DSPT Syllabus: St. Thomas Aquinas on *Nicomachean Ethics*
Fall 2021

Instructor: Fr. John Hilary Martin, O.P.
PHHS 4011: St. Thomas Aquinas on *Nicomachean Ethics*
Class Time: Fridays, 2:10-5:00 pm
Office Hours: Wed. 9:10-10: or TBA
Telephone: Office: 510-853-1080, but not after 7:30pm

Course Description

The Commentary of Thomas Aquinas on *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle has been a key text for the study of human moral behavior even to this day. Questions such as, what is happiness, is happiness the same for everyone and in every human society, what does happiness consist in and can perfect happiness ever be acquired in our life, are universal and timeless. In this course we will undertake a careful reading of Thomas’s *Commentary* and try to answer these questions and will examine the good and evil inherent in human acts. Aristotle’s text and the *Commentary* are quite long so only selected issues can be covered. In addition to happiness and the purpose of life, we will examine their understanding of a life of virtue and the nature of friendship

Method:

The lecture-seminar method will be used. For class, students will study an assigned portion of the *Commentary* & be prepared to discuss it. Students will take an active part in reporting on and in discussing the issues raised in the text. Copies of Thomas’s *Commentary* have been edited by the Leonine Commission and are available online for those who read Latin, an excellent English translation has been published by C.I. Litzinger, so Latin is not required to take this course. Discussions can be far ranging and can involve current issues, such as permissible use of violence, sexuality and gender, the difficulty of framing a just law in multi-cultural community.

Assessment: Either leading two discussions in class or turning in 2 short reflection papers (4/5 pages) will be required and a final term paper of 18 pages with appropriate bibliography. Two or three weeks before the end of term you will discuss in class your proposal for your final 18 pg. paper for class support and encouragement.
THOMAS’S COMMENTARY ON THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

Opening Lecture Sept. 7, 2021
(House keeping: I like two breaks of 10-15 min. each. We will need to experiment with zoom +Apparatus)

Thomas’s Commentary follows Aristotle’s long work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The text is far too long to be covered comfortably in a single semester. Modern scholarship has shown that the text of Aristotle was edited and reedited several times, sometimes perhaps by Aristotle himself. To spend time examining in detail which are the oldest and which the newest versions, as we might do with a biblical text, need not detain us here. Medieval authors were well aware that they were commenting on edited copies of an author and that the Greek and Latin texts they had come to them from different sources. They also knew the Latin text of their manuscripts were partly corrupt and that Aristotle himself had presented in the Ethics two somewhat different accounts of the idea of what constituted, human happiness (cf., Bk. 2 and Bk. 10). Those differences did not worry them. Medieval authors, like Thomas, saw the power of the ideas that Aristotle presented and in commenting on Aristotle’s ideas they developed their own philosophy.

In approaching Thomas’s *Commentary* it is important to read substantial portions of Aristotle’s own text rather than just relying on a general summary of his ideas—although the overview by Richard Kraut in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [SEP] (published May 1, 2001, revised, Mar 29, 2010) can be useful in setting the scene for your study. A certain number of texts will be singled out to be read and analyzed in class while other texts will be left as optional reading. We will concentrate on a few key topics in Thomas’s *Commentary*: a) the notion of the good, b) human happiness as the goal of human life, c) the voluntary; d) forming moral virtues, especially the virtue of justice; and e) the nature of friendship.

Aristotle wrote several centuries before Christ (335-323 BC) and outside of a Jewish/Christian tradition. The goal of an eternal life, of a life beyond the grave, or of divine sanctions for human conduct was not the focus of his ethical theory. His ethics is about how human beings can best conduct themselves in this world in which they are presently living which was for him the world of the *polis*, the Greek city state. Medieval commentators, like Thomas Aquinas, would have regarded Aristotle’s text as a study of human conduct following natural law, or better the ideals that should govern any honest human community, and not as a kind of roadmap for Christian behavior. Aristotle himself writes as a Macedonian Greek with knowledge of the complex history of the many feuding city states of Greece. His Ethics is not rigid, perhaps flexible would be a better word for it, particular conclusions often depend upon the immediate situation. In his ethics he writes as a kind of wise commentator on life in a Greek polis, who speaks as a mature person with the authority of a deep philosophical understanding of the possibilities of human nature, both individual and communal.

How we proceed

Each week we will have all read beforehand the assigned text from the Ethics that will be discussing in class. You may use English or Latin. Read the text, of course, and be able to report what is said there, but more important reflect on what questions the text raises, consider its inner consistency, its applications to contemporary issues within our own culture [times].

Be prepared to write a short reflection paper (3-4 pages). Footnotes and citations are not required in these short papers. A reflection paper will not be assigned every week, but one will
be announced in class when due. I suggest two reflection papers or leading two discussions in class.

**Week 1  HAPPINESS  Sept., 10**<sup>th</sup>  2021

**Lecture**  Review of Aristotle’s text (given by me) Items from the previous meeting. The goodness and the end (goal) of human acts. Every act and every choice seems to aim at some good as its object. Hence we say *the good is what all desire*. Why does Thomas say this? Why do we concur with him or not?

Discussion of Words:  (to avoid confusion with popular usage)

- *finis* = end  in time  in purpose
- *choice* = *electio*  pg. 5  133  [then read out 133-140]
  which is governed by prudence (practical reason)
- *architectonic* = *architectonicarum*  pg. 6  253
  = master plans
  = *architect* = *principalis artifex*  pg. 6  238

- *proportionalia*  p. 6  225

**Week 2.  A SCIENTIFIC STUDY  Sept. 17  2021**

If we desire something for itself, and if we wish other things in order to fulfil that desire, will we come at length to a supreme good and to our final end if we desire nothing beyond that?

Knowledge will be of great help, so let us speculate on the general characteristics of a final end and the knowledge that will lead us to it. For this we need a model science, Such a science will decide what ought to be studied and who ought to do the studying.:

Political science makes use of all practical sciences, even including our on past legislation. The goal political science seeks is *what is good for the whole of community*.

Even if we find that the good of an individual and of the community are much the same, is it better to prefer the good of the individual rather than that of the community? Is it always necessary to preserve the good of an individual over the good of the community? Is the good of the nation and the city more Divine?
What do we desire for our children, those who come after us? Happiness is the usual answer. **Read:** Opinions about happiness, over Aristotle: 1095a14-17

[The next 30 or 40 minutes will be instructions about, how to search Aristotle and other ancient authors. How to read medieval texts, e.g., a Commentary, a Sentence commentary, a Quaestio Disputata, etc.]

We will do our study well [i.e., properly] if we pay attention to the type of subject matter we are dealing with. The same level of certitude isn’t found everywhere. For Aristotle and Thomas studying Ethics is a science that generates moral certitude that governs our normal actions, but not metaphysical certitude.

Students & professors should accept what is taught, looking for as much certitude as the subject matter permits (e.g., a mathematician should not use rhetorical statements, nor a rhetorician give conclusive demonstrations.) Also the young are not good students in political science because they lacks experience of life, the starting point for this science. In addition the young are influenced by their emotions. If students have lived a life of passion, it really doesn’t matter if they are young or old, they will gain no profit from their knowledge, and the same goes for the incontinent. It will be useful moral matters to act according to the dictates of reason.

**Words?**

priority and posteriority  
Proportion. in ethics; proportionality in metaphysics  
*quod quid est* = substance  
analogy  
arguments, *propter quia, propter quid*

Aristotle’s text, summary  
What is the object of political science?  
What is the highest good of all human action? In general terms everyone thinks it is, **living well and acting well.**  
But what that consists in differs: Common people think it is having some specific thing, The educated think it is having the absolute good.  
It is pointless to survey all the various opinions

Let us begin from general principles, from something better known to us. Some are better known to us (quoad nos), some better known in se (in se)  
If we are committed to study politics we have to become accustomed to living a virtuous life, -all the time.  
Let us learn the principles of virtuous conduct from our own actions or learn from others.

The separated good as the ultimate end of all.
That something is eternal does not mean that it is better #86
Read Lecture 9 (Aris. ch 7) The nature of happiness # 104-117  nature of the
End. Characteristics of happiness. Lecture 10 definition of happiness #126, 129.
Lecture 11 and 12 # 136

Week 4   VIRTUE       Oct. 1, 2021
    Book II  over 1097a15….1103a13

    Book II  Lectures. 4, 9, 10…19,
    Our preliminary definition of happiness, “what is best, ultimate, the most
    wanted , etc.” must be discussed further. its genus and differences
    The good of anything must be found in its operation. Happiness follows
    the good of human nature, its supreme good.. Happiness will be an activity of the
    rational power. Happiness will be living a kind of life according to reason. This
    must be a life in possession of virtue .–.and  happiness will consist in pursuing the
    best of them.
    As we will want this in perpetuity, we cannot have this kind of happiness in
    this life. [Aristotle talks of “perpetuity” as a complete life, i.e., all through ones
    life]
    Good and just deeds have been wrongly judged so [often] that none of them
    seems good by nature, but good merely by prescription of law. So, propse a
    rough outline of the truth and then conclude [judge] goodness by what happens in
    the majority of cases.

Week 5   Book II     THE SEARCH      over 1107a28=b21      Oct. 8 , 2021

    Lectures  2-7; 8-108.   Our findings so far:
    Happiness is what all human beings want, rich and poor, to live and to act well.,
    It is the goal, purpose of life   But finding it is not automatic. The search for
    happiness by human beings is vain according to the OT. Cf., Qoheleth, (in Greek,
    Ecclesiastes.) Vanity of Vanity, says Qoheleth, All things are vanity. Happiness
    is not a thing, as much as an action It is the highest operation of a human being
    which is an activity of reason We do not share with the beasts, but is an action of
    a mind proper to human beings.
    We posses 3 things, our substance, (soul and body) our powers (intellect
    and will) and a sense part. The latter are qualified, made more powerful through
    virtue. Virtues can be intellectual and/or moral, they are not innate, but put into
    operation. We acquire virtues by activity
    Possession of the good in itself is not Happiness, is not possession of a
    good, rather happiness is an activity of mind which enjoys the good it possesses,
    Words: nature, power, virtue ( habit.)
We possess 3 things, our human nature (a substance of soul and body), our powers, mind and will, (always present although their action can be suppressed, e.g., by a stroke) and a sense, bodily part, of the concupiscible and irascible. Substance is modified by quality Aristotle divides quality into 4 species (Categories over 8b26–10a11): The 4 species are: 1) Habits and Dispositions, 2) Natural Capabilities and Incapabilities, 3) Affective, Qualities and Affections, 4) Form (Shape of physical objects). While virtues qualify nature, they are not in us by nature, but need to be developed by our (good or bad) activity by practice. The mean of virtue? What your reason tells you what you can do.

It is now time to begin the study of action, we will study the voluntary and the involuntary

**Words**: The voluntary, the involuntary & the non-voluntary. *Secundum quid* almost a loan word now in English Efficient cause / final causality

**Lecture 7**

**CHOOSING**

**Book III Lectures 1-6; 10-13** over 1109a19

The habit of correct choosing

*Voluntary, choice and willing*, the three are discussed together.

Voluntary, something done freely.

Choice, things that are for an end (i.e., purpose, goal)

Action of willing, the end itself.

Involuntary actions arise from violence and from ignorance.

The free movement of the appetite is excluded by violence

Physically forced; *(simpliciter)*; morally forced *(secundum quid)*

The act is from outside, the agent does nothing, freely

The mental awareness of what is being done is excluded.

Done *through fear*: (Throwing goods overboard in a storm) a mixed, action, something of the will, something involuntary.

b). How should we apportion praise and blame, honour and punishment for Actions, esp. *mixed* actions done from fear. There are 3 levels

1st. praise, suffering evil to preserve a good.

2nd. some act deserve no praise, just pardon

3rd. great praise for refusing to do an evil even with death threat.

Cf., Thomas #428 praise or blame as given by a prudent person.

Temptations force a person to act against their

3. Involuntary arising through ignorance. over (1110b18-1111a21)
4. Definition of the voluntary: What the agent himself initiates knowing the individual circumstance surrounding his action. (this would include things done motivated by anger, lust, etc. [426]

**Choice:** over 1111b4-1111b30 . Lectures 4-9
Before we get to choice we require deliberation, full deliberation for a full choice.
We are determining the mind to a particular act. The end is good (or desirable) and it is good for me, and so we set up the situation for an individual action. *What we ought to do* [449] = (e.g., close a house) is not a choice. It’s pre-choice if anything. It is an act of the intellect cf., bad will [445]
Acts of intellect, counsel, must accompany acts of choice, but choice itself is an act of the will.

**Counsel:** over 11112a18-b10
Deliberate on worth of the end, is the end worth deliberating about. We don’t take counsel about what is necessary –things without motion or change, nor with unchanging mathematical entities. [460], nor about things that happen purely by chance.
How will we pay for this? *Reply:* *Deus providebit*, this is not an act of counsel [463] Does not, should not lead to a choice.

Choice is something voluntary, but it is not identical with the voluntary [434-5] esp., [437] since the voluntary possibilities far exceeds choices. Finally, choice is not what we call *wishful thinking* either. [443] Nor is it about someone’s opinion on something. We take counsel about practical things, that are not determined per se.
But we can take counsel about things that happen more frequently. [471!]
When we are involved in counsel we can take into account things that happen more frequently. We are dealing with means to an end. [Lecture VII VIII] [476 a common place, right?]

Lecture 10 over 1113a15-1113b2
What is the object of the will?: Is it the good in itself; OR the good as it appears to us? Do we choose the good or the apparent good? [488-9 ] We don’t want to get in the position of saying no act of the will has a real object, but only an ideal one. So read [491] [and 495] carefully!
Lecture 11 over 1113b3-1114a3 [and 497] Is the power to act is within us, then, the power not to act must be in us too.
Week 8     Reading week     Oct. 29th

READ over 1129a3 -1129b11

Week 9     JUSTICE 1     Nov. 5, 2021

Book. V Lectures 1 - 7 over 1112b11-1132b20

Virtues/habits are not in us by nature, but are acquired, learned by performing the correct acts over time. cf., Thomas, Summa I-II, qq 1 seq, and q. 49 + for habits.

Morality, what is it? Morality accompanies a human act, it is a modification of a human act depending upon the end (what is intended). Morality is a kind of accident attached to human intended actions. Moral being is esse in the category of relation.
The habit of routinely taking a cup of tea before going to bed may not be a moral act (like drumming mindlessly on a table top), but if you do this with some purpose (end) in mind the act now has moral being (esse morale) =which is real being attached to the action that has (esse physicale).

Words:
General justice = virtue, -to give each his due
Particular justice, or better particular injustice
Mean for the virtue of justice =distributive
=commutative

Proportions, =arithmetic, geometric
Science as a habit (#891) perfecting the mind, as justice is a habit in the will
A modification of a human act, in this case modification of the potency known as the will, rational appetite

We seem to get a better look at justice by looking at injustices
(note later, equity a virtue that directs justice)

Aristotle divides justice into legal (civil) which for him is general, and particular justice meaning of the thing

Fr. J. H. Martin, O.P., PHHS-4011: Thomas on Nicomachean Ethics, Syllabus – 8
Week 10          JUSTICE 2           Nov. 12

Book. 5  Justice Lectures 6-8  over 1131b25 -1132a25
Later Lectures 10-11, 16 (on equity)
Mean of virtue for justice =distributive
=commutative
Proportions =arithmetic, geometric

Currency as a medium of exchange, price. The notion of general and particular justice demand

Review & Preliminary Lecture

All infants are born without virtues, they are acquired later, although there may be dispositions to some virtues in their particular nature—in the DNA even—which incline them toward a particular range of activity. All children will acquire habits by repeated actions. Some of these actions will be initiated by parents and teachers who train toddlers and pre-schoolers to act in certain ways, ways that are acceptable to the family and community. With the appearance of understanding children strike out on their own and make voluntary choices. If praised for making good choices and blamed for making bad ones, children will voluntarily and freely repeat these actions on their own. They will condition themselves to behave in a certain sort of way that will become habitual. Through their own actions they will acquire habits as they grow into adulthood.

Virtues are not to be confused with what are called skills. A wood-worker, for example, will become skilful at carving images of birds or animals into a wooden board if he carves them over and over again. Skills of a woodcarver will not be of much use when meeting guests at a dinner party. Being skilful such as making shoes does not help when drawing up a thesis proposal. The point is that the range of a skill is limited and cannot be transferred to a different discipline, virtues like fortitude come up in all sorts of situations. Morality is not a matter of skill as diplomacy is.

With justice virtue now involves society (or better virtue has social relations). We render justice to persons who live in society with us, not to ourselves. Because others are in relation to me (in our personal interactions) and because I also related to the whole of society justice is divided, there will be commutative justice and distributive justice. The median of justice, i.e., what is due will be different in each case. We are in relation to our communities in many ways depending on the complexity of our society. The Greeks tried to get at this when they went beyond personal ethics and outlined a threefold division of society into the household, the village and the city (the polis). A modern community offers a great deal more to sustain the individual than ever appeared in the ancient polis:

Things would appear to be simpler with commutative justice, i.e., the justice covered by exchanges between two individuals (or perhaps small groups functioning as if individuals). The model offered in Aristotle is of small loans being repaid, of rents...
collected in exchange for living accommodation, etc. At the end of an exchange it will often appear obvious that one party has gained too much and the other party suffered too great a loss. The mean of justice has been disturbed and needs to be righted. When the mean has been found the portion which one person has in excess will be handed over to the one who has less so there will be an even number of units for each. This is called an arithmetical proportion. The exchanges made between individuals are far more sophisticated than the simple model offered of small loans being repaid, of rents for accommodation. What shall we say about the exchange of a horse for a bolt of cloth, or the exchange of a two hour lecture by Peter Abelard for a ¼ acre of land in a distant forest? These exchanges raise all sorts of imponderables. The mean of justice here, however, is still the external value of the objects concerned and a fair exchange. What is needed, of course, is some sort of objective measure for items as disparate as a horse versus a bolt of cloth. This is where money comes in, for money is the measure of all things.

The just person, the person with the virtue of justice, is the one who continually searches for that external mean that enables him/her to distribute what is due to the citizen/s of the community, and the one who also seeks to find the mean in order to pay back (or maybe collect) what is due to other person in interpersonal exchanges.

Words
1. Because people take too much for themselves, we do not permit others to rule, but the law should rule—a law which is a dictate of reason. [1009], 3 corollaries follow:
   1) The prince should rule for the good of the people not for his own interests.
   2) A prince should live better than others, but receive a bit more reward than the others because of the work that he must do.
   3) The prince should receive honour and glory from the multitude and if he does not think that sufficient, he is a tyrant and unjust.

2. Natural justice [1016] natural law civil law = ius gentium positive law (local law)

Jurists hold the latter division

Natural justice is the same throughout the world since nature is the same.

E.g., *Fire burns in Greece as is does in Persia*

All legal justice that arises is rooted in natural justice. [1048]. It is an articulation of natural justice. e.g., *It is wrong to steal* (the universal) but what the penalty should be for a particular theft differs from country to country.

3. **Equity Lecture** Bk.5.16 over 1137a31-

In exceptional cases where a law would not work for the common good or appears not to be the intention of the lawmakers, we can appeal to natural justice, to what is called equity:

Equity is general *directive justice*.

Cases where justice departs from what is legally just. [1079]

The exceptional man is praised who has done what is better than [legally] just.

[N.B. Abuse of equity. Exceptional situations are reported, hardship cases, a need to do something contrary to the existing law, (equity), this breach is then used as an excuse for a general violation of the law, or a support to have new laws framed, *on the basis of the exceptions*.]
We have been dealing with moral virtues (habits) which are qualities acquired, now with

Lecture 1 right reason over 1138b18-1139a15
Lecture 3 science
Lecture 4 prudence
Lecture 5, 6 wisdom
Lecture 7 prudence in human affairs

Words: quality, habit as a quality
   ratio particularis

Civic prudence
   Prudence Estimative
Week 13  Thanksgiving  Nov 26th

No class

Week 14  FRIENDSHIP  Dec. 3, 2021

Book VIII  Lects 1-5 over 1155a3-1155b16; 1155b5-1158a1

*Friendship, friendship, just a perfect friendship, when other friendships are forgot ours will still be hot.*

. What is happiness  second statement

It is what we all desire, and we desire what appears to be good to us.
It is desired for itself and not for something other. In fact all other things are desired because of it.
It gives us pleasure but is not the same thing as pleasure

Happiness is a state or an activity.
It is acquired through habitual acts, not a purely passive reception.

**Prelecture:**
The text of Aristotle that Thomas is commenting on is from an author who wrote from c. 330 BC. His text and his ideas passed through many cultures and languages throughout the Mediterranean world, becoming the common property of the educated Greco-Roman elite. We have already noted some phrases and adages are still popular today, *e.g., one swallow does not make a summer,* …
The unity of human observation about human relationships that do not change. They form part of what is known as the *classical tradition.*

Another text on friendship, Cicero’s dialogue on friendship, De Amicitia, put into the mouth of (Gaeius) Laelius, and arranged as a Platonic dialogue is a part of that classical tradition. Written c. 50 BC at the end of the Roman Republic Cicero’s, De Amicitia was read as literature throughout the scholastic period. It has had lasting value. The editor of the Harvard Classics series in his preface remarked that, *The evils which were undermining the Republic bear so many striking resemblances to those which threaten the civic and national life of America to-day that the interest of the period is by no means merely historical,* -a remark made in 1909 about supposed situation in the US. This sort of reflection made very many times is now dated, but what Cicero had to say about friendship is not dated!

If we follow Aristotle, friends in the true sense of the name are obviously going to be very few. Acquaintances will be many and no disparagement is intended about the reality of those relationships, but they are not friendships. Using the word *friends* for the sort of connections made on Twitter, Face Book, Linked In, etc., produces immediate laughter. The word here is
Week 15  HAPPINESS  Dec. 3, 2021

Book X  Lecture 6. -10=12  over  1172a19-1172b8; and 1177a12-b4  and  1178a8

This Book is both a review of his initial discussion and a revision
The threefold division of friendship: one based on virtue, one of utility, and of attraction. (or being of a pleasing sort)
General discussion of the division and its describe the 3 members.

The last book of the Nicomachean ethics which is devoted to happiness (the end of our activity) is divided into three parts. The first deals with pleasure, an accompaniment of happiness but not happiness itself (lectures 1-9); the second part deals with the nature of happiness (lectures10-14) and the third short section is on the need for law and for some political theory to help us learn how to draw up suitable laws (lectures 15-16).

Prelecture

Week 16  HAPPINESS 2  Dec. 10, 2021

Preliminary Lecture

Review of Happiness-development by Aristotle

Proportion of penalty to the offense.

*Discrimination* defined in terms of natural law, civil law, latest scientific findings

Do you believe in any *exemplary* punishments?