CHAPTER 6

Forester, Bricoleur*, and Country Bumpkin*

THE STATE OF THE CRISIS

The introduction of Aristotle into the Christian world posed serious critical challenges, especially at the University of Paris in the 1260s and 1270s, and much of what resulted from this introduction received formal condemnation by Stephen Tempier, the bishop of Paris, in 1277. Many thought that Aquinas had not sufficiently distanced himself from the heterodox interpreters of Aristotle in his appropriation of the philosopher for Christian doctrine. Today Aquinas's work is again at the center of a crisis, but in many ways an opposite one. Since Pope Leo XIII, in the 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, rekindled interest in Aquinas as the "master and prince" of Scholastic Doctors, Aquinas has been regarded largely as a philosopher who answers the instability of Cartesian skepticism:

> Students of philosophy, therefore, not a few, giving their minds lately to the task of setting philosophy on a surer footing, have done their utmost, and are doing their utmost, to restore to its place the glorious teaching of Thomas Aquinas, and to win for it again its former renown (par. 25).

In an interesting way, Aquinas was again cast as a key player in the right use of philosophy, only this time it was precisely his Aristotelianism that was celebrated since it was seen as the answer to modern philosophy's aimlessness. Recently Fergus Kerr described the "standard account" of Thomism of the past hundred years or so as being unduly preoccupied with epistemology, with needing to establish how something is known

before we could say anything intelligible about what is known.[1] Aquinas was held up as one who had the answer to Descartes's epistemological problem but, as such, was made to underwrite the priority of epistemology and its very separation from ontology (and so theology).

The result was that Aquinas became primarily a philosopher with a "Christ-free theology and a theology-free philosophy."[2] This is notable in the *Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, which is part of a series whose purpose is to "provide expository and critical surveys of the work of major philosophers" and so chooses Aquinas from decidedly philosophical ranks.[3] The editors of that volume are pleased that "philosophers who have no professional interest in religion" are increasingly reading Aquinas as a philosopher, and hope that the *Cambridge Companion* will hasten that interest.[4] In Aquinas, theology should be taken as making the same sort of connection with philosophy as other sciences have more recently done, namely, sciences like biology and geology, followed by physics and mathematics, again followed by physics, neurophysiology, and computer science.[5] But this identification of Aquinas primarily as a philosopher, typical of the "standard account," to use Kerr's term, has increasingly been challenged. The articles within the *Cambridge Companion* itself do not all bear up the intention of the editors but indicate something of its instability. For example, Mark Jordan, writing of the relationship of philosophy to theology in Aquinas, asserts that "theology is related to philosophy as whole to part."[6]

The standard account involves a separation of nature from grace that takes natural law to be autonomous from and external to revealed law. Eugene Rogers, in his study of Aquinas and Barth, argues that this kind of Thomism reads texts like the *Summa* selectively, and usually at the

1. Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 17.

2. Ibid., 28.

3. Kretzmann and Stump, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*. At the time of its publication, the other volumes in the same series of *Cambridge Companions* were all dedicated to philosophers rather than theologians: Aristotle, Bacon, Descartes, Early Greek Philosophy, Foucault, Freud, Habermas, Hegel, Hobbes, Hume, Husserl, Kant, Leibniz, Locke, Marx, Mill, Nietzsche, Plato, Sartre, Spinoza, and Wittgenstein. Since then, the scope of the series has been greatly expanded.

4. Kretzmann and Stump, "Introduction," 2.

5. Ibid., 7.

6. Jordan, "Theology and Philosophy," 248. I am grateful to Nick Adams for helping me see the significance of Jordan's essay.

expense of Aquinas's commentaries on Scripture.[7] Moreover, according to Rogers, within its readings of the *Summa Theologiae* (ST), the standard account fails to notice that even arguments that seem to stand alone as evidence of natural law's autonomy, such as the Five Ways showing proof of God's existence, in fact do not stand alone at all (that is, apart from the grace of *revelabilia*): Rogers claims that the whole argument in *ST*, I.1.1–10 "has a circular structure according to which article 1 demands something foreknown about the end . . . that article 10 supplies, and article 10 sets up a structure of scriptural authority upon which article 1 has already depended."[8] Nature is intrinsic to grace because all of creation is gratuitous, that is, a gracious gift; and knowledge of nature *qua* creation is also not outside the grace that upholds creation.

This is putting a finer point on Rogers's thesis than his subtle approach does. My purpose here is only to indicate how the standard account of Thomism has been destabilized in recent years. David Burrell, Victor Preller (Rogers's teacher), Alasdair MacIntyre, and Bruce Marshall are others who have contributed to articulating the instability of natural law in the standard account. For example, MacIntyre points out a modern tendency to prescind questions about goods from questions about ends in order to achieve a limited good (e.g., political justice), given either a Hobbesian disavowal of ultimate ends or where such standards hold no consensus.[9] This reflects an operative atheism that combines the Averroist insistence that ends be restricted to this present life with the necessity for political stability when it could no longer be assumed that the citizenry was Christian. In response, interpretations of Thomism repositioned ultimate ends in a nontheological conception of nature so that human good was discoverable in humanity *qua* humanity. Catholic moral theology is only now coming to terms with the inadequacy of this response. For many, it can no longer be taken for granted that, in an ethic of natural law as Aquinas understood it, we know what it means for something to be "natural."

This chapter examines some recent engagements with the ethics of Thomas Aquinas in light of the aptness of three suggestive images for explicating moral knowledge and action. As a starting point, we will con-

7. Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*.

8. Ibid., 55.

9. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 140.

sider the way Aquinas described the beginning of practical rationality, namely, *synderesis*:

> Wherefore the first practical principles, bestowed on us by nature, do not belong to a special power, but to a special natural habit, which we call "synderesis." Whence "synderesis" is said to incite to good, and to murmur at evil, inasmuch as through first principles we proceed to discover, and judge of what we have discovered. It is therefore clear that "synderesis" is not a power, but a natural habit.[10]

Just what is a "natural habit"? It might seem that Aquinas would like to have it both ways, for what is natural is "known without any investigation on the part of reason, as from an immovable principle,"[11] and what is a habit, following Aristotle, is not readily known, since it is a disposition. But can some dispositions be natural? Aquinas notes that "habit implies a disposition in relation to a thing's nature, and to its operation or end, by reason of which disposition a thing is well or ill disposed thereto."[12] This means that a habit's ordering corresponds to the nature of a thing; but is the habit natural in the same sense as the nature of the thing is natural? We find two senses in which Aquinas will speak of something as being natural: specifically and individually.[13] Specific human nature is shared across the species (e.g., humans share the faculty of laughing), whereas individual nature varies from person to person (e.g., one person inclines to health, another to sickness). The specific nature is the way that the standard account has understood the sense in which natural law is natural. However, Aquinas is not suggesting that there are two kinds of nature but simply that "one thing can be natural to another in [these] two ways."[14] There is a place for habits (and so for the virtues) to work:

> Thus, then, if we speak of habit as a disposition of the subject in relation to form or nature, it may be natural in either of the foregoing ways. For there is a certain natural disposition demanded by the human species, so that no man can be without it. And this disposition is natural in respect of the specific nature. But since

10. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.79.12. Hereafter cited as *ST*.
11. *ST,* I.79.12.
12. *ST,* I–II.49.4.
13. This discussion is largely found in *ST,* I–II.51.1.
14. Ibid.

> such a disposition has a certain latitude, it happens that different grades of this disposition are becoming to different men in respect of the individual nature.[15]

This means that some people are more possessed of natural virtue than others, and we might simply call this good fortune. Certainly good fortune must remain as a possibility for Aquinas; but there is another way to explain how habits may be natural, although this is not easily demonstrated according to the terms supplied by the standard account. I hope to show that the following discussion serves an explication of Aquinas's account of moral reasoning as arising from natural habits.

THREE KNOWLEDGES: THREE IMAGES

Recent movements in theology, which some are calling postmodern—having acknowledged that the impartial moral agent is a fictitious construction, face certain challenges, such as the availability of and distinction between particulars and universals, the role of the intellect in discerning right moral action, and the function of the virtues. Three helpful images have emerged in recent discussions of Aquinas for delimiting boundaries in discussions of the moral life. How can habits be "natural"? How can nature be "habitual"? Traditional categories, particularly of nature, have prevented us from finding adequate answers to these questions. However, I hope to show that John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock's image of a knowing God as country bumpkin,[16] along with two separate pictures of the human moral agent (Jeffrey Stout's *bricoleur* and Charles Pinches's forester) can assist us in finding a way forward in this crisis.

Country Bumpkin

We begin with an image not of humans but of God, although the kind of human knowing is made plain by contrast to this divine image. Milbank and Pickstock suggest that the first step toward recasting the human knowledge of particulars is to distinguish this knowledge from God's

15. Ibid.

16. I should make a procedural comment here. The reference that Milbank and Pickstock make to God as country bumpkin comes from Aquinas himself (*rusticus*): *De Veritate*, Q. 2 a. 5 resp. Nevertheless I hope that I am right to take this image as functioning paradigmatically for a larger thesis about divine and human knowledge. The reference appears in Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 14.

knowledge. God has authentic knowledge of particulars since he *creates* particulars and is the source of their individuation. In this way, for Aquinas, God is like a country bumpkin (*rusticus*), whose knowledge of individual existences is unmediated by reflection on universals but rather is directly apprehended. He contrasts the ways that an astronomer and a country bumpkin know about eclipses differently. An astronomer has expert knowledge about eclipses in general but can only know a specific eclipse as a distinct phenomenon by fitting it with the general notion. However, a country bumpkin is more capable of grasping the individual existence of *this one eclipse*, since he has no expert knowledge to tell him that this is an eclipse because it is eclipse-like. Milbank and Pickstock summarize this point: the *rusticus* is "capable of a brutal direct unreflective intuition of cloddish earth, bleared and smeared with toil."[17]

God is like the country bumpkin; but the human mind is limited to grasping universals, as the astronomer does. Milbank and Pickstock go on to explain that, for Aquinas, human knowing involves striving after "bumpkinhood" in order to reach the kind of direct apprehension of particulars that God enjoys. Through imagination, the human intellect is able to approximate particular existences analogically through the senses.[18] But imagination is a reflexive activity; it involves the awareness of the image as the mediating principle for discerning all knowledge. So the intellect is not alone in grasping the individual significances of the sense objects. Because imagination is both analogical and reflexive, it cannot be limited to just the mind, but extends to the whole person—a complex unity of body and mind.

Against modern correspondence theories of truth, in which reality is directly apprehended and represented in the mind, Aquinas problematizes the idea of reality as such. Instead, what is truly real is so only by participation in the mind of God. Milbank notes that "there is no independently available 'real world' against which we must test our Christian convictions, because those convictions are the most final, and at the same time the most basic, *seeing* of what the world is."[19] Our truthful apprehension of a world of particulars is mediated not by the mirroring of reality in the mind but by an accurate rendering, through analogical connec-

17. Ibid., 14.

18. *ST,* I.51.1.

19. Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, 420.

tion between sense and intellect, of the individual participation in divine knowledge.

In this account we have an ontological "rather than" an epistemological approach to truth.[20] Not only is "truth convertible with being,"[21] but since all being is derived from God's Being, all truth (and, generally, knowledge) is rightly theological. This is part of the larger conviction driving the Radical Orthodoxy movement, namely, to show that theology trumps all philosophy by properly situating the content of philosophical categories theologically. More specifically, there is the challenge to modes of philosophical discourse that take for granted univocal being, that is, the assumption that what it means for one thing to *be* or to exist is necessarily the same for all things which *have being* or exist. For Aquinas, of course, the thought of how God exists is not directly (i.e., univocally) available when thinking about how anything else exists, since everything else exists because it is created; so creatures' created being relates to God's uncreated being only by means of analogy. Likewise, the way God knows is not univocally available as a concept from thinking about human knowledge, since human knowledge is related to divine knowledge analogously and is approached only through participation.

Milbank and Pickstock are certainly right to draw attention to the way that Aquinas would have repudiated later attempts to separate epistemology from ontology, even ostensibly in the interest of securing more philosophical ground for Christian theology against modern notions of truth. Furthermore, Milbank and Pickstock help us to understand that natural law is natural because of its rootedness in eternal law, that is, in God; and so knowledge of natural law is bound up with metaphysical claims about human creaturehood and participation in the eternal law of God. Brian Davies nicely describes the way this works for Aquinas:

> Does natural law derive from anything? Is there a law which is in any sense "above" it or superior to it? If we are thinking in terms of a code or list of precepts, Aquinas's answer is "No." But in one sense his answer is "Yes," because natural law, for him, falls under,

20. Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 17, 22. It is not clear to me that one can have any account of truth that is not in some sense epistemological, else there would be nothing to be known by it. Milbank and Pickstock should more aptly be described as explaining an approach to truth that refuses to separate ontology from epistemological considerations.

21. Ibid., 7.

> or is grounded on, what he calls "Eternal Law," which is nothing less than God himself.[22]

It is questionable, however, whether Milbank and Pickstock have given us an interpretation of Aquinas that is able to account for the particular nature of the virtues and for the ways that their display is finally a matter of contingency. For example, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt wonders if this kind of ontological account is not finally a case of the "philosophical tail wagging the theological dog."[23] In it the universalisms of modernity are not rendered unintelligible in light of the particularities, such as postmodernism has taught us to expect; rather, they are overwhelmed by a countervailing theological description that catches up those very universalisms in ontology and creation. Bauerschmidt notes that, in contrast, Aquinas himself simultaneously offered "a full-blown, theologically informed ontology, while at the same time paying scrupulous attention to the mysteries of the life of Christ."[24]

Milbank and Pickstock have developed an account that rightly locates the seat of being and knowledge in God (in whom humans participate) but have not suggested how it is that the imagination is shaped by the virtues. If knowledge for the moral life supposedly turns on the role of the imagination, then the crucial fashioning of determinative images is accomplished by practicing the virtues, in particular the theological virtues. These virtues "are called Divine, not as though God were virtuous by reason of them, but because of them God makes us virtuous, and directs us to Himself."[25] Elsewhere, however, Milbank seems to indicate that the locus of decision and right perception is in the will:

> Moreover, intellection as more intense presence of God, already suggests that God must first be disclosed if he is to be desired, and thus that in us, as in God, *logos* must precede will (in God the Holy Spirit), while only a right-willing and desiring allows us to see what appears as a horizon of aspiration (though perhaps

22. Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 247. Compare this rendering with Germain G. Grisez: "Every participation is really distinct from that in which it participates—a principle evidently applicable in this case, for the eternal law *is* God while the law of nature is set in precepts." Grisez, "First Principle of Practical Reason," 376.

23. Bauerschmidt, "Word Made Speculative?" 429.

24. Ibid., 430.

25. *ST,* I–II.62.1.

> Augustine realized better than Aquinas that we only ever see in the first place also by desire).[26]

Milbank and Pickstock draw our attention to how the universal of synderesis—a "natural habit"—is *natural*. But we also require an additional discussion of virtue to see how synderesis is, at the same time, a *habit* and how the Christian alternative is not simply another system.[27] In other words, Milbank and Pickstock just might be allowing a universal principle of being-as-such to eclipse the particularity of actual beings, thereby rejecting the universal ambitions of modern epistemology and reason, instead locating being in God, which is surely right, but at the expense of the virtues by which being is known.

Bricoleur

Jeffrey Stout is clear that an account of the virtues sets Aquinas himself apart from interpreters who make him the would-be builder of a natural-law system. Stout proposes the image of the *bricoleur* for our conception of the moral life: an alternative to the "Esperantist," which refers to the failed project of developing a universal language arising from the traditions of no particular people, with the hopes of uniting tribes. The moral equivalent of Esperanto is a system like Kant's, free of the particularities of various traditions and oriented toward prevailing over the ambiguities and contingencies of those traditions.

But Stout is quick to distance himself from so-called communitarians, like Alasdair MacIntyre (even though *communitarian* is a term MacIntyre rebuffs), whom Stout thinks hold hegemonic notions of community and of tradition as loci of practical reasoning. Instead, "*Bricolage* is meant to be a metaphor for what we all do when using ethical language *self-consciously*."[28] There is no moral reasoning in the unreflective application of decisions mastered by others and imparted by habit. In contrast, Aquinas made use of the moral resources at his disposal (particularly Augustinian and Aristotelian resources), incorporating them unsystematically in response to key questions: work that Stout terms *bricolage*.

26. Milbank, "Intensities," 465. The final words in parentheses were not included when this article was reprinted as the chapter "Truth and Vision" in *Truth in Aquinas*.

27. That it threatens to be just another system is a critique Stanley Hauerwas makes of Radical Orthodoxy in Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings,* 197–98 n. 7.

28. Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, 337 (my emphasis).

Furthermore, Stout holds that Aquinas not only worked in a sort of ad hoc retrieval of pieces of various traditions, but that he even promoted it as a style of ethics through the practicing of the virtues:

> If Aquinas was not what we usually mean nowadays by a natural-law theorist, and was instead a virtue theorist insisting on the priority of prudence in practical reasoning, then he may have been not only a *bricoleur* but an advocate of something called *bricolage*.[29]

It may be hard to reconcile Stout's enthusiasm for *bricolage* as a mode and his claim that by it he "mainly intended to describe our common lot, not . . . indicate a preferable alternative."[30] Nevertheless, it is clear that Stout finds the self-confidently traditionless status of modern thought to be a resource for *bricoleurs* who would follow Aquinas in a similar kind of activity by way of his method and content, that is, his appropriation of various traditions and his placement of the virtues in all subsequent moral reasoning activity.

Setting aside for the moment the question of whether Aquinas himself should be described as a *bricoleur*, let us briefly consider whether his account of moral reasoning ought to be considered an example of *bricolage*. The standard account certainly makes Aquinas an Esperantist, a great builder of a natural-law system. Specifically on this account, moral reasoning is partitioned into two operations: synderesis and conscience.

In the standard account, synderesis and conscience function separately and consecutively in moral decision and action. Reason grasps universal principles (e.g., "Do good and avoid evil.") by way of synderesis, and then involves conscience in the application of universal principles to specific cases (e.g., "Does doing *x* constitute doing good and avoiding evil?"). This is summed up in the definition of practical reason in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*:

> Human action is concerned with the particular and the contingent. But there are first principles in the practical order, as in the speculative, and a corresponding habit that enables man to come to knowledge of such principles, viz., synderesis. Right reason (*recta ratio*), starting with the principles furnished by synderesis and using the rules of reasoning (exactly as in the speculative or-

29. Ibid., 338.

30. Ibid., 336.

> der), establishes conclusions that constitute the rules of morality. Conscience applies rules to particular situations, to what must be done by the individual here and now.[31]

This account positions Aquinas as having departed significantly from Aristotle. It suggests a division of will and desire from intellect that is foreign to Aquinas and that more closely corresponds to the modern tendency to separate knowledge from action or motivation.[32] The problem is not just that this summary represents too intellectualistic an account of practical reason (although it does) but that it presupposes that an intellectualistic account of moral reasoning can stand apart from the perception and appreciation of the goods of practical reason. The very Aristotelian notion of ends gives way to Cartesian epistemology. The attraction of this account lies in its ability to explain where sin lies, namely, in the fallen will that knows better (through synderesis) but lacks the desire or will adequate to act rightly. The Cartesian account is supposedly an improvement over the Socratic scheme, which is compelled to treat *akrasia* (weakness) as ignorance, a failure of the intellect.

But Aquinas did not Christianize Aristotle by inventing the will to function as the seat of deliberation for what the pure intellect grasps by unaided reason. The assumption that Aquinas did invent the will as the seat of deliberation in this way makes Aristotle's *phronesis* (*prudentia*) at once too contingent for a natural-law system and too determinative against the vagaries of the human will. Daniel Westberg, in his extraordinary study on prudence, suggests that this misinterpretation of Aquinas reflects the modern tendency toward voluntarism, giving the will complete decision-making power over the intellect.[33] In actuality, the synthesis Aquinas achieved remained closer to Aristotle than this: Aquinas maintained the full deliberative and operative senses of *phronesis* except that he moved the object of human happiness beyond this life. The crucial point to make is that such ends reside in God, and their knowledge depends on divine disclosure such that human seeking after them is bound up with Christian ways of knowing, which, though "natural," are not generally perceived apart from the kind of knowing made possible by

31. J. A. Ladrière, "Reasoning," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 12:120, cited in Westberg, *Right Practical Reason,* 32.

32. Pinches, *Theology and Action*, 195.

33. Westberg, *Right Practical Reason*, 223–26.

the virtues. Aquinas does not doubt whether *phronesis* is the process of moral deliberation and action, even apart from the supernatural virtues, only whether they lead to right action, having deliberated on true or false ends.[34]

As it turns out, "deliberation" does not quite capture the force of what is involved in the moral reasoning that Aquinas has in mind. In the grip of principle-driven theories of moral reasoning, nature is self-evident, not the result of practical judgments that help one to discover the evidence that was natural all along. But goods are finally correlative to a nature that is by no means self-evident, and it is only by apprehension of these goods that the fullness of nature can be perceived as natural.

Clearly Aquinas was onto a project that resulted in an account of moral reasoning quite different from *bricolage*: he does not intend for the moral agent first to take stock of the problem and the moral and conceptual resources available for solving it.[35] Instead, the very way of perceiving the nature of the problem is bound up with the moral resources already deployed. Furthermore, we might ask whether Stout's image is able to account of the subtlety of everyday moral decision making that Aquinas had in mind. For Aquinas, the process of moral reasoning and action need not be self-conscious; in fact as he formulated it, it appears exactly to give an account of how nonreflective moral decisions get made. Having acquired the virtues, the agent's will does not repeatedly consult the intellect over moral principles, since those principles are largely not articulated or even acknowledged. This is apparent in Aquinas's discussion of the habit of chastity. The one who has this habit makes judgments by "a kind of connaturality" whereas others form right judgments through "inquiring with his reason."[36] Habits form a kind of second nature that is more like nature itself than like guiding ethical principles.

But was Aquinas's project itself an example of *bricolage?* In a new postscript to *Ethics after Babel*, Stout defends his earlier assertions: "A *bricoleur*, as I use the term, is someone with decisions to make about not only which ethical beliefs to accept but which ethical concepts to em-

34. In this discussion of anger and hatred, Aquinas notes (following Aristotle) that "hatred is more incurable than anger" precisely because hatred arises from the passions whereas anger is a habit and therefore less prone to transitoriness, *ST,* I–II.46.6.reply 3.

35. See Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 77.

36. *ST*, II–II.45.2. See also MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 128–29.

ploy, and thus which candidates for ethical truth or falsity to entertain."[37] Given Aquinas's depiction of the unselfconscious mode of moral decision making, it would seem that if Aquinas was a *bricoleur*, then he was the exception rather than the rule.

Forester

Aquinas intentionally structured the *Summa* in order to help readers to perceive the world rightly, but not by handing them general principles by which to interpret what they see. Instead he went about training them (an intention he admits to in the Prologue) to develop the virtues necessary to recognize the contingent nature of particulars without the distortion of having to fit them with universals. Perceiving the world rightly involves seeing the world as it really is. Prudence (*prudentia*), then, names the virtue of noting what constitutes a right and a wrong perception. Acting in a certain way derives from perceiving the world as ordered toward certain purposive ends and so disciplines the will and affections toward possibilities of desire commensurate with those ends. At the same time, training in the virtues occasioned by movement toward those ends forms right perception. This way of putting the matter reflects Aquinas's refusal to separate will from action or, as Charles Pinches points out, what is right from what is true.[38]

Pinches's image of the work of Aquinas as the work of a forester is specifically meant to improve Stout's image of the *bricoleur* and represents a reassertion of MacIntyre's interpretation, particularly of his extensive demonstration of the fusion of the Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions in his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[39] I think there are good reasons for favoring Pinches's image (and MacIntyre's Aquinas) over Stout's, but I also hope to show that it helps us see the significance of the virtues not easily explained by Milbank and Pickstock's discussion of the country bumpkin. The forester is possessed of skills for the classification and individuation of trees so that she is able to see patterns and meanings where the nonforester might simply see an uninteresting grouping. It is crucial to the aptness of the image that the forester does not impose a foreign system but discovers what is truly there. One potential pitfall of

37. Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, 337.

38. Pinches, *Theology and Action*, 191.

39. Macintyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

the forester image arises if seeing the world as it really is means merely being possessed of the right universals. But the forester neither imposes upon particulars a foreign system of universals nor brings together shards of traditions to suit a separate purpose. The purposive ends of forestry are bound up with the very practice of forestry itself while at the same time giving the practice its *telos*. Pinches notes that "we must see that Aquinas is about neither system building nor fixing particular problems by combining bits and pieces of traditions or thinkers. Rather Aquinas is fundamentally interested in discerning reality."[40]

Like the country bumpkin, the forester strives for knowledge of particulars in the pursuit of perceiving what is truly real, but it is through the shaping of practical rationality that this knowledge is (approximately) accomplished. Practical judgments about particulars are partially derivative of and partially constitutive of the principles of natural law. This means that the complex sets of concepts and applications involved in practical reasoning both depend on and approach the goods in question. Unlike the *bricoleur*, the forester is engaged in these processes largely unreflectively and unselfconsciously, discovering more and more the natural goods already presupposed in the activities of judgment and discernment (habits) that correlate to those very goods. In MacIntyre's words, "The precepts of the natural law are those precepts promulgated by God through reason without conformity to which human beings cannot achieve their common good."[41] I suspect that we begin to understand the importance of putting the matter this way when we notice that MacIntyre has given us a rather tricky definition, tricky for two reasons. First, it is paradoxical: natural law precepts depend on the *telos* of the common good, and the common good is achieved through right conformity to natural-law precepts. Second, it is backward: we only know what the natural law precepts are in view of the common good. In the first case, the apparent paradox is circumvented by the fact that the natural virtues are present to some degree initially, if only to the degree that they can then serve in the development of other virtues. Also, MacIntyre points out that a teacher is required, the authority of whom will have to be assumed at first.[42] Like the junior forester, the junior student of Christian moral training (we

40. Pinches, *Theology and Action*, 7.

41. Macintyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 111.

42. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 63.

might say the student of the *Summa*) subjects himself to a master, who names what is and what is not this or that (a cypress, a murder).

There is no simple movement from moral knowledge to deliberation to action, not only because deliberation need not be self-conscious, but, more important, because moral knowledge itself is not easily separated from the virtues that make possible deliberation leading to right action. This helps to explain the rather tentative distinction that Aquinas seems to make between principles and acts, synderesis and conscience:

> But since habit is a principle of act, sometimes the name conscience is given to the first natural habit—namely, "synderesis": thus Jerome calls "synderesis" conscience; Basil, the "natural power of judgment," and Damascene says that it is the "law of our intellect." For it is customary for causes and effects to be called after one another.[43]

The upshot here is not only that synderesis and conscience are "called after one another" but that their very operations are caught up one with the other. Synderesis is logically first, but it is not typically first self-consciously; instead, it is rather assumed in the kinds of applications made by conscience.

A WAY FORWARD

Given developments of so-called postmodernity such as the disavowal of the neutral moral agent and a subsequent, general suspicion of moral universals, it would seem that Thomism, having positioned itself in opposition to (but tragically dependent on) these kinds of assumptions, is once again in crisis.

The Esperantist fallacy was to suppose not only that universality was possible; by way of achieving it, the particularities of the various traditions were taken to be contrary to practical reasoning itself. Even worse, attempts at universal, objective grounding cannot help but be self-canceling as they expose just how particularistic those groundings really are. Michael Walzer notes that moral Esperanto cannot help but resemble the universal claims made by a particular position, in the same way that as a language, Esperanto is actually closer to European languages than to any

43. *ST,* I.51.1.

others.[44] At its worst, Thomism became a means of detailing this kind of linguistic absolutism by way of natural-law theology and natural-law ethics. As a result, Thomism necessarily separated natural from eternal law, natural from supernatural virtue, and intellect from both will and virtue. Aquinas was made to play a philosophical role that he would have rejected. Nevertheless if Thomistic ethics (and Thomism in general) is again in crisis, then the above models represent a way forward.

If God is like a country bumpkin in his way of knowing particulars out of divine simplicity, then we are reminded that knowledge of particulars comes from participation in the mind of God. This participation, we find out, is participation in eternal law, from which natural law is derived, and so natural law cannot constitute a separate, sufficient system of moral knowledge. On its own, however, the country-bumpkin image would seem to rely too much on the will as the locus for decision, reflecting both an interiority and a voluntarism foreign to Aquinas. The image of *bricoleur* reminds us that system building was far from the kind of work that Aquinas was about. But Aquinas's ethics—which may well have been the work of a *bricoleur*—cannot be described as advocating *bricolage*, since moral reasoning for Aquinas may operate in an unreflective, discursive manner just to the extent that the virtues have been sufficiently acquired; and right perception demands no more attention of activity than right action. The image of the forester further reminds us that the virtues both aid in right perception (and hence right knowledge) and depend on right perception for right action. The apparent paradox derives from the fact that the virtues are in fact inseparable from all aspects of practical reasoning, from knowledge to act; and they are dependent on one another, meaning that they are not acquired all at once. Just as the practice of forestry involves the interaction of a complex set of theoretical knowledge with practical skills, so moral reasoning for Aquinas relies upon a similarly complex interrelationship of synderesis, conscience, and virtue.

By attending to the questions raised and answered (adequately or not) by these three images, I hope to have indicated in some measure how Aquinas might have thought about natural habits and knowledge as contingent matters of human flourishing.[45]

44. Walzer, *Thick and Thin,* 9.

45. I would like to thank Stanley Hauerwas and Denys Turner for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.