



2012

Response to Fr. Rhonheimer

Anna Bonta Moreland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/vlr>



Part of the [Legal History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anna B. Moreland, *Response to Fr. Rhonheimer*, 57 Vill. L. Rev. 889 (2012).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/vlr/vol57/iss5/8>

This Symposia is brought to you for free and open access by Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Villanova Law Review by an authorized editor of Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law Digital Repository.

2012]

RESPONSE TO FR. RHONHEIMER

ANNA BONTA MORELAND*

IT is a distinct privilege and challenge to respond to Fr. Rhonheimer's paper: a privilege, of course, since I have long admired his work in Aquinas' ethics, and a challenge because such a carefully argued and lucid paper makes my job as a respondent very difficult.

I find two related but distinct arguments in Fr. Rhonheimer's paper. The first offers a softer claim and the second a stronger one. The first argument emerges as an alternative to the traditional position of neo-scholasticism. For the neo-scholastics, in order to learn about what one desires, one simply had to apply the results of what one learned through theoretical inquiry. Now this position is faithful neither to Aristotle, nor to Aquinas.

Fr. Rhonheimer presents an alternative position, one in which ethics do not follow upon metaphysics, learning about what one desires does not follow upon learning about what one knows. Instead, ethics has its own proper starting point in the practical experience of acting subject. Our primary grasp of what is good for us is a practical grasp, and it arises out of the human person's natural desire for the good.

So far so good.

The second interrelated but distinct argument pushes further than the first and raises a series of questions.

I will summarize the position first and then offer some questions for reflection. Fr. Rhonheimer argues *both* that knowledge of human nature and natural ends do not presuppose theoretical knowledge (as in the first argument), *and* that the *opposite* is true, namely that in order to know human nature, one needs previous experience both of the acts of natural practical reason and its objects, and of the ends of the natural inclinations.

In order to know the true, then, previous knowledge of the good is necessary.

I am not sure this stronger argument is faithful, at least to Aquinas. I will point to one brief but significant moment in Aquinas's corpus that reflects his view that the true, that what is, that everything that exists, calls out to us to be understood independent of our moral inclinations. You might raise your eyebrows at my selection of this text. It is perhaps an unusual place to go, but it is, I think, the most fitting for our purposes.

In the third objection of the *Prima pars* Question 12, article 12 on whether the human person can know God by natural reason in this life, one of the objectors states that knowledge of natural reason belongs to both good and evil people, insofar as they share a common nature. But

* Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Villanova University.

knowledge of God belongs only to the good. Aquinas gives an interesting response, for he states that knowledge of God's essence is, of course, by grace, so it belongs only to the good. But knowledge of God by natural reason belongs to both good and evil people.

I mention this reply because if evil people can come to know *God*, then surely they can come to know other things about what *is*, about metaphysics, about human nature, without necessarily having to be ordered to the good. If evil people can come to know the cause of the created order through natural reason, then they can use their reason to come to know the created order.

Just as there is a dynamism to the good in Aquinas to which we are naturally ordered and that we naturally desire—as Fr. Rhonheimer clearly lays out in his paper—there is a dynamism to what *is*, to *esse* in Aquinas, to which we are naturally ordered and that we naturally desire.

I agree with Fr. Rhonheimer that the principles of each order of inquiry are distinct but related.

We can agree that in a certain and limited way each presupposes the other, but we cannot flip around the order of inquiry and give priority to moral over theoretical questions. If we do, then at the very least, we are departing from the spirit of Aquinas' text.

A related question arises for me during this discussion of the order of inquiry. Fr. Rhonheimer claims that the natural law pertains to the order of knowing rather than the order of being, that it is a “cognitive reality in the human soul that opens the way to fully understand human nature.” In the conclusion of his paper, he states that “Aquinas' account of the natural law is an account of the genesis and the natural principles of moral knowledge, and not an ontological account of ‘nature’ or natural teleology as such, though this epistemological account is anchored in strong ontological presuppositions.”

I am happier with this second formulation of natural law than with the first. If we are going to talk about the natural law in the order of knowing, then it has to be anchored in, to reflect, what is to be known, what is to be desired. So I wonder in the end what the cash value is of stating so starkly that the natural law is in the order of knowing rather than the order of being.

I get the sense in this paper that Fr. Rhonheimer thinks metaphysical inquiry falls into the modernist illusion of being objective inquiry, one that pretends to stand outside itself, but that ethics escapes this illusion, being rooted as it is in the practical subject. But what if we were to recognize that for Aquinas, metaphysics is just as rooted in the human subject as ethics, just in different aspects of that subject, namely in the theoretical intellect instead of the practical intellect? We could set aside, then, some of the criticisms that Fr. Rhonheimer places at the door of the neo-scholastics.

2012]

COMMENT

891

Finally, I could not help but notice Fr. Rhonheimer's optimism with respect to children's immediate grasp of the goods involved in their natural inclinations. This mother of four is not sure that grasp is as immediate as I would like. I do not see my children more immediately inclined toward the good than toward the true. But this would move today's discussion too much into the practical realm.

