

THOMAS AQUINAS ON NATURAL INCLINATIONS: METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND, PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, AND RELATION TO GOODS AND PRECEPTS¹

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Abstract: How and why does a being's nature relate to what is good for it? Thomas Aquinas provides an account such that a being's nature endows it with powers and natural inclinations – tendencies, strivings, directednesses – for the very goods that constitute a flourishing life for beings of that nature. In this essay, I aim to present, elucidate, and motivate Aquinas's rich and nuanced thought on natural inclinations and how it illuminates some of his key views in metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and ethics. I first provide the background in Aquinas's philosophical psychology and metaphysics, including his natural theology. Next, I take up the objection that evolutionary theory renders Aquinas's thought on these matters obsolete. I then consider the natural inclinations of human beings, and specifically how these natural inclinations relate to practical cognition of basic goods and precepts.

KeyWords: Natural Inclinations; Aquinas; Metaphysics; Good; Practical Cognition.

1. *Introduction*

How and why does a being's nature relate to what is good for it? Thomas Aquinas provides an account such that a being's nature endows it with powers and natural inclinations – tendencies, strivings, directednesses – for the very goods that constitute a flourishing life for beings of that nature. In this essay, I aim to present, clarify, and motivate Aquinas's rich and nuanced thought on natural inclinations and how it illuminates some of his key views in metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and ethics. I first provide the background in Aquinas's philosophical psychology and metaphysics, including his natural theology. Next, I take up the objection that evolutionary theory renders Aquinas's thought on these matters obsolete, especially Aquinas's view that natural inclinations have their source in God's cognition. I then consider in detail the natural inclinations

¹ Parts of this essay are drawn or adapted from my article «Thomas Aquinas on Natural Inclinations and the Practical Cognition of Human Goods: A Fresh Take on an Old Debate», *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 94, n. 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 239-271, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq2020942203>.

of human beings, rival interpretations of how natural inclinations relate to practical cognition of basic goods and precepts, and what I take to be Aquinas's considered and plausible view. I close by considering how for Aquinas, natural inclinations enable a form of connatural knowledge – that as human beings are by nature, so do the basic human goods seem to them.

2. Background in Aquinas's *Philosophical Psychology and Metaphysics*

I begin by considering general remarks Aquinas makes about the nature of appetite/inclination and how it contrasts with cognition. Appetition and cognition are *alike* in that they are both states of the soul that have objects. The term 'object' in this context simply stands for *what* the state is related to, and is not a synonym for 'substance' or 'medium-sized dry good'. Aquinas has in mind what some philosophers call an intensional object.² Appetite and cognition are *different* by virtue of having different types of relation to their objects, and Aquinas highlights two differences in particular. First, the direction of the relation between the soul and its object is different: for cognition, the relation typically goes from the object to the soul, while for inclination, the relation goes from the soul to the object. In other words, the capacity to cognize is a receptive capacity; it enables the agent to take in things and features of the world. On the other hand, the capacity to incline or desire enables the agent, not to be receptive to the extra-mental world, but to engage with it and tend towards it.³ The etymology of the word 'appetite' helps bring out this feature: 'appetite' is from 'ad' which means 'to' and 'petere' which means 'to go or seek out'. Speaking broadly we can say that appetite is *towards* or *for* things, while cognition is *from* things.

As stated above, appetites are what enable their possessors to tend out towards the world and engage with it. As such, appetites are the fundamental motive principles or sources of activity in nature; as Aquinas says, «all movement is a pursuit or avoidance of something by way of appetite».⁴ We can get further clarity

² See A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, London, 1963, pp. 187-88.

³ The account here of how Aquinas differentiates cognition from desire follows *De Ver.*, q. 22, art. 10: See also *ST I*, q. 81, art. 1. I use the following abbreviations for citing Aquinas's texts:

De Malo *Quaestiones disputatae De malo*
De Ver. *Quaestiones disputatae De veritate*
De Virt. *Quaestiones disputatae De virtutibus in Communi*
In De Anima *Sentencia libri De anima*
In De Trin. *Super de Trinitate*
In Ethic. *Sententia libri Ethicorum*
SCG *Summa Contra Gentiles*
ST *Summa Theologiae*

All translations are my own, using the Latin Leonine editions for Aquinas's texts, except for *In De Anima*, for which the edition from www.corpusthomicum.org is used.

⁴ Aquinas, *In III De Anima*, lect. 14, n. 19.

on appetite/inclination by considering the range of possible translations of Aquinas's Latin terms. Aquinas uses 'appetitus' and 'inclinatio' interchangeably; besides translating these as 'appetite' and 'inclination', the terms 'tendency', 'orientation', 'bent' or 'striving' can be used, or even 'love', as we will see. 'Desire' can also be used, if understood broadly, as Aquinas mentions a use of '*desiderium*' that simply involves «a movement towards the thing desired».⁵ But 'desire' in ordinary English often connotes a felt or conscious state, and Aquinas's term '*concupiscentia*' (also typically translated as 'desire') signifies a kind of emotion. So, if 'desire' is used in this context, one needs to be careful to not import connotations of conscious feeling, since Aquinas does not characterize inclinations as felt or conscious states.⁶ Accordingly, Mark Murphy following Alasdair MacIntyre suggests the term 'directedness' as a translation of '*inclinatio*'; 'directedness' is especially fitting since it brings out an inclination or appetite's guiding and directing function but doesn't have connotations suggesting a conscious or felt state.⁷ In this essay, I use the above translations interchangeably, but with 'inclination' as my focal reference.

Now, what inclinations orient us direct us towards are real or apparent *goods*, i.e., objects that are in some way desirable to the inclination's possessor.⁸ Aquinas clarifies natural appetite by its contrast with cognitive appetite.⁹ He holds that every appetite follows upon some form, some structure: a being's natural inclinations follow upon its natural form, while its cognitive inclinations follow upon forms cognized by that being. So, an inclination is *natural* just in case and because it follows upon its possessor's nature – it's an intrinsic directedness of a subject to its ends; and an inclination is *cognitive* just in case and because it follows upon a form cognized by its possessor. In Aquinas's metaphysics, all substances, inorganic, organic, or immaterial have natural inclinations or strivings. Animals also have cognitive inclinations in the form of sensory appetites that follow upon sensory cognition. Human beings and angels in addition have rational appetites of the will which follow upon cognitions of the practical intellect.

⁵ See Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 30, art. 1, ad. 2.

⁶ This isn't to say that humans cannot become conscious of their natural inclinations, nor is it to say that natural inclinations couldn't give rise to felt longings and needs.

⁷ Mark Murphy uses this language of *directedness* as a translation of Aquinas's *inclinatio* in *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 10, where he notes that this translation originates in A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1988, pp. 173-174.

⁸ *ST I*, q. 5, art.1: «The nature of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable». For Aquinas's account of goodness in general, see *ST I*, q. 5.

⁹ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 78, art. 1, ad. 3; q. 80, art. 1, c. and ad. 3; I-II, q. 8, art. 1. Aquinas sometimes calls desire that follows upon the agent's cognition "animal desire", though beings which are not animals, such as angels, have desire that follows upon cognition in the form of will. I call this genus of desire that follows upon cognition simply *cognitive desire*.

To illustrate, consider a dog: the dog's natural inclinations follow upon the dog's nature, which fits it with a set of inclinations/tendencies/directednesses to live a characteristically canine life. Moreover, the dog's natural inclinations are directed towards things that are really good for it.¹⁰ So too, human beings have a set of natural inclinations that follow upon their nature and fit them to live a characteristically human life, and these inclinations are oriented towards things that are really good for human beings. More generally, natural desires are always directed towards real goods, i.e., things that are good for the possessor or things that are simply good.

Cognitive desires follow upon forms cognized by their possessor. So cognitive desires are responses to cognitions. Appetites have for their objects goods; cognitive desires are responses to, and are directed toward, things cognized as good in some respect. These things cognized as good may be either real or merely apparent goods, and hence cognitive desires can be directed towards either real or merely apparent goods.¹¹ A dog, upon seeing and smelling the food his caretaker put out for him, forms a cognitive desire to eat that food, a real good for the dog. But the dog could smell another potential food in its environment, such as chocolate, and form a cognitive desire to eat it, though chocolate isn't good for the dog. Human beings in addition have cognitive desires of the will (the rational appetite) that don't simply arise from sensory cognitions, but from the cognitions of the intellect as practical. Suppose that a human being becomes acquainted with someone that he judges would be a good friend; this person, upon cognizing the goodness and fittingness of forming a friendship with the other, forms a rational desire to become friends with him or her.

Now it is these intellectual cognitions fit to give rise to rational desires that for Aquinas are *practical cognitions*, for practical cognition is precisely that type of cognition that intellectually or rationally grasps something as good and fitting, and so is fit to elicit a rational desire from the will. Because practical cognition bears on rational desire in this way, it can be for the sake of action.¹² Furthermore, *what* practical cognition cognizes as good (or the object of cognition) must be something achievable by action. Aquinas attributes practical cognition to the

¹⁰ Moreover, as I will expound later, the dog's *powers* are also said to have natural inclinations; the dog's power of sight, for example, is naturally inclined to the act of seeing. The dog's power of sight is hard-wired, as it were, to perform the operation of seeing.

¹¹ Though Aquinas states that even a merely apparent good is in some way good: «Nothing is so evil that it is not able to have some aspect of good; and it is by reason of that goodness it has that it can move the appetite». (*De Ver.* q. 22, art. 6, ad. 6)

¹² *ST I*, q. 79, art. 11, ad. 2: «The object of the practical intellect is good directed to an action, under the aspect of truth. For the practical intellect cognizes truth, even as the speculative; but it directs the cognized truth to an operation». See also *ST I-II*, q. 9, art. 1, ad. 2: «Just as the imagination of a form without a judgment of fittingness or harmfulness does not move the sensory appetite, so neither does the apprehension of what is true without the aspect of goodness and desirability. Therefore, it is not the speculative intellect that moves, but rather the practical intellect, as is said in *De Anima III*».

practical intellect, but we should note that for Aquinas the practical intellect is not a separate power, but simply the intellect in its practical function of being ordered towards action.¹³

Returning to natural inclinations: whereas cognitive inclinations follow apprehension and can aim at either real or merely apparent goods, natural inclinations flow from the agent's nature and are always directed towards real goods, as we have seen. And while natural inclinations flow from the subject's nature, these inclinations are not blind, and this directedness to real goods is not happenstance. Note that the distinction between natural appetites and cognitive appetites explicated above is made from the standpoint of the subject or possessor. But Aquinas in fact holds that *all* desire follows upon cognition in some way. It follows that even a being's natural inclinations follow upon cognition – not the possessor's cognition, to be sure, but upon the cognition of God, «the One who establishes their nature».¹⁴ Hence, an electron or a dog or a human's natural directednesses depend upon the cognition of God, who by authoring the natures endows these beings with such natural inclinations. And this direction from God is the reason natural inclinations reliably aim at real goods:

Just as natural cognition is always true, so too natural love is always right, since natural love is nothing other than an inclination of nature instilled by the Author of nature. Therefore, to say that natural inclination is not right is to derogate the Author of nature¹⁵

More generally, God in his wisdom endows creatures with natural orientations to their characteristic activities and ends.¹⁶ In his treatise on natural law, Aquinas clarifies this by saying that the eternal law is the plan of divine wisdom whereby God moves all things to their proper acts and ends, which plan is promulgated to creatures by endowing them with natural inclinations: «It is manifest that all things participate in the eternal law, insofar as from its imprint they have inclinations to their proper acts and ends».¹⁷ Such inclinations to their proper acts and ends are found not only in animals and living things, but in all substances.¹⁸

We see that Aquinas's thought on natural inclinations needs to be understood in the context of his broader teleological view of nature. Aquinas unpacks this teleological view well in the following:

¹³ *ST I*, q. 79, art. 11. For a sustained treatment of Aquinas on the difference between the speculative and practical intellect, see J. Naus, S.J., *The Nature of the Practical Intellect according to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Analecta Gregoriana, Rome 1959, pp. 17-30.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 26, art. 1.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 60, art. 1, ad. 3.

¹⁶ *De Ver.* q. 22, art. 1, ad2, and art. 5; *ST I*, q. 80, art. 1; and see especially *ST I*, q. 60, art. 1, c. and ad. 2.

¹⁷ See *ST I-II*, q. 91, art. 2. See also *ST I-II*, q. 93, art. 6.

¹⁸ See *ST I-II*, q. 26, art. 1, where Aquinas mentions that heavy rocks have a natural appetite for their proper place due to gravity.

It is manifest that every agent acts for the sake of an end, because any agent whatsoever tends towards something determinate. Now that towards which an agent tends in a determinate way must be suitable to it: for the agent would not tend to it unless on account of some suitability to it. But that which is suitable to something is good for it. Therefore, every agent acts for the sake of a good¹⁹

Acting for the sake of an end is based on tending or inclining to a definite end; and tending or inclining to a definite end requires a suitability or appropriateness relation between the agent and the end. And this suitability or appropriateness is the ground for saying that every being tends towards and acts for a definite good or set of goods that is perfective of it. This natural tendency is both recognizable “from below” insofar as we recognize beings acting in regular ways for specific ends, and finds its source “from above” in God’s establishing of nature.

Now Aquinas also characterizes natural inclination, as well as the suitability between a thing and its good, in terms of *natural love*. I consider here some of what he says regarding natural love as it further illuminates our understanding of a being’s nature, its natural inclinations, and its good(s).

In some places, Aquinas treats natural inclination and natural love as synonymous; for instance, he writes, «Now this is common to every nature, that it has some inclination, which is its natural appetite or love».²⁰ In his treatise on love, Aquinas provides a way of distinguishing the two: in regard to an appetite, the term ‘love’ signifies the *principle* of the movement towards the loved end/good. So, on the one hand, we have a movement or striving towards a good, picked out by ‘appetite’; on the other hand, we have the source or basis of the movement, picked out by ‘love’. Aquinas further clarifies this meaning of ‘love’: «In a natural appetite, the principle of this kind of motion is the connaturality of the desiring thing for that towards which it tends, and this is called *natural love*».²¹ The principle or source of a natural appetite is the connaturality, i.e., the suitability, fittingness, or appropriateness relation that holds between a being of a certain nature and the good(s) it tends toward. *Natural love* signifies the natural fit or harmony between the thing and its good. For example, maintaining its life through consuming food is connatural and appropriate to a dog given its nature, and this natural fit or aptitude between the dog and maintenance through food is its natural love or bond. And this natural love grounds the dog’s natural striving, its intrinsic directedness towards maintaining its life through food. In summary, while ‘natural love’ and ‘natural inclination’ are sometimes treated as synonymous in Aquinas, they can also be distinguished; and when distinguished

¹⁹ *SCG*, Bk. 3, ch. 3, n. 2.

²⁰ *ST I*, q. 60, art. 1.

²¹ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 26, art. 1.

we are enabled to grasp the metaphysical foundation for natural inclinations: the natural fit or harmony between beings of a certain nature and the goods that perfect them.

In this analysis of natural love, we again see a key principle of Aquinas: that a thing's good is that which is suitable to it according to its nature. Contemporary philosophers such as Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson, who hold a similar view, put this in terms of an organism's life form. What is good for an organism is intrinsically related to its life form, and must be grasped from the perspective of that very life form.²²

Now, Aquinas's thought on natural love and inclination extends not only to a whole substance, but also to a being's powers. For Aquinas, a power or capacity of the soul is «nothing other than a proximate principle of an operation of the soul».²³ Powers are differentiated on the basis of activities or ways of being acted on and the objects of these, but diverse powers are postulated only if what the power concerns itself with cannot be reduced to a single aspect.²⁴ Here it becomes apparent that Aquinas has a robust, ontological sense of 'power' in mind: a power is the ontological ground or source by virtue of which one is capable of engaging in a multitude of functions and activities. When it comes to human beings, Aquinas holds that there are five kinds of power: vegetative powers, which account for the growth and maintenance of the body as well as reproduction; locomotive powers, which account for the movement of the body with respect to place; sensory powers, further divided into the internal and external senses; appetitive powers, further divided into the sensory appetite and the will or rational appetite; and the intellectual powers. Aquinas elucidates the relation between a thing's powers and natural inclinations as follows:

Natural love is not only in the powers of the vegetative soul, but in all the powers of the soul, and likewise in all the parts of the body, and universally in all things. And this is because, as Dionysius says in ch. 4 of *De Divinis Nominibus*, "The beautiful and the good are loveable to all things," since each

²² Foot writes, «By contrast, 'natural' goodness, as I define it, which is attributable only to living things themselves and [page break] to their parts, characteristics, and operations, is intrinsic or 'autonomous' goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the 'life form' of its species». P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 26-27. See also M. Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2008. For an essay by Thompson that clarifies and develops Foot's views on the species relativity of goodness and how this applies to human beings, see «Three Degrees of Natural Goodness» originally published in *Iride* in Italian in 2003, and found in English at <http://www.pitt.edu/~mthomps/three.pdf>.

²³ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 78, art. 4.

²⁴ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 78, art. 4. For more detail on how the powers of the soul are diversified, *ST I*, q. 77, art. 3.

thing has a connaturality towards that which is suitable to it according to its nature²⁵

So, each power has a natural love or connaturality with what is suitable to it, which grounds an inclination towards that good. Aquinas further clarifies:

Each power of the soul is a certain form or nature, and has a natural inclination towards something. This being the case, each power desires an object suitable to itself by a natural appetite²⁶

On the basis of the power's natural love, fit, or aptitude to act or be acted on in certain ways, each power has a natural inclination towards its proper and fitting object. For instance, the intellect is naturally ordered towards cognition of truth, while the will is naturally inclined towards the good.²⁷ For Aquinas, we see that each being, humans included, have a nature that endows that being with certain powers, and these powers are naturally inclined to their proper good(s) and end(s). This account is in the order of being or metaphysical explanation; but we should note that in the order of discovery, we move in the reverse direction: we first cognize something's activities and the objects of those activities, and then move to posit powers and inclinations that ground and direct towards those activities, and thereby gain understanding of the being's nature.²⁸

2.1 *An Objection to Natural Inclinations*

As we have seen, Aquinas defines natural inclinations “from above” as having their source in God's cognition and not their possessor's. Now one might worry or object that this part of his view – grounding natural inclinations in divine wisdom and providence – is obsolete given the findings of modern evolutionary theory. A dog may have basic inclinations that direct it towards what is good for it, but these are the product of a long evolutionary history, not the result of the nature's being authored by God. But Aquinas wouldn't have found the two accounts incompatible. He understands well that there are genuine secondary causes (i.e., creaturely causal explanations) and that the study of nature contributes to explaining such phenomena. Aquinas himself raises the objection that positing the existence of God is superfluous, since immanent natural principles are sufficient to explain natural phenomena.²⁹ He responds,

²⁵ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 26, art. 1, ad. 3.

²⁶ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 80, art. 1, ad. 3.

²⁷ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 10, art. 1, ad. 3.

²⁸ See Aquinas, *In II De Anima*, lect. 6, n. 10.

²⁹ *ST I*, q. 2, art. 3, obj. 2.

Since nature acts for the sake of a definite end under the direction of some superior agent, it is necessary that what occurs by nature also be traced back to God, as to a first cause³⁰

So, Aquinas would argue that the evolutionary process that produces a dog must ultimately be traced back to God as first cause. At minimum, he could offer this as a defense against the objection, manifesting that such compatibility is conceivable. Aquinas also argues that, given the existence of an all-good God, such work through secondary causes is fitting. He writes,

In governance, two things need to be considered: the plan of governance, which is providence itself; and the execution of the plan. With respect to the plan of governance, God immediately governs all things; but with respect to the execution of governance, God governs certain things through the mediation of other things [...] Now it is a greater perfection for something to be good in itself and also the cause of goodness for others, than if something were only good in itself. And hence God governs things such that certain things are instituted as causes of other things in governing³¹

If God exists and is good, it is appropriate that he should communicate goodness and perfection to his creatures in such a way that those creatures can also communicate goodness to others and be genuine secondary causes of effects. Such an account could easily be extended to the evolutionary process, *mutatis mutandis*.

One could also argue on Aquinas's behalf that there are different and compatible levels of explanation. If asked *why* the water on the stove is boiling, one true response is that the water has reached its boiling point, 100 degrees Celsius. But an equally true and compatible response is that the water is boiling because I am making tea. We could call the first a mechanical explanation and the latter a personal explanation.³² So, the dog's natural inclinations could on the one hand be explained by its evolutionary history, and could likewise be explained by God in his wisdom wanting such domesticatable creatures to inhabit the earth, brought about through a series of secondary causes.

Furthermore, Aquinas has a resource for claiming that the rectitude or reliability of natural inclinations is ultimately guaranteed, since God is their source.³³ This safeguards Aquinas's view of natural inclinations from falling prey

³⁰ *ST I*, q. 2, art. 3, ad. 2.

³¹ *ST I*, q. 103, art. 6. Given the references to Boethius in q. 103 and the later explication in q. 116, Aquinas is clearly drawing on Boethius's distinction between providence and fate in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. 4, Prose 6.

³² I get this distinction and example from Kelly James Clarke in his talk «Philosophical Reflections on the Cognitive Science of Religion», Purdue University, Sept. 7, 2012.

³³ See *ST I*, q. 60, art. 1, ad. 3.

to a version of Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism, which would argue that the aims of the evolutionary process render natural inclinations as unreliable sources for identifying real goods for humans and ethical principles. To put this point a different way: if the theory of evolution is true and God is removed as the source of natural inclinations, then a theory of natural inclinations *would* fall prey to a version of Plantinga's argument against naturalism.

Last, we should note that Aquinas's thought on natural inclinations would also apply to entities that have no evolutionary history, such as electrons. Electrons have natures that incline them to act in regular ways. Aquinas would say that their being intrinsically directed to so act must be explained with reference to the minded Author of their nature, which endowed them with such inclinations.³⁴

More could be said here, but I give the above brief account to show that evolutionary theory does not undercut Aquinas's thought on natural inclinations and their divine source.

3. The Natural Inclinations of Human Beings

We have seen that human beings, like other substances, have a set of natural desires that follow upon their nature and powers and fit them to live a characteristically human life. These natural inclinations orient or intrinsically direct human beings towards things that are really good for them: natural inclinations are what make it the case that human beings are *for* certain goods. These inclinations, as flowing from our human powers, are constitutive of human nature, or to put it another way, are hard-wired into the nature of the human being as such. And in the order of explanation, a being's natural desires are fundamental and are the ground for an agent's supervening desires.³⁵ God in establishing human nature instills these natural inclinations; likewise, God's eternal law, considered as natural law, is instilled into human minds so that we can *naturally* cognize it, a claim I later clarify.³⁶

For Aquinas, the fundamental natural inclination of human beings, given their nature as rational animals, is that of the will – the rational appetite – towards the good in general.³⁷ Aquinas sometimes describes the object of the will as the *ratio*

³⁴ I thank Joel Johnson for this example. This is the reasoning Aquinas uses in his fifth way where the explanandum is that natural bodies that lack intelligence act for ends. See *ST I*, q. 2, art. 3.

³⁵ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 155, art. 2: «Natural inclinations are the principles of all supervening inclinations». See also, *ST I*, q. 60, art. 2.

³⁶ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 90, art. 4, ad. 1.

³⁷ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 10, art. 1. For a comprehensive treatment of Aquinas on the will, see D. Gallagher, «Thomas Aquinas on the Will as Rational Appetite», *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 29, no. 4 (October 1991), pp. 559–84. See also Eleonore Stump's account of the will in «Aquinas's Account of Freedom: Intellect and Will», *Monist* 80, no. 4 (October 1997), pp. 576–97.

boni, the aspect or nature of good.³⁸ Aquinas clarifies that just as the object of the will is the good in general or *ratio boni*, it is also the ultimate end – happiness.³⁹ What is more, Aquinas claims that the will naturally tends to «all those things which are appropriate to the one willing according to his own nature».⁴⁰ So human beings are naturally inclined through their will, not simply to the good in general and happiness, but to more specific goods that suit their nature and specific powers. Aquinas at times gives a relatively short list of the human being's natural inclinations and goods, saying that they have inclinations to exist, to live, and to know.⁴¹ In other places, he mentions a variety of natural inclinations: a natural inclination to act according to reason⁴²; a natural inclination to the good of virtue⁴³; a natural inclination to set aside a time for necessary functions such as sleeping, eating, and spiritual refreshment⁴⁴; a natural inclination to perform an act proportionate to one's power⁴⁵; and even a natural inclination to know the future by human means.⁴⁶ As is well known, in his treatise on natural law in *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, art. 2, he gives a more principled list.

Aquinas there classifies human natural inclinations with reference to the set of creatures with which humans share those inclinations. He then specifies the goods these natural inclinations are oriented towards and gives examples of precepts that protect or promote those goods.⁴⁷ He points out that human beings have an inclination to preserve their own existence, an inclination that they share with all substances. Human beings also have an inclination to the union of male and female and the raising of offspring, an inclination that they share with a large class of animals. Moreover, human beings have inclinations that flow from their rational nature: he mentions the inclination to live in society, to know the truth about God, and to act according to reason.⁴⁸ We can see that human natural inclinations are tendencies that intrinsically direct us to the goods that constitute the basic aspects of a flourishing human life. Following a standard idiom, I will henceforth refer to these basic aspects of flourishing that Aquinas mentions as the *basic goods*.⁴⁹

³⁸ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 8, art. 2.

³⁹ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 82, art. 1.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 10, art. 1.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *De Malo*, q. 6.

⁴² Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 94, art. 3.

⁴³ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 85, art. 1 and 2; *De Malo*, q. 1, art. 4.

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 122, art. 4.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 133, art. 1.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 122, art. 4, ad1.

⁴⁷ In this paragraph I follow closely Aquinas's reasoning in *ST* I-II, 94, art. 2.

⁴⁸ The natural inclination to act according to reason is found in the following article, *ST* I-II, q. 94, art. 3.

⁴⁹ I find no reason to think that Aquinas's list of the basic goods in either of the two texts mentioned is intended to be exhaustive. When I speak of the basic goods, I mean at least those goods

Now we may wonder how these specific natural inclinations to basic goods relate to the fundamental inclination of the will to the good and happiness. We find the key to connecting the specific natural inclinations to the fundamental inclination of the will in the following passage:

For we not only desire by means of the will those things which pertain to the power of the will, but also those things which pertain to the individual powers and to the whole human being. This being the case, a human being naturally wills not only the object of the will, but also other objects which are appropriate to the other powers: as cognition of truth, which is appropriate to the intellect; and to be and to live and other things of this kind, which provide for natural preservation. These things are all included under the will's object, as certain particular goods.⁵⁰

We see here that we not only naturally will the object of the will – the good in general and happiness – but also the basic goods, of which Aquinas here gives preservation of life and knowledge of truth as examples. Aquinas says that these specific goods mentioned are *included* in the object of the will, which is the good in general. What does Aquinas mean by ‘included’ here? To begin, Aquinas holds that the will moves all the other powers of the soul, and those powers themselves are good or end directed. For example, the intellect is naturally inclined to know the truth; the power of intellect is *for* truth. So, because the will is inclined to the good in general, and because the good towards which the intellect is inclined is truth, that good falls under the range of the will's inclination to good in general. The same holds for the good of living; this is a good that pertains to the welfare of the whole human being, and hence it falls under the scope of the will's inclination to the good and is included in it.

We could say that for Aquinas, human beings have an objective, *natural motivational set*; this motivational set is not populated by pro-attitudes that human beings simply happen to have, as in Bernard Williams' now common idea of a subjective motivational set, but by orientations which the human being has by virtue of its nature.⁵¹ And this natural motivational set fixes what we could call the natural ends of the human being, i.e., the basic human goods. Moreover, the goods this motivational set direct us towards are not wholly distinct or separate from the primary object of the will, which is good/happiness; rather, these goods should be seen as aspects or parts of happiness. They are by extension included

we are naturally inclined to that Aquinas explicitly mentions: the goods of life, mating and the rearing of offspring, acting in accord with reason, living in society, and knowing the truth about God (which I take to imply the good of knowledge of truth in general, which he lists elsewhere in *De Malo*, q. 6).

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 10, art. 1.

⁵¹ B. Williams, «Internal and External Reasons», in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, pp. 101-113.

in the object of the will, since the will also moves the other human powers to their ends.

4. Natural Inclinations' Influence on Practical Cognition of Goods and Precepts

We have seen that from the perspective of metaphysics, a human being's natural inclinations set their natural ends or basic goods and direct them towards those ends. We can now consider how a human being's natural inclinations towards perfective goods at the metaphysical level relates to practical cognition of goods and precepts at the epistemic level.

Aquinas interpreters have been divided on how to interpret Aquinas. The basic division is typically presented as being between interpreters who espouse derivationism and those who espouse inclinationism.⁵² Derivationism is the view that practical cognitions about human goods and precepts are derived or inferred from speculative cognitions about human nature, its powers, and natural inclinations. Inclinationism is the view that practical cognition of the basic goods isn't so derived; rather, these basic goods are known by practical reason immediately or directly, and what the human being's inclinations do is play an important role in how the human being comes to know them.⁵³

The derivationist vs. inclinationist distinction, while helpful in some ways, is also cumbersome, and so I set it to the side for now.⁵⁴ I find it more illuminating to consider three more fine-grained interpretations of Aquinas: an anthropological, introspective, and epistemic directive interpretation. Examining these interpretations is not a mere exercise in Aquinas exegesis, for it elucidates this area of logical space and the potential philosophical paths for relating natural inclinations to practical cognitions of goods and precepts.

As we have seen, when Aquinas gives an extended treatment of these natural inclinations in his section on natural law, he correlates them with the goods to which they are directed, and some respective precepts that are based on those goods. For example, a human being's natural inclination to the good of living in society is connected to the apprehension of that good and the precept of the practical intellect that one should avoid offending those among whom one has to live. The question arises as to just *how* these inclinations relate to the practical

⁵² For the difference between derivationism and inclinationism, see M. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, pp. 6-13.

⁵³ This division generally aligns with that between "old natural law" and "new natural law" interpretations, the former being derivationist and the latter inclinationist. While the old/new natural law is helpful in some ways, it is cumbersome, in part because "new natural law" became a philosophical movement that, while grounded in Aquinas, developed Thomistic ethics in its own way. Moreover, Jacques Maritain, a key Aquinas interpreter on these issues, while not a derivationist, was not a part of the new natural law movement.

⁵⁴ As I point out in section 4.2, the derivationist/inclinationist division also needs more nuance in order a) to account for a view that allows for both kinds of cognition, and b) since many thinkers classified as derivationist qualify their reading of Aquinas in significant ways.

cognition of goods. Aquinas gives us the following compressed but precise analysis:

But because good has the aspect of an end, whereas evil has the aspect of a contrary, for this reason all those things towards which a human being has a natural inclination, reason naturally apprehends as good, and consequently as things to be pursued, and the contraries of these as evil and to be avoided⁵⁵

Aquinas speaks here of a *natural apprehension* of the goods towards which we have natural inclinations, and a concomitant natural apprehension of the evils which are the contraries of those goods. Moreover, in the sentence immediately preceding this passage Aquinas likewise speaks of practical reason *naturally apprehending* human goods.⁵⁶ What does Aquinas mean here?

I call the first interpretation the *anthropological* interpretation. On this reading, the person considering Aquinas's text or at least considering this area of logical space first recognizes that human beings, including himself, possess a nature with certain powers and natural inclinations. And from this knowledge, he moves to cognize the goods that are the objects of these inclinations, his knowledge of the goods being dependent upon his knowledge of his nature, powers, and inclinations. This is the standard interpretation among the "old natural law" theorists and would count as derivationist.⁵⁷ A person's practical knowledge of the human goods is in some sense derived from an antecedent non-practical knowledge of human nature.

The anthropological interpretation faces three problems. First, Aquinas says that practical reason naturally *apprehends* the goods, but the anthropological reading posits an inference or discursive movement from the inclinations to the goods. Moreover, Aquinas says that what the agent naturally apprehends are the *human goods*, and says nothing about the powers and inclinations themselves being the object of apprehension. Second, for Aquinas, the basic human goods must be knowable and known by all, for the natural law is promulgated or written on the heart of every human being «on account of the fact that God instilled it into the minds of human beings so as to be naturally cognized by them».⁵⁸ Knowledge of the basic goods must be egalitarian, not the province of an intellectually sophisticated, educated, or introspective elite. However, it simply isn't the case

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 94, art. 2.

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 94, art. 2.

⁵⁷ I return to consider derivationism and inclinationism in 4.2, with appropriate references, and clarify how these categories relate to the three interpretations I propose here; I also articulate what I take to be the proper way of categorizing Aquinas's view.

⁵⁸ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 90, art. 4, ad 1. For the language of *written on the heart*, which draws from St. Paul in Romans 2:14–15 and Augustine, see *ST I-II*, q. 94, art. 6. Aquinas states that the general principles of the natural law are known by all in *ST I-II*, q. 94, art. 4. And he claims that the basic precepts of the natural law are in a sense self-evident in *ST I-II*, q. 94, art. 2.

that knowledge of human nature, powers, and inclinations, along with how these rationally connect to human goods, is known to or even knowable by all. Such knowledge surely wouldn't be available to medieval peasants and their contemporary analogues; and it would even be lacking to more intelligent plain persons who lack the appropriate conceptual repertoire and training to make these reflective connections.⁵⁹ Aquinas uses the language of St. Paul in saying that the natural law is *written on the heart*, clearly indicating that the natural law is a gift whereby God enables properly functioning human beings to have direct practical cognition of the basic human goods, without the need for recourse to philosophical or quasi-philosophical reasoning on human anthropology. Third, for Aquinas, the agent grasps the basic goods by means of the practical intellect, which operates from the first-person, deliberative standpoint, and whose objects are *operabile* – achievable by action. But the anthropological reading requires the agent to take up a third-person, observer perspective, cognizing anthropological facts about human beings and from there concluding that certain things are human goods. But this surely is an exercise of speculative reason, given the third-person perspective, the non-achievable objects of cognition, and the type of inference involved.

Now for the second interpretation, the *introspective* interpretation. Aquinas could mean that individuals identify their own deepest inclinations, and by attending to and listening to these, naturally apprehend human goods.⁶⁰ This

⁵⁹ As Murphy writes, «It must be conceded, however, that a consistent natural law theorist could hardly hold that derivationist knowledge of the human good is the only such knowledge possible. For it is part of the paradigm natural law view that the basic principles of the natural law are known by all, and the sort of arguments that would need to be made in order to produce derivationist knowledge of the human good are certainly not had (or even have-able) by all». M. Murphy, «The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics», in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2019 edition, ed. Edward M. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/natural-law-ethics>.

⁶⁰ Jacques Maritain at times speaks as if he is giving the introspective interpretation, though I don't think this is his considered view. In arguing that knowledge of the natural law is knowledge through inclination, he states that in such knowledge «the intellect, in order to make its judgments, consults the inner leanings of the subject – the experience that he has of himself – and listens to the melody produced by the vibration of deep-rooted tendencies made present in the subject». J. Maritain, «The Ontological and Epistemological Elements of Natural Law», *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, ed. William Sweet, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend 2001, pp. 34-35. John Finnis too in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* also speaks as if he's giving an introspective interpretation: «Aquinas considers that practical reasoning begins not by understanding this nature from the outside, as it were, by way of psychological, anthropological, or metaphysical observations and judgments defining human nature, *but by experiencing one's nature, so to speak, from the inside, in the form of one's inclinations*. But again there is no process of inference». J. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980, p. 34, emphasis mine. Finnis's introspective language is likely influenced by a different understanding of *inclinatio* than that found in Aquinas; for Finnis interprets *inclination* as a something felt, rather than as a tendency or directedness. On this point, see M. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, p. 10. My take is

interpretation is more plausible than the first, since it doesn't require human beings to first take up a quasi-philosophical observer perspective about human anthropology and from there reason to human goods. Recognizing and reflecting on one's own inclinations and tendencies seems much more widely available. But this interpretation faces criticisms similar to those of the anthropological interpretation. First, Aquinas doesn't say that we first apprehend and reflect on our own inclinations and from there apprehend basic goods. Aquinas simply says that whatever we are naturally inclined towards we naturally apprehend as good, indicating that the natural inclinations are playing a directive role for apprehension, not that they are the *object* of internal access or observation. Second, we have seen that the basic goods are supposed to be knowable and known by all. But attributing to all such identification and reflection on one's inclinations is highly implausible. While many today are prone to reflect on their subjectivity, tendencies, desires, and feelings, it would be a stretch to *require* such sophisticated reflection on our psychology and behavior for a grasp of the basic goods, and to call this a natural apprehension. It would be even more of a stretch to attribute such introspective reflection to medieval peasants and their contemporary analogues, who belong in the class to whom Aquinas is ascribing knowledge of the basic goods. Moreover, unlike a philosopher such as Descartes, it is not part of Aquinas's philosophical method to call upon his reader to use introspection to discover truths about their nature. Third, while the introspective interpretation does leave room for a practical perspective, one would still be observing their inclinations, treating them as data, and from there one would be making a discursive movement towards the goods, and not an *apprehension* of the goods. Moreover, observing one's inclinations would not itself count as a function of practical reason, since the natural inclinations aren't achievable by action, but are simply part of our nature.

Now for the third interpretation, which I call the *epistemic directive* interpretation. On this interpretation, which I have developed and endorse, Aquinas is describing the principles which enable human beings to identify basic goods from the first person, practical perspective. Here, the natural inclinations are not the object of either philosophical or introspective attention/reflection, but rather work in the background so that a human being is directed to reliably apprehend these basic goods, and to grasp them without inference. To put it another way, Aquinas in this passage is stating that the natural inclinations play an epistemic role, in the sense that they play a key role in explaining how human beings come to *recognize* certain things as good, both with respect to the origin and maintenance of such recognition. Because our human nature is always and

that Finnis leaves the relation between inclinations and goods ambiguous, for while he denies that an agent makes an inference from the inclinations to the goods, the fact that the agent must first *experience* the felt inclinations and then move to a grasp of value may imply that a discursive movement is in fact at work.

already inclined towards certain goods, an agent's practical intellect is enabled to naturally apprehend these goods. The natural inclinations, then, are the metaphysical ground of our nature that move our minds to cognize the human goods that will satisfy them.

This epistemic directive interpretation doesn't fall prey to the major criticisms leveled against the anthropological and introspective interpretations. First, it is clear that the agent is *apprehending* certain goods; *no* inference or discursive reasoning is at work. Moreover, there is a clear sense in which the agent is *naturally* apprehending goods: the apprehension is steered by *natural* inclinations, and moreover because of the way that the inclinations are directing his awareness, the agent will naturally (i.e., without the need for discursive reflection) apprehend the goods. Because of how a human is inclined by his nature, certain things will naturally seem good. Second, this interpretation allows for all, including medieval peasants and their contemporary analogues, to know the basic goods; they need not have a quasi-philosophical grasp of human nature and its natural inclinations, nor an introspective grasp of their own inclinations; but their inclinations are working in the background (metaphysically, from deep within their nature) to direct them to cognize the goods. As human beings are by nature, so do the basic human goods seem to them. Third, the agent is obviously occupying the first person, practical perspective, attending to what naturally strikes him as good; he is not looking out into the world or into himself from a speculative, observer standpoint for data from which he can infer or make a rational connection to human goods.

Having clarified the epistemic directive interpretation and its merits, I note that more generally, I take Aquinas to be doing two things in the relevant passages in q. 94, art. 2: (i) He is giving his reader seeking wisdom a metaphysical understanding of human nature and its inclinations, the goods that fulfill these, and the precepts that relate to these goods. Aquinas is providing his reader with a reflective endorsement of these goods and precepts, a new *way* of cognizing the same goods and precepts that are available to all. (ii) Even more, he is making an epistemic point from the bird's eye point of view, helping his reader understand how *every* functional human being, by virtue of being constituted by these inclinations, is enabled and directed to naturally apprehend human goods. This includes medieval peasants and their contemporary analogues who simply do not possess the rather sophisticated concept of a natural inclination, much less grasp a rational connection between these and human goods. On my reading, Aquinas is explaining to his reader a key part of what it means for the natural law to be implanted by God, to be written on the heart of *every* human being.

4.1 *How the Natural Inclinations Play their Epistemic Role*

I now want to further motivate and clarify the epistemic directive interpretation I am proposing by investigating precisely *how* this directive role of natural

inclinations works. Although Aquinas does not go into much detail about the psychological process by which the natural inclinations allow us to naturally grasp basic goods, we can construct a reasonable account of what Aquinas would say, an account that harmonizes with how he speaks of the role of inclinations vis-à-vis cognition in other contexts. First, it's plausible that a human being's natural inclinations have the primary effect of directing their *attention* to instances of those basic goods, which in turn provides the material for the practical intellect to abstract and form general judgments about the basic goods (e.g., that preserving one's life is good). Psychologists point out that attention is selective, that human beings in coming into a situation are not, as it were, barraged with homogenous impressions. A healthy human being naturally and unconsciously discriminates the salient features and individuals in a given situation from unimportant details, between a foreground and a background, and this discrimination is in part based on interests that the human being already has.⁶¹ While Aquinas obviously wasn't familiar with modern psychological theory, the same basic idea is available to philosophical reflection and is at work in Aquinas's thought. It is plausible to think that for Aquinas, the natural inclinations naturally direct a human being's attention such that she is able to pick out those basic goods that are aspects of human happiness, so that they occupy a foreground of her attention. And they occupy the foreground of her attention not simply as objects of curiosity, but as desirable, as under the *ratio boni*. We might say that the natural inclinations reliably direct our attention to certain things and "charge" those things with attractiveness, or to put it another way, put them in a light in which their attractive aspects are disclosed. And this is certainly a phenomenon that needs explanation. We don't naturally attend to the goods of cats or frogs, nor do they naturally attend to human goods, and for Aquinas this would be explained by us being different types of creatures that have different natural inclinations directing our attention.⁶² While the cognition of the basic goods is achieved by the relevant cognitive

⁶¹ For background on the phenomenon of selective attention from a psychological point of view, see the chapter on selective attention in H. Pashler, *The Psychology of Attention*, A Bradford Book, Cambridge 1998, pp. 37-99. The distinction between figure and ground that I am drawing on was developed by the Gestalt psychologists; see D. Katz, *Gestalt Psychology: Its Nature and Significance*, trans. R. Tyson, Greenwood Press, Westwood 1950, pp. 30-39.

⁶² Another way of putting this point: human practical cognition, like that of other animals, is species-specific; it is naturally directed according to our species-kind. (This view is perfectly compatible with the classical claim that by virtue of the intellect, the human mind is open to all being.) For a rich discussion of human species-specific cognition, containing a nuanced appropriation of the work of biologist Jakob von Uexküll, see J. Pieper, «The Philosophical Act» in *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, trans. G. Malsbary, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend 1998, pp. 81-94.

powers, either in general or in particular instances, those cognitive powers are directed in their *exercise* by the natural inclinations.⁶³

This understanding of the role of natural inclinations in terms of selective attention is well-grounded in Aquinas's texts. For Aquinas repeatedly makes explicit reference to what I call Aristotle's Principle: «as a person is, so does an end seem to him».⁶⁴ The idea is that the condition of a person's character and desires molds their evaluative perception of ends. And Aquinas applies Aristotle's principle not simply to acquired inclinations and habits, but to the natural inclination to happiness and to more specific natural inclinations.⁶⁵ In a key text in *De Malo*, Aquinas gives three reasons why a person's will could incline towards one aspect of good rather than another, the third reason being a person's disposition. He explains,

In a third way this happens on account of a human being's disposition, because according to the Philosopher, "as a person is, so does an end seem to him" [...] If therefore the disposition by which something seems good and fitting to a person is natural and not subject to the will, the will prefers that thing on account of a natural necessity, as all human beings naturally desire to be, to live, and to understand⁶⁶

We see that Aquinas explicitly cites Aristotle's Principle and applies it to the natural inclinations to basic goods, explicating how the natural inclinations are

⁶³ I am here drawing on and applying in my own way Aquinas's specification/exercise distinction. Aquinas makes this distinction with respect to the will's relation to the intellect; see *ST I-II*, q. 9, a. 1 and *De Malo* q. 6. For a clear analysis of this distinction in Aquinas, including how the will can indirectly affect the specification of the intellect, see David Gallagher, «Free Choice and Free Judgment in Thomas Aquinas», *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 76 (1994), pp. 260-70. When I say that the natural inclinations *direct* the exercise of the relevant cognitive powers, I mean at minimum that they do so in the manner of an occasional cause; they may in fact influence the intellect in the manner of an efficient cause connected to the will. For Aquinas's distinction between an occasional cause and an efficient cause, and how this distinction applies to practical cognition, see *ST II-II*, q. 156, c. and ad. 2; *De Malo* q. 3, a. 3; q. 3, a. 5; and q. 6, ad. 21. See also *In V Meta.*, lect. 2, n. 4-5 for the distinction between a disposing (*disponens*) cause (clearly synonymous with "occasional") and various types of efficient cause.

⁶⁴ «*Qualis unusquisque est, talis finis videtur eis*» The saying appears in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. III, ch. 5, and he elucidates it in Bk. 10, ch. 5, especially at 1176a10–23. Aquinas discusses this saying of Aristotle in *In III Ethic.*, lect. 13, n. 516 and *In III Ethic.*, lect. 10, n. 494. He also cites this saying in *ST I-II*, q. 9, art. 2 and *ST I-II* q. 58, art. 5, and uses the principle in *ST I-II*, q. 1, art. 7. He speaks of this saying in *De Virt.*, q. 1, art. 9, obj. 21, and in the response to this objection applies and analyses it with respect to bodily temperament and the influence of celestial bodies. He speaks of the principle in reference to the natural inclination of the will in *ST I*, q. 83, art. 1, obj.1 and ad.1.

⁶⁵ On the natural desire for happiness and its influence on how ends seem to us, see *ST I*, q. 83, art. 1, obj. 5 and ad. 5.

⁶⁶ *De Malo*, q. 6. Aquinas also endorses and elucidates the relation between inclination and attention in his thought on sins of passion. On the way the sensory passions influence attention, see *De Malo*, q. 3, art. 9. For how the will can influence the exercise of the intellect and what it attends to, see *De Malo*, q. 3, art. 10.

one kind of disposition by which attention is selective in a way that provides a lens that shapes what seems good to a person.

Now Aquinas also claims that the intellect has a natural habit, called *synderesis*, which disposes human beings to grasp certain normative practical principles, the precepts of the natural law. We may wonder how the human natural inclinations relate to *synderesis*. We should first note that while Aquinas says that *synderesis* “contains” the precepts of the natural law, he doesn’t mean that humans have innate moral knowledge.⁶⁷ Rather, *synderesis* is a disposition to knowledge of the natural law, and relies on concrete experience to form such knowledge.⁶⁸ But in order to have such concrete experience, the human being needs to be reliably directed to the kinds of concrete experience from which the disposition of *synderesis* can be actualized to form and retain practical precepts. And it stands to reason that it is the natural inclinations that are responsible for this reliable direction or selective attention. We are not at the mercy of simply happening to attend to instances of these basic human goods, and perhaps getting things wrong and attending to, say, feline or froggy goods; our human natural inclinations ensure that the relevant cognitive powers and *synderesis* are reliably directed towards these goods. What is more, these processes typically are not and need not be conscious to the agent.

4.2 *Categorizing Aquinas’s View*

I now return to the secondary literature’s division of derivationist and inclinationist readings of how we cognize the basic goods and precepts of the natural law. What I have called the anthropological interpretation is derivationist, and the introspective interpretation while not necessarily derivationist, could be understood in a derivationist way, insofar as one’s own inclinations are taken to be data from which one infers basic goods. But at this point, I find that these categories need further distinction. Call the view that basic goods are derived (or at least can be) from facts about natural inclinations *derivationism* and call the view that this is the *only* epistemic way that natural inclinations relate to the basic goods *strong derivationism*. Notice that on strong derivationism, the natural inclinations do not play any epistemic role in directing an agent to cognize basic

⁶⁷ For the language of *synderesis* “containing” the precepts, see *ST I-II*, q. 94, art. 1, ad. 2. Aquinas also when investigating *synderesis* speaks of the precepts of the natural law as being naturally endowed or implanted (*naturaliter indita*); see *ST I*, q. 79, art. 12.

⁶⁸ Aquinas rejects the idea of innate knowledge. On the centrality of this epistemological principle for Aquinas, see J. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite to Infinite Being*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 2000, p. 35 and note p. 43. Wippel lists the following texts of Aquinas as representative: *In De Trin.*, q. 6, art. 2; *De Ver.*, q. 12, art. 3, ad2; *ST II-II*, q. 173, art. 2.

goods, but *only* serve as a datum for the intellect to derive or infer basic goods.⁶⁹ My interpretation of Aquinas is obviously opposed to strong derivationism, but it allows that derivationist cognition of the basic human goods is possible for an agent reflecting in a philosophical mode on human nature and the metaphysics of good.⁷⁰ Moreover, as we have seen, I do not think that Aquinas's purpose in *ST* q. 94, art. 2 is to argue that each human being reasons to human goods from natural inclinations.

My interpretation of Aquinas is a specific version of what is known in the literature under the heading of *inclinationism*.⁷¹ According to *inclinationism*, knowledge of the basic goods is not derived from knowledge of human natural inclinations; rather these basic goods are known immediately or directly, and what the human being's inclinations do is play an important role in how the human being comes to know them. For further clarity, let's call the view that the basic goods cannot be philosophically derived but can *only* be arrived at through

⁶⁹ For more on the differences between inclinationism and derivationism, see M. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, 6-13. The distinction between derivationism and strong derivationism is my own. Examples of those who would ascribe to some version of strong derivationism would be H. Veatch, «Natural Law and the “Is”-“Ought” Question: Queries to Finnis and Grisez» in *Swimming Against the Current in Contemporary Philosophy: Occasional Essays and Papers*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 1990, pp. 293-311; A. Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996; R. McInerny, «The Primacy of Theoretical Knowledge: Some Remarks on John Finnis» and «Ethics and Metaphysics» in *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 1992, pp. 184-92 and pp.193-206, respectively; D. Oderberg, «The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Law»; E. Feser, *Aquinas*, Oneworld Publications, London 2009, pp. 174-88; and S.J. Jensen, *Knowing the Natural Law*. Veatch, McInerny, Oderberg, and Jensen all qualify their interpretations in significant ways, but all are committed at least to the view that practical cognition of goods and precepts is epistemically dependent on speculative cognition of human nature. For an exposition and assessment of Jensen's position, see my essay «Thomas Aquinas on Natural Inclinations and the Practical Cognition of Human Goods», pp. 254-258.

⁷⁰ I am not claiming that such a derivation of the basic goods would replace the agent's basic practical cognition of those goods, or render inoperative the directive role of the natural inclinations and the cognitive processes I have described. The derivations would rather corroborate those basic practical cognitions of goods and provide an *understanding* of why they are good.

⁷¹ The major proponents of *inclinationism* are John Finnis, Germain Grisez, Robert George, and (to an extent) Mark Murphy, all of whom are also expositors of the new natural law theory. But one also finds an inclinationist reading in Jacques Maritain, who is not a proponent of the new natural law theory. For inclinationist readings of natural law in relation to natural inclinations, see J. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 33-36 and 60-69; J. Finnis, «Natural Law and the “Is”-“Ought” Question», pp. 266-77; G. Grisez, «The First Principle of Practical Reason», pp. 179-81; R. George, «Natural Law and Human Nature», *Natural Law Theory: Contemporary Essays*, R. George (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992, pp. 31-41; M. Murphy, *Natural Law and Natural Rationality*, pp. 6-45; and J. Maritain, «On Knowledge through Connaturality» and «The Ontological and Epistemological Elements of Natural Law», *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, W. Sweet (ed.), St. Augustine's Press, South Bend 2001. We should note that while all these authors reject some form of derivationism, they all *do* hold that the basic goods and precepts are ontologically grounded in human nature.

inclination *strong inclinationism*.⁷² Just as my interpretation is opposed to strong derivationism, it is also opposed to strong inclinationism, since I hold that on Aquinas's view the basic goods can be philosophically derived. My view could be called a version *weak inclinationism*. I hold that with respect to practical cognition of the basic goods, the primary role that Aquinas ascribes to the natural inclinations is a directive, epistemic one that enables all human beings to readily grasp the basic goods and precepts, but that the goods can also be derived in a philosophical mode.⁷³

Supposing the version of weak inclinationism I propose is correct, then Aquinas holds a sort of externalist, reliabilist view of the justification of basic practical knowledge.⁷⁴ It is *externalist* since the agent does not need to reflect upon her inclinations and recognize that they are directed towards basic goods to be justified in her judgments concerning those goods. It is *reliabilist* since the natural inclinations need to be reliable sources for directing the identification of the basic goods, and the natural disposition of synderesis also needs to be reliable, though again the agent need not know that they are reliable. When it comes to the metaphysical question of what *makes* these natural inclinations reliable, Aquinas holds that it is by virtue of their being implanted by God, as we have seen (though again we need not be aware of this fact).

Now one weakness of standard inclinationist accounts is that not much is said on precisely *how* the natural inclinations relate to the basic goods. The account I laid out in the previous section on how the natural inclinations relate to attention and synderesis aims to fill this lacuna. I will now close by showing how this reading of Aquinas harmonizes with what Aquinas says about the relation between inclination and practical cognition in a virtuous agent.

⁷² Both Grisez and Finnis seem to endorse strong inclinationism. Murphy it seems would endorse weak inclinationism. Murphy in «The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics» claims that even those who downplay derivationism should leave open the possibility that the human goods can be derived, since even inclinationists admit that the human good is grounded in human nature. What is needed for such derivations, according to Murphy, is a bridge principle between the objects of speculative reason and practical reason. For Murphy's proposed bridge principle, which he finds traces of in Aquinas and calls the "real identity thesis". See *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, pp. 17-21 and 137-38.

⁷³I take it for granted that Aquinas makes such derivationist arguments in various places. A paradigm example is *ST II-II*, q. 64, art. 5 where he argues that suicide is wrong because it goes against the natural inclination to preserve oneself in being. For a host of texts where Aquinas gives derivationist-type arguments, see Jensen, *Knowing the Natural Law*, pp. 87-107 (though I of course don't draw the same overall interpretive conclusion from these texts as Jensen does). My interpretation, as should be clear, makes ample room for such texts and this type of moral argument.

⁷⁴ I thank Brian Besong for suggesting these contemporary categories to me for expressing my interpretation.

5. Aquinas on Knowledge through Inclination

Aquinas thinks that good or bad habits – virtues and vices – mold what a person cognizes as good or evil, i.e., his practical cognitions. In the following two passages Aquinas lays out two ways in which an agent could come to a right judgment about matters of virtue:

Since judgment pertains to wisdom, according to a twofold mode of judging, wisdom is received in two ways. *For someone judges in one way through the mode of inclination*: as someone who has a virtuous habit, rightly judges about those things to be done in accordance with that virtue, insofar as he is inclined to them. Hence, it is said in Book X of the *Ethics* that the virtuous person is the measure and rule of human acts. In another way, *someone judges through the mode of cognition*: as someone instructed in moral science could judge about acts of a virtue even were he not to have that virtue⁷⁵

But rectitude of judgment can happen in two ways: in one way, according to the perfect use of reason; in another way, through a certain connaturality with regard to those things about which one is to judge. Just as he who acquires knowledge of moral science rightly judges about those things which pertain to chastity by means of the inquiry of reason, but he who has the habit of chastity rightly judges of those things by a certain connaturality with regard to them⁷⁶

With respect to judgments made about virtuous acts, one could ground one's judgments in the moral knowledge one has gained through study and philosophical reflection, or if one is virtuous, those judgments could be grounded in the inclination that flows from one's good habit. He also calls this judgment through inclination a judgment through connaturality.⁷⁷ But the phenomenon Aquinas is pointing to is familiar. We are inclined to think that a person who has a good character, yet lacks any systematic study of moral matters, tends to have an intuitive yet reliable knowledge about matters of good and bad, of what we should pursue and avoid. Evidence for this is that we often seek counsel from a person of good character even if she lacks such systematic study. Aquinas's notion of judgment through inclination or connaturality among other things helps to explain this phenomenon. Aquinas also connects this judgment by inclination or connaturality with Aristotle's Principle:

⁷⁵ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, art. 6, ad. 3. (Emphasis in translation is mine.)

⁷⁶ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 45, art. 2.

⁷⁷ For commentary on Aquinas on knowledge through inclination/connaturality throughout Aquinas's corpus, see J. Naus, S.J., *The Nature of the Practical Intellect according to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Analecta Gregoriana, Rome 1959, pp. 142-149. For additional commentary, and an account of how this knowledge through inclination can be applied to knowledge of the natural law, see J. Maritain, «On Knowledge through Connaturality».

And he [Aristotle] says that the virtuous person rightly judges about individual things which pertain to human actions, and in particular cases what seems to be good to him is that which is truly good. And this is because what seems good and pleasing to each habit are those things which are proper to it, that is, which are fitting to it; but those things are fitting to the habit of virtue which are in accordance with the true good⁷⁸

A habit, then, has great influence on what seems good to an agent. It does this by molding the framework of the person's evaluative perception.

We see that Aquinas distinguishes between a judgment through inclination and a judgment by moral science. This distinction provides a key for interpreting Aquinas's text on the natural apprehension of human goods. Just as the virtuous person is able to judge what is good by virtue of her acquired inclinations, and the philosopher who possesses moral science judges what is good by philosophical reasoning; so too, every human being is enabled to grasp the basic goods by virtue of their natural inclinations, and the trained philosopher is able to reflectively derive those goods from reasoning about God's eternal law, human powers and inclinations, and the relation of these to human goods.⁷⁹ The philosopher is also given a reflective understanding of how it is that everyone is able to grasp the basic goods in an immediate way. We could say that whereas all including plain persons have a justified grasp of the fact (*quia*, in this case the basic goods and precepts), the philosopher is able to understand the reasoned fact (*propter quid*).⁸⁰

So, we see that Aquinas holds that habitual inclinations can be a source of practical cognitions. And if these inclinations of our habitual *second nature* can be such a source, then we have excellent reason to believe that the natural

⁷⁸ Aquinas, *In III Ethic.*, lect. 10, 1113a29, 76-83.

⁷⁹ Jacques Maritain is the main interpreter who explicitly and emphatically uses Aquinas's distinction between knowledge through inclination and knowledge through moral science to interpret Aquinas on apprehending the content of the natural law vs. developing a theoretical account of the natural law. This is significant, since Maritain is not part of the new natural law movement. See J. Maritain, «On Knowledge through Connaturality» and «The Ontological and Epistemological Elements», pp. 33-38.

⁸⁰ Two points are in order, the first clarificatory, the second a substantive caveat: 1) The *quia/propter quid* distinction is normally used to track two different types of *demonstration*; I am altering it to contrast a justified apprehension of some good, on the one hand, and a reasoned account of why it is a good, on the other. 2) The caveat: while important for moral science, one might say on Aquinas's behalf that in public debate, such philosophical derivations will likely not be very *persuasive* if one's interlocutors don't have at least some naturally directed apprehension of the human good in question, even if the arguments are sound. In a given case, Aquinas might say that what is first needed is to work to expose and remove (or lessen the effect of) the impediments that can blot out the natural law in a person's heart: the influence of bad passion, persuasion, habit, or custom (see *ST* I-II, q. 94, art. 6). This would enable the person's natural inclinations to be released (to use Maritain's term: see «On Knowledge through Connaturality», p. 20) and accordingly allow for some natural apprehension of the human good, which in turn could make the person more amenable to such philosophical arguments.

inclinations of our human *first nature* play a similar role. Moreover, Aquinas explicitly connects the natural inclinations with the inclinations of virtue, saying that the natural inclinations are the seeds of the virtues (*seminalia virtutum*).⁸¹ Hence, it stands to reason that just as the virtues enable connatural knowledge through acquired inclinations to more particular goods, so do the seeds of virtue enable connatural knowledge through natural inclinations to the basic goods.

Finally, let us recall that Aquinas claims that natural inclinations find their source in natural love, which he characterizes as precisely a kind of connaturality or suitability that holds between a being and its goods. This language mirrors the language Aquinas uses of how appetitive habits create a suitability or connaturality between an agent and various ends. This again gives us excellent reason to hold that Aquinas thinks of our practical knowledge of the basic goods as being a kind of connatural knowledge or knowledge through our natural inclinations.

In response to a potential worry, I should emphasize that on the interpretation I have laid out, the human goods do not float free of human nature and its inclinations, either metaphysically or epistemically: metaphysically, the human goods are fulfillments of the inclinations of human nature; and epistemically, it is precisely *because* the natural inclinations are so deeply embedded in us that they move us to directly apprehend the goods that fulfill them, without having to first apprehend that we have such inclinations – just as the connatural knowledge of goods granted by virtue need not involve any awareness of our virtuous inclinations. As human beings are by nature, so do the basic goods seem to them.

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⁸¹ On the natural inclinations as the seeds of virtue, see Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 51, art. 1 and q. 63, art. 1.

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