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Leo Strauss's Criticism of Thomas Aquinas's Understanding of Conscience

Like Professor West, my goal this afternoon is to analyze Leo Strauss's criticism of Thomas Aquinas. In my view, the focal point of Strauss's criticism concerns Thomas's notion of conscience, for all of the aspects of Thomas's teaching to which Strauss objects follow from what Thomas says about the universal knowledge of basic natural law precepts by means of conscience. What I want to do first, then, is review briefly Thomas's teaching on the subject; after that I will turn to Strauss's criticism as it is stated in chapter 4 of *Natural Right and History*.

Thomas accepts Aristotle's distinction between speculative and practical reason and explains the latter by means of its similarities with the former. Speculative reason has an object, something it tries to grasp. This object is "what is," or "being." At the basis of speculative reasoning's activity of knowing being, there is a fundamental principle—the principle of non-contradiction: a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time, in the same place, and in the same manner. This is not the only self-evident principle of speculative reasoning, but it is the most basic one, for nothing can be affirmed or denied without this principle. How can the speculative reasoning grasp such basic principles? It possesses them through a natural *habitus*. Aristotle called this *nous*; the Latin medievals translated *nous* as *intellectus*. But grasping first principles is only the beginning. The speculative reasoning faculty must also move from principles to conclusions. This is done by means of the syllogism, an act of discursive reasoning. This activity of the mind moving from principles to conclusions by an act of discursive reasoning Thomas calls *scientia*—which word is meant to translate Aristotle's *episteme*.

The practical reasoning process can be explained, in Thomas's view, by comparing it to speculative reasoning. For starters, like speculative reasoning, practical reasoning has an object--not being simply, but the good, or being as good. Like speculative reasoning, practical reasoning has a basic first principle—good is to be done and pursued; evil avoided. This and other starting points for practical reasoning must be possessed in a natural habit of the mind—this habit whereby the practical reason understands first practical principles, or the primary precepts of the natural law, is *synderesis*. But practical reasoning, too, must move from starting points or premises to conclusions; from primary precepts of the natural law it moves quickly to secondary precepts, and then to more distant conclusions about moral precepts. This activity is called, not *scientia*, but *conscientia*. We notice immediately that, in Thomas's writings, *synderesis* is probably closer to our word "conscience" than is the Latin word *conscientia*.

At the heart of Strauss's criticism of Thomas's natural law theory is his criticism of this notion of *synderesis*. In Strauss's view, Thomas's doctrine of *synderesis* introduces a novelty into natural right thinking that weakens it. Thomas probably did this, Strauss says, under the influence of biblical revelation. Strauss's claim is odd in two ways. First, it is odd because the Reformed Protestantism associated with John Calvin

likewise criticizes Thomas's notion of *synderesis*. The Protestants, however, rather than thinking of *synderesis* as a notion from revealed theology that has been snuck into philosophy, think of *synderesis* as a notion borrowed from philosophy that has been snuck into revealed theology. Strauss's suggestion that Thomas has been improperly influenced by the medieval situation in which he wrote is also odd because it is a comment that is very uncharacteristic of Strauss. To suggest that Thomas should be read as in some sense the product of his age would seem to be a departure from the principle of understanding Thomas as Thomas understood himself.

Strauss makes concrete his suggestion that Thomas was influenced by revealed religion in two ways: he says that *synderesis* is in fact a concept that stems from Patristic authors, i.e. the Fathers of the Church, who based themselves on revelation; he also says that *synderesis* is not an Aristotelian notion; that is, it is not a properly philosophical concept. Let us discuss each of these claims in turn.

Jerome wrote a massive commentary on the Book of Ezekiel in the early fifth century in which he treats with some detail how the four faces in Ezekiel's vision should be understood. Jerome himself held that the lion, the calf, the human, and the eagle represent the four Gospels, and that became the standard Christian interpretation, as can be seen in Christian art to this day. Jerome says, however, that he is aware of other interpretations of the faces by those "who follow the foolish wisdom of philosophers." The most widespread of these philosophical interpretations is the Platonic, in which the calf stands for the desiring part of the soul, the lion for the spirited, and the human for the rational. Students of the *Republic* will recognize the famous doctrine of the tripartition of the soul in this interpretation of the first three faces, but how does the Platonic interpretation understand the eagle?

The eagle is said to be *syneidesis* in Greek or *conscientia* in Latin, which are both usually translated as "conscience" in English. The eagle is above the other three and admonishes and the soul and corrects it. It is also called *pneuma* or *spiritus*: spirit. Those of us who study Plato may find this part of Jerome's "Platonic interpretation" strange, for *syneidesis* is not a word that Plato uses. Probably, though, the idea goes back to the *daimonion* that protected Socrates and told him what to do in times of danger. By the time of the 'neo-Platonists,' this *daimonion* had become something quite amazing. Plutarch, for example, in his dialogue titled *On the Daimon of Socrates*, makes his interlocutor Timarchus tell an extraordinary story in which it is recounted that, above and beyond the soul or *psyche* there exists what the many call *nous*, but which is in fact each person's *daimon*. This *daimon* helps lead the soul in a straight path when the passions tend to jerk it in wrong directions, and it is the source of the remorse and shame the soul feels at its misdeeds. Another non-biblical Platonist, Plotinus, was famous for teaching of a *nous* that transcends *psyche* and through which an individual soul has an attachment to the One. According to Eusebius, the teacher of Plotinus was Ammonius Saccas, who was also the teacher of Origen, and from extant parts of Origen's works it is clear that the Platonic view of conscience being reported by Jerome is shared by Origen, who had himself written a large commentary on Ezekiel. Both biblical and non-biblical Platonists, then, spoke of an anthropology that included a *pneuma*, *nous*, *daimon*, or *syneidesis* transcending the tripartite human soul or *psyche*. This is indeed a very elevated notion of conscience. It reminds me of what is sometimes said about guardian angels, or the

character of Jiminy Cricket in Pinocchio—the voice of someone with connections to God whispering in our ear what is right and what is wrong.

Returning to Strauss, we can say that the author of *Natural Right and History* is surely correct to say that the notion of conscience comes to Thomas Aquinas through a report of a Patristic author. Whether that notion of conscience is itself a product of revelation, however, is questionable. The Patristic author who reports the idea does not approve of it and attributes it to philosophers. I am inclined to think that the notion probably represents a mistake in interpretation committed by neo-Platonists who misunderstand Plato, but in any case it is not clear that the idea represents an improper influence of biblical revelation.

Be this as it may, however, two things happened to this text of Jerome that we must understand. First, the text was excerpted from Jerome's commentary and entered the medieval glosses, which were sort of running commentaries on Scripture compiled from selections from venerated commentators. Jerome's prefatory statement that the interpretation he is reporting belongs to the foolish wisdom of the Platonic philosophers was *not* included in the glosses, however, so it appeared to medieval scholars as though the interpretation Jerome reports actually represents Jerome's own view. Secondly, the word *syneidesis*, the standard Greek word that is translated by the Latin *conscientia* and the English conscience, became corrupted in the text into *synderesis*. So now the thinkers of the early thirteenth century at the new University of Paris have a problem. Jerome tells them about something called *synderesis*, and since Jerome's is an authoritative voice, the text cannot simply be ignored. From context the word clearly is related to *conscientia*, but at the same time is has to be distinguished from it because the Greek word for *conscientia* is *syneidesis*. This all might seem to be a comedy of errors, but in the event it forced the Latin medievals to make distinctions with great subtlety and to rethink the whole problem of conscience thoroughly.

Now, already from what was said at the beginning about Thomas's view of *synderesis*, it should be clear that Thomas took the elevated neo-Platonic notion of conscience represented by the soaring eagle and turned it into a much more mundane and simple natural habit by means of which the first principles of Aristotelian practical reasoning are known. We might say that the high-flying neo-Platonic eagle got its wings clipped with Aristotelian scissors.

This brings us to Strauss's second claim about *synderesis*, i.e. that it is foreign to Aristotle. Stated more bluntly, Strauss's suggestion is in essence that Thomas misunderstood Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

We might straightaway adopt something of a skeptical stance when we hear such a claim by Strauss, especially when we reflect on the remarkable education in the *Ethics* that Thomas received. At the dawn of the thirteenth century, only small parts of the *Ethics* were known in Latin Christendom, but by 1248, a new, complete translation of the book from Greek was done either by or under the authority of Robert Grosseteste, the bishop of Lincoln. The new translation was made with the assistance of a number of Greek manuscripts. This enabled the translators to construct the best reading possible and even to add extensive annotations to their work, sometimes even giving Greek

variants. The new translation was accompanied by a Latin translation of a compilation of earlier highly-valued Greek commentaries on the *Ethics*.

In 1248, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas walked from Paris to Cologne in order to set up a new house of studies for the Dominican order. Albert took the new translation of Grosseteste with him, along with the notes and the translation of the Greek commentaries. Upon arriving in Cologne, he immediately began to lecture on the *Ethics* and did not finish until 1252. Thomas, as Albert's baccalareus, wrote down the lectures and presumably helped Albert edit them. The commentary that Albert produced on the *Ethics* in this way is often viewed as the best by far to be written in the entire Middle Ages. We know that Thomas continued to have Albert's commentary with him throughout his life, and that when he came to write his own commentary he made extensive indices and tables on the *Ethics*. Given the richness of the resources Thomas had at his disposal and the great effort he, Albert, and Grosseteste had undertaken in order to understand Aristotle's book, if Thomas lacked a solid grasp of the *Ethics,* he must not have been a very good student. Even well-trained commentators make mistakes, of course, but it would be surprising if Thomas were *wildly* wrong in his interpretation. Albert also educated Thomas with respect to *synderesis*. When Albert became Master at Paris in 1245, the debate about *synderesis* had already been going on for nearly half a century since it was initiated at Paris by Stephen Langton. Albert was the first, however, to be faced with trying to square this neo-Platonic *synderesis* with the new Aristotelian anthropology, and the position he worked out seems to me almost indistinguishable from the one that would be advocated by his student.

But our question is whether *synderesis* is Aristotelian. Albert and Thomas both clearly state that the term is not used by *philosophi*, but *theologi*. They make no claim that Aristotle used the word *synderesis*. The point at issue, then, is whether Albert and Thomas thought that Aristotle either *used the idea* or *implied* such a concept.

In the interests of time, we shall have to limit ourselves to a consideration of two passages in the *Ethics*. Book 6 is Aristotle's treatment of prudence or *phronesis*, but the author speaks of *nous* on two occasions in the book, once in chapter 2 and then again in chapter 6. The second use of *nous* is the one we are more likely to remember, where Aristotle says that there are five rational activities in the soul: *sophia, episteme, nous, phronesis, and techne.* He explains *phronesis* negatively, as it were, by distinguishing it from the other four. He says that *nous* is the ability to grasp first principles, and that *nous* coupled with *episteme* or discursive reasoning that moves from principles to conclusions results in s*ophia*; i.e. theoretical or scientific knowledge. In chapter 6, then, *nous* seems clearly to be referred to the speculative intellect. The use of *nous* in chapter 2 seems different, however. Aristotle says there that while there is a kind of thought that is concerned simply with affirmation or denial, there is also a kind of thought that consists of reasoning and desire. This kind of thought and its corresponding kind of truth is practical and concerned with action. Such thought combines *nous* and desire to give rise to *praxis*. In other words, the puzzling character of practical reason is that it is somehow a combination of a rational power that distinguishes between truth and falsity simply and a power that pursues what is good and avoids what is bad.

In speaking of this passage from Book 6, ch. 2 in the massive Cologne commentary mentioned above, Albert says quite plausibly: "He [Aristotle] later [i.e. in ch. 6] understands *intellectus* [the translation of *nous*] as a power comprehending universal principles, and in that way it is a speculative habit, but here [in ch. 2], he understands *intellectus* as it extends itself to deliberative reasoning, and thus it orders actions." Well, *intellectus* extended into the realm of deliberation regarding action--that is what Thomas and Albert call *synderesis*.

After 1252, Thomas walked back to Paris from Cologne to write his own commentary on the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard and to become Master at the University. In one passage in this *Sentences* commentary he says, "Just as there are innate starting points of demonstration in the speculative reason, so there are connatural ends innate to man in the practical reason. Concerning the former there is not an acquired or infused habit, but a natural one. So it is with *synderesis*, in place of which the philosopher places *intellectus* in activity [*intellectus in operatives*] in Book VI of the *Ethics*."

What's my point? In Book 6, chapter 2 of the *Ethics*, Aristotle speaks of *nous* and connects it with desire and *praxis*. Is it so implausible to refer to *nous* in this sense as *synderesis* and to distinguish it from *nous* as the speculative habit simply, as it is spoken of in Book 6, chapter 6?

Perhaps an even more obvious piece of evidence in favor of Albert and Thomas is found in Book 7, where Aristotle speaks of the practical syllogism. Well, syllogisms move from principles to conclusions, and the principles themselves must be the conclusions of antecedent syllogisms. But there cannot be an infinite regress in principles. At some point, the first principles must simply be grasped immediately. Is it unreasonable to conclude to a set of first practical principles known through a habit that one can name with the word *synderesis*?

We cannot this afternoon go through all of the texts and decide for sure whether Albert and Thomas's interpretation of Aristotle is correct. In the end, I am inclined to think that it is not, because it is hard to square their interpretation about a natural habit of first practical principles with what Aristotle says about the vicious man in Book 7 of the *Ethics*. If you remember, that man is so corrupted that he does not even know what is right anymore, but Thomas and Albert, claiming that *synderesis* is a natural habit, assert that *synderesis* and its first principles of the natural law can never be deleted from the human heart.

I think I have shown enough, however, to show that Albert and Thomas do not understand themselves as being influenced in their interpretation of Aristotle by biblical revelation. They think they have the Aristotelian texts to establish their case. In the end, they may be wrong, but if they are, it is because they have made a philosophical mistake, not because they were unduly influenced by biblical revelation.

So, where does this leave us with respect to Strauss's criticism of Thomas? In my view, Strauss is right but for the wrong reasons. That is to say, Strauss's concern about sneaking in biblical revelation is mistaken. Yes, the word *synderesis* comes from a Patristic text, but the definition that Thomas ascribes to that word does not. The

definition is Aristotelian at least in the sense that it represents a serious attempt to understand Aristotle, and even if it is not ultimately an accurate interpretation of Aristotle, it does not follow that it is crypto-Christianity.

Yet, it seems to me that there really is a problem with Thomas's statement on *synderesis*. The problem is that Thomas's theory of *synderesis* renders natural right vulnerable to the objections of ancient conventionalism. Strauss himself discussed the argument of conventionalism earlier in *Natural Right and History*. That argument, according to Strauss, concluded that natural right must not exist, for if it did exist, then everyone would think the same about natural right. But in fact people do not think the same about what is right by nature. Therefore, natural right does not exist. Strauss states on no fewer than three occasions in the earlier pages of his book that this argument of the ancient conventionalists is patently mistaken, for simply because someone somewhere denies natural right, it does not follow that such a denial is warranted or correct. Indeed, if knowledge of natural right requires philosophical acumen, then we should anticipate that almost no one except a few who are wise would have any knowledge of natural right.

What if we expose the natural law thinking of Thomas Aquinas to the argument of conventionalism, though? Thomas's teaching on *synderesis* surely implies that everyone knows the primary precepts of the natural law, and that almost everyone but the most morally obtuse also know the secondary precepts. Indeed, Thomas teaches that it is impossible for the primary precepts of the natural law to be blotted out from the heart of man. In this context, the argument of the conventionalists may sting: If natural law exists, then everyone should think the same about natural law, as you yourself, Thomas, state. Yet not everyone does think the same about natural law. And therefore, by *modus tollens*, natural law does not exist.

We can see the problem most clearly if we compare Platonic natural right with Thomistic natural law. The former view, Strauss himself argued, implied the necessity of the dilution of natural right in the context of politics. We might say that Platonic natural right necessarily is committed to a sort of esotericism. Thomistic natural law requires no dilution in application. Because of what Strauss (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) refers to as its "noble simplicity," natural law is immediately accessible to all. Because of its teaching on *synderesis* or conscience, natural law finds esotericism quite unnecessary, for the obligations of morality are universally known and hence universally obligatory. In the cave of the *Republic*, a certain prisoner somehow escapes his chains and, by a most torturous route, ascends through a narrow passage, eventually reaching the sun. And if this freed philosopher would go back into the cave, he must not talk about the sun too openly. Thomas, however, seems to suggest that we are all already outside in the sunlight, at least with respect to knowledge of the basics of morality. Stated differently, in Platonic natural right, it is a very rare human being who knows what is just by nature; in Thomistic natural law, it is a very rare human being who does not.