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Is There an Ethics Independent from Revelation – Ralph McInerny's Reappropriation of Aquinas' Theory of Natural Law

Czy istnieje etyka niezależna od objawienia – Ralpa McInerny'ego reinterpretacja teorii prawa naturalnego św. Tomasza z Akwinu

Introduction

The problem of the existence of ethics based only on human reason and independent of Revelation is one of the most discussed problems in contemporary ethics and moral discourse. Today, in an age of postmodernism, when all absolute truths are rejected, especially those concerned with universal moral norms, philosophers, especially ethicists, struggle to find common moral principles. On the one hand, we have the attempt of Hans Küng in so-called Global-Ethic¹, which try to identify some common moral principles in different religious standpoints while another view is held in a document of the International Theological Commission: *The Search for Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law*, which endeavours to redefine the struggle for the search of a universal ethic in a return to theory of natural law². This theory claims that all human agents can grasp some basic truths of the moral order, and even the most complicated or complex social order or other circumstances cannot eradicate them from the human mind. But is this theory sufficient? For example John Calvin and other Reformers rejected the notion

¹ <http://www.kusala.org/udharma/globalethic.html> [accessed 19.03.2012].

² <http://www.pathsoflove.com/universal-ethics-natural-law.html> [accessed 19.03.2012].

of natural law³. Of the opposite view is Immanuel Kant⁴ – a key figure in Modernism who tried to interpret Christianity as essentially a moral teaching separable from any dogmatic baggage.

In this article I want to reflect on the way in which the American scholar, Ralph McInerny tries to respond to this appeal and to find a solution in his interpretation of Thomas Aquinas' idea of natural law⁵. As a former student of Charles de Konick, one of the most prominent figures in so-called aristotelic Thomism – McInerny's interpretation of Aquinas is based primarily on Aristotle. What is very interesting is that his interpretation is opposed to the views of two Thomas Aquinas scholars, (Aquinas is considered as one of the main theoretician of natural law theory) Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain who have tried in the past to undermine the value of so called philosophical ethics, based on the work of reason only.

1. OBJECTIONS TO THE POSSIBILITIES OF ETHICS

The first of these, is espoused by Etienne Gilson who recognized Aquinas first of all as a theologian. Of course he recognized in his works huge philosophical impact, which refuted Bertrand Russell's and Will Durant's idea, that nothing special happened in philosophy in the Middle Ages⁶. But on the other hand, in Gilson's understanding the philosophy of Aquinas is embedded in theology. Aquinas developed a Christian philosophy, not to be confused with his theology, even though it was made in the course of their theologizing. Theology and philosophy must be distinct, but not separate. The order of Aquinas's philosophy is subjected to his theology⁷.

From that standpoint Gilson easily arrived at his conception of Christian philosophy. Gilson's purpose in discussing the existence of Christian philosophy is to suggest that not only is Thomism a Christian philosophy, but that of Bonaventure and Augustine is as well. This kind of Christian philosophy will be intelligible in the light of the relationship between faith and reason. Gilson

³ See J. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles, Grand Rapids 1986.

⁴ See I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. J. R. Silber, New York 1960.

⁵ The main source for this article will be the book of Ralph McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, Washington D.C. 1993, written lectures given in the „John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family”. This book is the only one by this author that fully examines the question of the existence of an ethics „independent from Revelation”.

⁶ See R. McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 10.

⁷ See Ibidem, p. 10, see also: E. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in Middle Ages*, New York 1955.

is then suggesting that faith can be intrinsic to philosophy⁸. Gilson embarks on historical research so as to examine this question. According to the works of Paul, who spoke in his *Letter to the Romans* of natural moral law, or Justin, who taught that the participation of every human being, through which ever revelation, is a participation in the light of Christ, Gilson could validate the claim, that there is a Christian philosophy. It is because acceptance of faith was taken to confer philosophical advantages as well as others⁹. This does not mean that „faith is a kind of cognition superior to natural cognition”¹⁰. Man cannot proceed from premises of faith to pure science or make a transformation from faith to knowledge. Instead, the Christian philosopher asks whether there are any truths accepted by faith that can be known by reason to be true. Then there will be progression from faith to knowledge, and the latter can be called Christian philosophy because of the original status of the truth of the believer. Gilson stated that he calls Christian every philosophy, „which although keeping the two orders (natural and supernatural) formally distinct, nevertheless considers Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason”¹¹. What Gilson is insisting is that the „constitution of this true philosophy could not be achieved without the aid of revelation acting as an indispensable moral support to the reason”¹². But this provokes other problems: if this is so then can the philosophy of Aquinas without a theological background still be called a Christian philosophy? If his philosophical ethics, without the impact of grace and supernatural order is possible? Of course one has to state that operating with insufficient knowledge of the end of every human, ethics has a limited task. But does this limited moral philosophy have no right to exist independent of theology? This kind of purely philosophical ethics had little practical value for Gilson¹³.

Another Thomistic scholar, Jacques Maritain invented the theory of „moral philosophy adequately considered”. In his understanding, purely philosophical ethics would be possible only in a state of pure nature, not concerning the fact of Original Sin which weakened our intellectual faculties in moral discernment. Of course Maritain acknowledged that purely philosophical ethics could prescribe some good acts such as „tell the truth and do not lie”, but

⁸ See Ibid, p. 12, see also: E. Gilson, *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes, New York 1936, p. 9.

⁹ See Ibidem, p. 13.

¹⁰ E. Gilson, *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, p. 35.

¹¹ See Ibidem, p. 38.

¹² See Ibidem, 40-41.

¹³ See V. Bourke, *Moral Philosophy without Revelation*, „Thomist”, 40 (1976), p. 555.

the prescription of good acts is not enough to form a practical science. Maritain stated: „the true science of the use of freedom not only prescribes good actions but determines how the acting subject can live a life of consistent goodness and organize rightly his whole universe of action”¹⁴.

Maritain in his works tried to contrast two orders: the practical and theoretical. In the theoretical order he acknowledges possibilities of natural theology – we can get some information about God, perhaps this science is not sufficient, but it is not false. Difference is in practical order. Maritain stated about ethics that „it is essentially insufficient in the sense that no science directive of human conduct – no science pure and simply worthy of the name – can exist without taking into account the real and actual last end of human life”¹⁵. One must take into account the actual fallen state of human beings after original sin. Purely natural will in a state of pure nature is for Maritain a false concept. He stated that if we want to conceptualize in a „texture of pure reason, we will produce a false morality designed for man as he is, but with its axis all awry”¹⁶. This position can be summed up by the statement that „man, as he actually exists has been redeemed by Christ and called to a happiness that exceeds his natural reach, yet it is only through faith that one can accept this claim as true; therefore, moral directives adequate to actually existing man must presuppose the faith”¹⁷. By that critique Maritain developed the idea of „moral philosophy adequately considered”, which is subjected to moral theology.

2. MCINERNY'S IDEA OF INDEPENDENT ETHICS

McInerny try to reject Gilson's and Maritain's obstacles by reading and commentary of Aquinas, in particular his *Treatise on Law*. What McInerny first noticed was that in Aquinas's thinking, pagan philosophers were able to learn some truth about God which is a small package of revelation, therefore it is possible that they could gain some knowledge of the human good, which is in the full picture given by revelation, especially in Decalogue. McInerny named these truths the preambles of faith in a practical order¹⁸.

¹⁴ J. Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, trans. B. Wall, New York 1940, p. 162.

¹⁵ J. Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, p. 165.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 167.

¹⁷ R. McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Idem, *First Glance of St. Thomas Aquinas. A Handbook for Peeping Thomists*, Notre Dame – London 1990, p. 157-158.

2.1. Preambula fidei

The first mention of *preambula fidei* is found in *Summa contra gentiles*. Thomas observes two kinds of truth: the first is that we can gain from our natural reason. These are truths such as: „God exists” or „God is one”. On the other hand there are some truths, that God had to reveal to us, like that of the three persons in the Trinity or that Jesus is human and divine¹⁹. They are called mysteries of faith. As Thomas stated, preambles of faith can be known by reason for the believer or not, Christian faith is not presupposed. As McInerny noted, „Thomas, living at the time when the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* of Aristotle became available in the West, was able to compile a list such truths about God that the philosophers had acquired”²⁰. Of course Maritain will acknowledge his contribution and give importance to truth about God, that could be found in theoretical reason, but he rejected this significance concerning truths about human activity. For him practical reason and practical sciences scarcely differ from theoretical reason and theoretical sciences²¹.

As a confrontation to Maritain McInerny noted, that there is Aquinas’s parallel between practical reason to the preambles of faith in theoretical reason. Through things, which God revealed, there are some precepts meant to guide our actions, notably those included in the Decalogue. To understand fully the significance of the precept of the Decalogue in Aquinas, McInerny is trying to see it in the broader context of Aquinas’s *Treatise on Law*²².

2.2. Natural law

When Aquinas speaks of „law”, he thinks about promulgated rational ordination to the common good by one who has charge of the community²³. This notion is used analogously to God’s direction of the world. His plan for all creatures is called divine law, usually equated with God’s providence. As McInerny commented, „just as central events may be said to be rational, not because of any reasoning on the part of physical objects, but because of the wise ordering of the Creator, so the activities of natural entities are lawful, not because they rationally direct themselves, but because of the wise they are directed²⁴”. Human participation in this eternal law Aquinas called natural

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *SCG*, b. 1, q. 3.

²⁰ R. McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 42.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 41, see also: J. Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, p. 165-166.

²² See Ibidem, p. 44, see also Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 90-98.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 90, a. 4.

²⁴ R. McInerny, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Notre Dame, Indiana 1982, p. 63.

law. Thomas applied the notion of natural law to those creatures, which are not only rationally directed, but which rationally direct themselves to an end. The human person is one such creature²⁵. Human beings are not merely directed by divine reason – they direct themselves rationally and this self-direction involves another law, distinct from eternal law – and this we call natural law. As we can understand natural law, man has not been given a mind simply to discover the single possible course of action open to him. We are not forced to act in the way we do. We are capable of acting rightly or wrongly. This indeterminacy involved is moral: good can be known by reason. The human agent in his moral investigation pursues happiness as a fulfilling end. The most general starting points of this moral endeavour can be found in the precepts of natural law²⁶. It is law appropriate to our nature and prescriptive judgments which talks about what is good for our nature and can really perfect it. What McInerny insisted on was that Aquinas identified natural law with the first precepts of practical reason,

the nongainsayable truths that mark the limit of moral discourse. These common and naturally known first principles are latent or implicit in particular moral judgments that are discursively arrived at. These principles are thus said to preside over moral philosophy in general – over ethics, domestic governance, political action, and of course civil law²⁷.

These kind of judgments human beings are supposed to know naturally, easily. That's why Aquinas enumerates only several precepts of natural law.

The first of these can be deduced from an analogy between the most basic precepts of theoretical order. In theoretical knowledge there is a rule of contradiction: the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time. The same one can observe in the practical order: good is the primary concept in the practical use of our mind. The good is what all men seek so we can come to the first principle of practical reason: „good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided”. As we see, the first principle of practical reason is grounded in knowledge of the notion of goodness; this means the good is that which all things seek. This is what „good” is taken to mean, just as „being” means that we exist²⁸. As McInerny commented on Aquinas: „this good does not simply designate an object of pursuit, but rather gives some kind of formality under which the object is pursued as being complete or

²⁵ See Thomas Aquinas ST, I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

²⁶ R. McInerny, *St Thomas Aquinas*, p. 64.

²⁷ Idem, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 45.

²⁸ See Idem, *Ethica Thomistica*, Washington D.C. 1982, p. 42.

perfective. Whatever is done is done under the formality of the good, that is, with the thought that it is perfective and fulfilling the agent²⁹. But what is the criterion for inclusion in the precepts of natural law? The order of precepts of natural law follows that of natural inclinations.

2.3. Natural inclinations

The first inclination, according to the nature shared with all substances, every human agent seeks to conserve itself in existence according to its nature. That is why humans naturally try to preserve their lives. The second inclination, according to nature shared with animal is joining between husband and wife, education of children and the like.

The third inclination, characteristic only for rational creatures, is that man has a natural inclination to know the truth of God and live in society³⁰. Inclinations are not precepts of natural law themselves. Their presence within us helps with immediate access to some types of good, of objects of desire of inclination³¹. What McInerny insisted on was that we understand these goods as human beings, not as a kind animal instinct. The second inclination, which tells us that we are inclined to have sexual intercourse and have offspring does not mean that in our sexual lives we can behave like brute animals. We must acknowledge our reason in every action, and every fulfillment of inclination has to have a personal and reasonable dimension. One must also take into account, that we must seek a knowledge of context of our deeds and that the rights of the others are to be respected would be suggestive of the first and immediate judgments which guide human actions³².

One must acknowledge that precepts of natural law are some kind of general directives to the ultimate end, aiming at constituents of the human good. Thanks to the fact that, in every human action the agent recognizes a striving for the ultimate end, natural law is valid for all men and all times. What must be emphasized is that natural law claims that there are moral absolutes. It is an absolute moral principle-judgment or precept – that informs us what is good for us and what we must not do which admits of no exceptions³³. If we consider some negative precepts such as: „Thou shalt not murder” or „Thou shalt not steal ”we can easily get to the point that in no way we can murder

²⁹ See Ibidem, p. 44.

³⁰ See ST, I-II, q. 94, a. 2, see also R. McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica*, p. 45.

³¹ R. McInerny, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 66.

³² See Ibidem, p. 67.

³³ See R. McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica*, p. 47.

well, steal well or commit adultery well. Apart from negative precepts we can of course gain some positive conclusions. Be just. Be generous. These precepts are perhaps not very specific but at least they call the human being to the moral ideal. One can notice that precepts like: „Thou shalt not murder” or „Thou shall not steal” can be found in the Decalogue. What is for Aquinas then the status of the Decalogue and why did McInerny name them „preambula fidei of practical order”?

2.4. Decalogue

In Aquinas’s *Treatise on Law* the Decalogue is a manifestation of the Old Law – part of law that was given to the Jews in the Old Covenant. But what McInerny emphasised in reading Aquinas is the fact, that the Decalogue is directly connected with natural law. McInerny repeated Aquinas’s statement that the „Old Law manifested precepts of natural law, to which it added a number of special precepts. Consequently, with respect to that of natural law that the Old Law contains, all were held to the observance of Old Law, not because they were (precepts) of the Old Law, but because they pertain to natural law”³⁴. That one can see, that the Old Law contains precepts not only peculiar to the chosen nation, Israelites, but also precepts of natural law. We can judge our acts by fitting them with reason. In such a case evil acts become discordant with reason. Just as we can discover some basic principles in speculative order, for example the rule of non-contradiction, we can find the same in practical order. As McInerny notes: „Some things about human acts are so obvious that they can be approved or rejected right off; judgments about other acts require intense inquiry into their different circumstances, and not everyone is equipped for such inquiry: yet other things are such that man needs the help of divine instruction in order to judge, as in matters of faith”³⁵. Thanks to this statement one can find the existence of precepts, which pertain to natural law, for example „honour thy father or mother” or „do not kill”. Other moral precepts are arrived at discursively from natural law precepts, and pertain to natural law only in that sense, as derived from it. But why are these kinds of precepts were revealed in the Decalogue? McInerny once again invokes Aquinas: „among the things proposed for our belief are not only those which reason cannot attain such as that God is triune, but also those which

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, ST, I-II, q. 100, a. 1, see also: R. McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 46.

³⁵ R. McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 47, see also: Thomas Aquinas ST, I-II, q. 100, a. 1.

right reason can grasp, such as that God is one, for the exclusion of human reason's error, which occurs in many"³⁶. Sinful practice can obscure both common moral precepts as well as more particular ones, so divine aid, by the divine authority of the Decalogue was necessary.

McInerny further pointed out that: „Some law of course is made by man, some by God – but there is as well the natural law, also deriving from God, as nature itself does"³⁷. We can gain major precepts of natural law using our reason. We have this notion of right practical reason, which says to us: „do good, avoid evil". So, for example, no murderer can excuse himself by saying that he rejected the Bible and Ten Commandments. Murder is always some destruction of society and because natural law has to preserve common good, it also protects life of every citizen³⁸. The same is directed to our other actions, especially these conducted through our natural inclinations. My desire to eat and drink is not law unto itself, but should be governed by my mind. The same with sex – without using reason sexual intercourse becomes only a physical act, definitely non human. Human agents must put an intellectual consideration into choosing actions to fulfill those natural inclinations, which are grounded in natural law³⁹.

As mentioned earlier, these moral principles, found in the Decalogue – just as *preambula fidei*, are close to being self-evident, following directly from principles that are self-evident. Of course divine sanction was needed for the sinfulness of men, but by its nature these precepts do not require God's intervention⁴⁰. In this statement McInerny saw one of key arguments for the Catholic Church to be a defender of natural law. (As previously mentioned, Calvin and the Reformers rejected theory of natural law; the Eastern Churches have not developed this theory). McInerny stressed that the Catholic Church constantly used arguments from natural law in documents like *Humanae vitae*, *Donum vitae* and others. Of course natural law is not a theological doctrine. Neither does it suggest that the acceptance of some moral norms is dependent on religious faith⁴¹. McInerny tries to show that

in times, when people think that it is not possible to reach practical agreement in moral principles, and all moral theories try transform moral principles as simply expressions of subjectivity with no objective basis to it, it is more than important to

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, ST, I-II, q. 99, a. 2, ad 2.

³⁷ R. McInerny, *Handbook for Peeping Thomists*, p. 159.

³⁸ See Ibidem, p. 159.

³⁹ See Ibidem, p. 159.

⁴⁰ See R. McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 63.

⁴¹ See Ibidem, p. 52.

try to find in natural law some common agreement of moral rights that human agents will be able supposed to follow⁴².

3. SOME CRITICAL REMARKS

First of all, one can notice that the cases of *preambula fidei* and practical order are not on the same footing. In the first a believer has a sanction external to and prior to philosophy. Then he has to produce some proof if he expects the approval of a non-believer. In practical order things go differently. It is not simply that one claims extra philosophical sanction for moral precepts naturally knowable. Natural law requires that the non-believer accepts the existence of God. Now we must confront two objections. Aquinas describes natural law as a participation in eternal law, which can be equated with God's providence. How is it possible for the non-believer to believe such a thing?⁴³ Secondly, from the precepts of natural law that Aquinas distinguishes, one can find the injunction that we are to pursue knowledge of God. It is difficult to see how a non-believer could accept the presumption that God is to be known. In this case natural law presupposes, what is non-evident⁴⁴.

In answer to the first objection, the theory of natural law claims that there are certain practical judgments any agent can be expected to make. These judgments are based on the work of practical reason and the theological description of natural law does not require that every agent is expected to know that description. „The core of theory is that every person, sophisticated or not, bears within him the wherewithal to distinguish good from evil⁴⁵.

According to second objection, if natural law theory presupposes a natural inclination to know God we can say that this statement must be understood in a strict way. God is the ultimate end of human life and everything is made for His sake. So generally one might have the impression that knowledge of Him is presupposed in moral life. On the other hand Aquinas wrote in his commentary on Boethius *De Trinitate*:

It should be said that although God is the ultimate end attained and the first in intention of natural appetite, it isn't necessary that he be first in the knowledge of the human mind that is ordered to the end, but on the knowledge of the one ordering, as in

⁴² See *Ibidem*, p. 64.

⁴³ See *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁴⁴ See *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁴⁵ See *Ibidem*, p. 66.

other things that tend to the end by natural appetite. He is, however, known as the mind desires well being and to live well, which it will have only when it has God⁴⁶.

As McNerny finds, „God, who is unrestricted, infinite existence, is known implicitly whenever any existent thing is known; so too, the desire for any good thing, any participated goodness, is an implicit desire for essential goodness”⁴⁷. When Aquinas talks about natural inclination of knowing God, he is just saying: „Seek knowledge, avoid ignorance”.

The other objection to natural law is the problem of the so called natural fallacy. McNerny writes that, we live in times of general scepticism about moral absolutes, where there is some presumption, that practical and moral order must be autonomous. When we try to understand, what „natural law morality” is, people not familiar with that notion think that this is taking rules from nature. Hume objected to the transition from „is” to „ought”. He called it a naturalistic fallacy⁴⁸. Let’s therefore, turn to Aristotle. We can find in his teaching the notion of four orders: „There is a certain order that reason does not construct but only considers, such as the order of natural objects. There is another order which reason introduces by considering its own activity, as when it relates concepts among themselves and the signs of concepts which are signifying sounds. Third is the order reason introduces into acts of will. Fourth is the order reason imposes on eternal things of which it is the cause, as in a chest or house⁴⁹”. Natural philosophy here stands for the first order, logic or rational philosophy stands for the second order, the third order is the concern of moral philosophy, the fourth pertains to the mechanical acts. Here we want to raise the question as to whether, we can see dependence between first and third order, metaphysics and moral philosophy.

When we try to show a dependence between ethics and metaphysics it is not an easy task, as anyone, in order to know what he ought to do or be, must first become a metaphysician. Moral knowledge does not presuppose knowledge of metaphysics or indeed any theoretical knowledge. What is important is that „no more should the theory of natural law be taken to be what anyone is said already to know about what he ought to do”⁵⁰. If we have in mind the content of natural law, the truths that constitute it, then not only is knowledge of it possible without metaphysics, but even without ethics or moral philoso-

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *In Boethii de Trinitate*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 4.

⁴⁷ R. McNerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ See R. McNerny, *Aquinas on Human Action*, Washington D.C. 1992, p. 193.

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, l. 1.

⁵⁰ R. McNerny, *Aquinas on Human Action*, p. 198.

phy. This is not equal to the statement that moral knowledge is independent of knowledge of the way things are. When any human agent knows what to do, this knowledge entails knowledge of the sort of agent he is. Practical knowledge is always an extension of theoretical knowledge⁵¹.

How one can prove this? In the *Questiones Disputate de Veritate*, Thomas recalls that the idea of being is the first thing which reason grasps. Then he went to conclude that: „hence all other conceptions of the intellect must be taken as adding to being”⁵². The concept of good is among those others, so good must presuppose yet add to being in some way. He goes on to discuss the various ways in which truth adds to being. The most authoritative fragment is where Aquinas has made reference to Aristotle *Metaphysics V*, the second article: „secondly being is perfective of another not only with respect to the grasp of its species, but also with respect to real existence, and in this way good is perfective and conservative of the existence of another, it has the notion of end with respect to what it perfects”⁵³. From this passage one can see that good includes the understanding of being. As McNerny stated, any *per se notum* principle other than the first presupposes the first⁵⁴. In this way it has been shown that there is a connection between practical and theoretical order.

4. RESPONSE TO GILSON

As previously mentioned in this article, Etienne Gilson saw the Christian philosopher as one who develops rational arguments for conclusions already accepted on the basis of faith. McNerny writes that „Gilson’s Christian philosophy stresses the provenance of certain truths, not their status as philosophically established”⁵⁵. He held the view that all philosophical truths are grounded in rationality, yet „revelation” is „indispensable” as a support to reason in the pursuit of these truths. „In his understanding of Christian philosophy he suggested a version of Thomism that would bring all philosophical thinking under the influence of the faith, including, of course, philosophical ethics”⁵⁶. But on the other hand if it is serious to doubt that even if some philosophical truths were discovered by Christians, inspired by their faith, do these truths,

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 198.

⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputate de Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1.

⁵³ Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputate de Veritate*, q. 21, a. 1.

⁵⁴ R. McNerny, *Aquinas on Human Action*, p. 206.

⁵⁵ Idem, *The Question of Christian Ethics*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 21.

once acquired, depend only on philosophical principles needed to sustain them?⁵⁷ Gilson sometimes seems to be suggesting that this is the case. What is more in his opinion, the philosophy of Aquinas could not survive alone without any theological background.

McInerny responded that this claim could be upheld in the case of saint Bonaventure, but not Thomas. In Aquinas we have a very clear notion of how he treated philosophy and other constitutive sciences. When we read Aquinas's commentary we see all his responses and development to almost all philosophical areas⁵⁸. McInerny makes reference to another Thomistic scholar, father Chenu, who talking about these commentaries, showed how Aquinas as a commentator made an effort to explain them and assimilate philosophical science⁵⁹. Therefore all the forms of philosophical developments, arguments and achievements, that we find in theological writings, without their theological background, we have a place to put them. We can see them as Thomas's contribution to philosophical sciences, based mainly on Aristotle⁶⁰. In this case truly philosophical ethics, based only on Stagirite gain the right to exist independently as a logical and complete theory.

5. RESPONSE TO MARITAIN

It is right to once again confront Maritain's idea of „moral philosophy adequately considered”, in which philosophical ethics must be subjected to moral theology. McInerny remarked, „it would be maintained that, although man has been called to a higher, supernatural end, this elevation of his nature does not destroy it, so that it remains possible to come to knowledge of the good perfective of the human agent and to formulate directives in the light of that natural end⁶¹”. What he insisted on was that we can undertake the question, if for example, Aristotle's ethics precluded human elevation to the supernatural end. When Plato and Aristotle talk about human goodness and happiness, are their answers really contradictory to the Christian faith? Perhaps this philosophical answer will be inadequate, but not false.

Can Aristotelian ethics really compete with moral theology? In *Science and Wisdom* this problem was not especially developed by Maritain. This

⁵⁷ See Ibidem, p. 49.

⁵⁸ See Ibidem, p. 49.

⁵⁹ See Ibidem, see also: M. D. Chenu, *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Thomas d'Aquino*, Paris, 1954, p. 173-198.

⁶⁰ See Ibidem, p. 49-50.

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 21.

would lead us to question whether Maritain's reconstruction of Aristotle is justified⁶². What is interesting, and even Maritain in his works noted the fact, that such precepts such as „do not steal” or „do not lie” can be deduced from Aristotle's ethics. This it would perhaps suggest a degree of inadequacy in his thought since he rejected the possibilities of philosophical ethics. Even if we take into account that human nature was depraved by original sin, is it justifiable that a sinner is incapable of a naturally good action? As McInerny stated, „if it is granted that philosophical ethics can give true advice as how to man, naturally considered, can act well, that would seem to be a more than sufficient basis for the claim that a philosophical ethics is possible – possible because it is actual. *Ab esse posse valet illation*”⁶³. And one must take the difference between practical sciences, that can show the path of a morally good life from the dispositions of that life, as, for example, prudence or other moral virtues. As we have seen in passages on the Old Law, corruption by sin caused God's revelation of truth that could be undertaken by human beings from natural law. However, the doctrine of natural law does not assume the standpoint that any and every human agent, no matter the moral quality of his life, can straight off and without any trouble grasp the truth of such precepts as those of the Decalogue, even though these principles present no difficulty to the mind of one pursuing good. In Thomas' teaching we can find passages that suggest that we have been wounded in the intellectual, and even more in practical order. Complex situations and circumstances often confuse us about principles that supposed to be self-evident. To remedy this, we need the help of grace to achieve even imperfect happiness, recognized for example by Aristotle⁶⁴. From *Treatise on Grace* we are informed, that without grace the human agent cannot avoid serious sin. What is more, in *Treatise on Virtues* one is informed that mankind may achieve acquired virtues, which are not even virtues in the right sense.

Nevertheless, after careful study of the Second Part of *Summa Theologiae*, from human nature we can formulate great nongainsayable truths about human good⁶⁵. McInerny concluded his moral investigation writing that

such truths are implicit in any particular decision; their articulation is of value since they suggest that, despite the contingency and continuous alteration of the circumstances in which we act, despite the historical changes that make one century so different from another, there are absolutes of human action; some goods that will ever

⁶² Ibidem, p. 22.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 51.

⁶⁴ R. McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica*, p. 119.

⁶⁵ See Ibidem, p. 120.

be constitutive of the human moral ideal, some kinds of action that are always destructive of the human good. This is the conviction that Thomas develops in his theory of natural law⁶⁶.

6. CONCLUSION

As discussed in the article, Ralph McInerny gives his idea of independent ethics, mainly based on his understanding, commentary and reappropriation of Aquinas's natural law. This vision is opposed to that of other Thomistic scholars like Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, who have tried to minimize the role of moral philosophy in favour of moral theology. By analyzing the thoughts of Aquinas, McInerny became convinced, that in practical philosophy Aquinas gave so much importance to the working of practical reason, precepts of natural law and natural inclination that one can find in Christianity the possibility of the existence of independent ethics from moral theology. The foundation for this idea is the conviction that basic moral norms can be rationally deduced from natural law, without any influence of Revelation. By analogy, as we can grasp the first intellectual principle in theoretical order, in the same way moral good can be found in the practical order. As shown earlier, in this theory we can also find very strict dependence on a theoretical and practical order, which is an effort to overcome the problem of the naturalistic fallacy.

McInerny's outlook provides a very important and significant voice in the present time of post-modern refusals of moral absolutes and truths. It tries to show a universal application of natural law in finding moral commonplaces for every person, believer or non-believer, wise or not wise. It appeals to the work of our reason, our nature and our natural strivings. But what is most important, his idea can offer a powerful defence of natural law theory, which is crucial for the Church's moral teaching, and its attempts to find general nongainsayable judgments, common for every person in a morally complex world.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 121.

STRESZCZENIE

Ralph McInerny, bazując na swej interpretacji teorii prawa naturalnego Tomasza z Akwinu, wychodzi z interesującą teorią etyki niezależnej względem objawienia. McInerny swą teorię opiera na przekonaniu, że tak jak rozum może poznać podstawowe zasady w porządku teoretycznym, tak jest on w stanie uchwycić takowe zasady w porządku praktycznym. Teoria ta stara się być mocną obroną teorii prawa naturalnego, która szuka niezmiennych, etycznych zasad w złożonym moralnie postmodernistycznym świecie.

Keywords

McInerny, natural law, Thomas Aquinas, Revelation