristotle, *On the soul*, III, 10, 433 b 9-10.

4. Aristotle, *Categories*, III, 15; *Metaphysics* V, 23.

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 13; VI.

6. "…The most important question that we can ask, is whether there is any permanent standard, by which we can compare one civilization with another, and by which we can make some guess at the improvement or decline of our own. We have to admit, in comparing one civilization with another, and in comparing the different stages of our own, that no one society and no one age of it realize all the values of civilization. Not all of these values may be compatible with each other: what is at least as certain is that in realizing some we lose the appreciation of others. Nevertheless, we can distinguish between higher and lower cultures; we can distinguish between advance and retrogression" (Elliot 1948, 18).

7. Moore, G.E., *Principia Ethica*, § 28.

8. Aristotle, NE, I, 7, 1098, a 3-5.

9. Aristotle, NE, I, 13, 1102 b 29-1103 a 3.

10. Aristotle, NE, I, 13, 1103 a 3-10.

11. Aristotle, NE, VI, 12, 1144 a 6-7.

12. In this sense, what Aristotle could say really is that "good deed is an end in and of itself." NE, VI, 5, 1140 b 7.

13. Aristotle, NE, VI, 12, 1144 a 20.

14. Aristotle, NE, VI, 12, 1144 a 23-29.

15. Aristotle, NE, VI, 13, 1144 b 30.

16. Aristotle, NE, VI, 13, 1144 b 26-28.

17. Thomas Aquinas, S. Th. I-IIae, q. 91, a. 2, ad. 3. Where he proposes his general definition of law *as aliquid rationis*, in S. Th. I-IIae, q. 90, a. 1, sol.

18. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 16, a. 2, ad 4.

19. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 16, a. 3.

20. Such precepts are not formal. The *synderesis* is a universal precept, but not formal: "good must be done, evil must be avoided." Simply put it is a precept that requires being concreted. According to Aquinas, the immediate concretion of that precept remits to the content of natural inclinations, whose ends constitute the first goods known by practical intellect. Intellect knows the ends of inclinations, that is, the goods to which these assign themselves. Among them, figure the very good of reason, that is, truth, as a good, which must be sought; not only theoretical truth, but also practical truth, that is, the truth of action. That is why intellect knows not but the goods of each one of the inclinations, but rather it knows them under the different ways in which such goods must be pursued in order to constitute human good in an integrated way. One must not forget that *synderesis* prescribes the search for the practical good, rather than an arbitrary search for isolated goods. Practical good is the good, which is within hand's reach, the good of concrete action, in which multiple aspects if a rational mode are integrated. These modes are, precisely, virtues. For that reason Aquinas can say that *synderesis* is the "sewer of virtues."

21. Thomas Aquinas, S. Th. I-IIae, q. 94, a. 2, sol.

22. Thomas Aquinas, S. Th. I-Iliad, q. 94, a. 4, sol.

23. This position considers that only intention or consequences turn an action into a bad one. In other words: the end sought or the predictable effects of our actions facing the achievement of greater well-being would be the only elements to keep in our ethical judgments. Certainly, at the heart of a multicultural society, not even that solution would appear sufficient. In the view of the moral conflicts posed by persons proceeding from different moral communities, it would be important in the last instance to appeal to consensus.

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