

Capitalism and Morality

Thomas Aquinas and Michael Novak: Two of a Kind

**Lindsey Peters
Wheeling Jesuit University Graduate 2006**

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Thomas Aquinas is one of the most acclaimed philosophers and theologians of all time. His writings are concise and well-reasoned as he elaborates on Aristotle's teachings. Michael Novak who incorporates both Aristotle and Aquinas into his teachings is arguably one of the best modern philosophers who persuasively reasons the close relationship of capitalism, faith, and philosophy. This paper will show how the medieval philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is congruous and further applied to the economy by Michael Novak.

Thomas Aquinas was born in year 1225 into a noble family with such relatives as Emperors Henry VI and Frederick II, and the Kings of Aragon, Castile, and France. Yet, he was not interested in nobility but rather his education that begun at the age of 5 with the Benedictine Months evoked a great love of God. He was sent to the University of Naples not long after at the insistence of the abbot of Monte Cassino. Sometime between 1240 and 1243 Aquinas received the habit of the Saint Dominic. His family did not understand Aquinas's calling and quickly tried to prevent him from joining the clergy. His brothers had him captured enroute to Rome, and he was held in the fortress of San Giovanni at Rocca Secca.¹ He was held there for nearly two years before his mother relented and let him pursue his vocation. He went on to author more than 60 works in his mere 50 years. He is most noted for *Summa Theologica* in which he addresses many questions of Christian philosophy. Following the Aristotelian tradition in philosophy, Aquinas emphasized the importance of reason. He also furthered the concept of flourishing through the development of one's gifts and talents. Yet Aquinas went further to combine Christianity and the ultimate goal of communion with God into his philosophy. Aquinas was always careful to note that philosophy is the handmaid to theology.

Michael Novak is a contemporary philosopher, theologian and author most known for writings on how religion and culture are important aspects of a free market economy and capitalism. He is an esteemed author with 25 books on the philosophy and theology of culture with his most noted one being *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*.² Novak has won numerous awards for his writings and work and continues to be a popular speaker and lecturer in the U.S. and abroad. His appeal can be attributed to his way of clarifying how ideas that have been conventionally taught as contradictory are actually fundamentally necessary for one another such as his writings on capitalism and religion.

Thomas Aquinas is most known for his writings on the topic of natural law. He answered the great debate of how faith and reason relate. Aquinas states that faith and knowledge are divine in nature and complementary methods of understanding God and the world. Reason and faith are therefore not contradictory at all. Faith, being divine, is above reason in the hierarchy of truth and is more certain than reason being that it is revelation from God.³ This argument is not accepted by secular schools of thought as faith cannot be proven, but Aquinas relates that it is beyond proof. If they could be proven they would be philosophy. Reason further supports faith but it does not find foundational proof for it. When the Church adopted this line of teaching, it essentially replaced the Augustinian theories that were a combination of Plato and Christianity and implemented Aquinas's views which combined Aristotle and Christianity. The relationship that Aquinas describes of faith and reason still resonate today as individuals try to find the balance of reason and faith. He explained fully that while it can not be empirically proven, it can be chosen and accepted as congruous with reason.

Michael Novak writes a great deal of the close relationship faith plays in relation to all aspects of life. It is obvious from his writings that he uses reason to understand his faith more fully. It is by reason that he became the "neo-conservative" from his liberal roots. Novak seems to take the writings of Aquinas and

¹ D.J. Kennedy, New Advent: Thomas Aquinas, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14663b.htm>

² Michael Novak, <http://www.michaelnovak.net/Module/Site/Biography.aspx>.

³ Alan Ebenstein and William Ebenstein, *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present*, (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 222.

apply them further to modern situations dealing with the economy and state. In his article *How Christianity Change Political Economy*⁴ he describes seven ways that society has been changed by the virtues and characteristics of Christianity. Even those that are not Christians have been affected by the teachings of Christianity and now those teachings are standards in society. Novak says that “our deepest notions of truth, liberty, community, person, conscience, equality, compassion, progress, and judgment”⁵ are derived from Jewish-Christian civilization.

Aquinas also completely changed how government was regarded by the Church. St. Augustine believed that man should not have dominion over man but only over beasts. He regarded government as a result of sin or a perversion of the nature of man. Aquinas, however, believed that dominion could be interpreted as directing and governing free men and that it certainly had a rightful place in society.⁶ He did confer that man should not have dominion over other men in terms of slavery and dominion should not be interpreted as slavery. The Thomistic view of government is very similar to the Aristotelian view of government. Aquinas and Aristotle both believed government to be natural because man is a social being. Even in an age of Innocence before the introduction of sin men would lead a social life and government would have given order to the social life. He also said that if one is greater in justice and knowledge, than it would be to the benefit of all that he should rule.

Aquinas did differ from Aristotle about the end or purpose of government. Aristotle purported that the end of man is to live virtuously so as to better himself and the community while in this world. Aquinas goes further to state that one must live virtuously so as to be with God after death. Therefore, government is a means to an end according to Aquinas. There are two authorities according to Aquinas: the temporal and spiritual which rule over their own entities just as man has a spiritual soul and reasonable body. He concludes further that secular government is subject to the church. The Church is concerned with the ultimate goal of salvation of one’s soul and secular government is only concerned with affairs on earth and therefore Aquinas reasoned the Church is prior to the state.

The priority of the Church can be more fully understood by exploring the basics of Aquinas’s writings on natural law. Aristotle wrote, “The intention of the lawgiver is to lead men to virtue.”⁷ This is the basic principle of natural law. Aquinas defines law by saying, “Law is a rule and measure of acts, whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting because it binds one to act.”⁸ The idea of natural law is that moral ideals are derived from the nature of humans and, even further, are given to man from a higher being, namely God. Aquinas was of the mind that there are four types of law: the eternal law, the natural law, the divine law, and human (positive) law. He also believed that positive law was derived from natural law.

Moreover, Aquinas felt that a law must be just or it was not a law to the best sense it could be. He defined a just law as one that moved people to the “common good”, one that the lawgiver did not over-impose his authority, and that is imposed fairly upon the citizens. Also, under natural law a citizen is not bound to obey an unjust law if he can do so without harm or causing turmoil.

Natural law is that which is inherent within man to want to reach and pursue his end or telos. It is known by all men that they may pursue the truth. Aquinas states in *Summa Theologica* Q91:2

⁴Michael Novak, *A Free Society Reader: Principles for the New Millennium*, (Lanham: Lexington Books: 2000), 91-97.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Alan Ebenstein and William Ebenstein, *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present*, (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 224

⁷ Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Q90 A.3

⁸ *Ibid* Q90 A.1

“Wherefore, since all things subject to Divine providence are ruled and measured by the eternal law, as was stated above (1); it is evident that all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, insofar as, namely, from its being imprinted upon them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to divine providence in a more excellent way, insofar as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the eternal reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end, and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law.”⁹

Furthermore, natural law has primary and secondary precepts. The primary precept is "good is to be done and pursued, and evil avoided"¹⁰. This precept applies to all and has been the subject of much debate. For Aquinas, anything that is pursued is done with the thought that it is an apparent good. As Aristotle taught, men that know the truth will pursue it. This concept of natural law is very similar. Interestingly enough, Aquinas stated that positive law can never subtract from natural law, it can only add to it.

In this way, positive law is really contained within natural law. Natural law is determined by human nature and the inherent qualities within us, while positive law is determined by the will of the lawmaker. The two also differ in regards to when something is determined as wrong. Under natural law, it is wrong when it is against reason or morals as opposed to be wrong simply because the law says so under positive law. Within natural law there is room for discernment and choice, yet under positive law there is no room for choice, it is merely a matter of do as told. The basis for the two concepts of law varies as well: natural law is based upon human nature and actions, whereas positive law could nearly be called artificial and not related to human nature at all.

The strongest point for natural law is the close relation to morality. Though positivists may say it is a negative thing or completely unrelated, there is actually no denying that law should be based upon morality and Divine law. Legal positivists believe in norms as opposed to morals. Natural law has the objective of making men more virtuous. Also, natural law has the end of happiness. To live justly and according to reason will bring about happiness. The most important precept of natural law is to do good and avoid evil. To follow this simple principle can result in nothing but good.

One of the obvious advantages of natural law is the unchanging nature of it. The law is a thing of justice and it is a reflection of God’s mind. Law is related to the human being in an intimate way. God is the supreme lawgiver. He gave man divine positive law in the form of the Ten Commandments and the first five books of the Bible. This had to be issued because of the uncertainty of human judgment. Law is educative in this way and teaches what is right and wrong or clarifies what is right and wrong.

Novak encounters natural law and especially the concept of Eudaimonia, or living the happy life through actively using the abilities given by God, in the market. For Novak a businessman has a calling just as anyone else of a noble profession. Aquinas also stressed the importance of humans being free to make their own decisions. He was very specific in his Summa Theologica that human laws can be too binding. The government should be an extension of reason and natural law. Those that follow business as a calling exemplify eudaimonia in the sense that it is beneficial for them to act virtuously in transactions and to give it their fullest ability. They will be rewarded with satisfaction and inner happiness but also monetary reward as others value their work.

Trade was not something that Aquinas cared for but he realized that a shared market is necessary to a community. He addressed issues regarding economics, trade and property in Summa Theologica.

⁹ Ibid Q91 A.2

¹⁰ Ibid Q94, A.2

Private property is in accord with natural law but it may be governed by positive law so as to keep order. Aquinas did not think trade in itself was immoral but he did think that its end could be. He also discussed the issue of a “just price.” It is unknown exactly what he meant by the phrase but it seems that he felt there needed to be mutual satisfaction in the transaction.

Another area about which Novak and Aquinas would agree would be the definition of a person as an individual with that has both free will and the ability to reason. They also agree that the end or purpose of each person is eternal communion with God.¹¹ Furthermore, the common good as understood by Aquinas is to be in communion with Christ. This is both the common good and the personal good as it does not require that one give up something so that the many should profit. Quite the opposite, it is almost magnified as more individuals have seek love and truth; it furthers the common good of the community. It is amazing that Aquinas nailed this idea so succinctly on the head in the Middle Ages and that Novak has applied the idea to today’s political economy.

Novak goes on to state that the common good can be most fully realized through a capitalist system in which individuals are free to choose their actions. In a capitalist society all transactions are made willingly and are an exchange of values. It is beneficial to the community that each work for his own good while simultaneously benefiting the whole community in the trade of goods. While Capitalism itself is amoral the transactions within it encourage the use of one’s talents which Aquinas would agree with very much. Aquinas stated that each person had a telos or end. That end was to live virtuously and in communion with God.

Thomas Aquinas set a great standard by which to live in his theory of natural law and eudaimonia. He combined Aristotle’s emphasis on the use of reason with theology and came up with a Christian philosophy that allows man to be free and prosper through his decisions and actions. Michael Novak builds on both the works of Aristotle and Aquinas to adapt their writings to the market economy of today. He is a beacon of truth in a liberal, secular society. Though Aquinas did not have the opportunity to address many of the complex issues that has arisen today in the global market, he built a foundation of truths that one can live by and further explore. Novak has continued to explore the ideas of Aquinas and has brought his ideas to the mainstream.

Notes

1. D.J. Kennedy, New Advent: Thomas Aquinas, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14663b.htm>.
2. Michael Novak, <http://www.michaelnovak.net/Module/Site/Biography.aspx>.
3. Alan Ebenstein and William Ebenstein, *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present*, (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 222.
4. Michael Novak, *A Free Society Reader: Principles for the New Millennium*, (Lanham: Lexington Books: 2000), 91-97.
5. Ibid
6. Alan Ebenstein and William Ebenstein, *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present*, (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 224
7. Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Q90 A.3
8. Ibid Q90 A.1
9. Ibid Q91 A.2
10. Ibid Q94, A.2
11. Edward W. Younkins, *The Journal of Markets and Morality* Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 1999, *Novak’s Portrait of Democratic Capitalism* Michael, http://www.acton.org/publicat/m_and_m/1999_spr/younkins.html.

¹¹ Edward W. Younkins, *The Journal of Markets and Morality* Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 1999, *Novak’s Portrait of Democratic Capitalism* Michael, http://www.acton.org/publicat/m_and_m/1999_spr/younkins.html.

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