



## Thomas Aquinas' anthropological-metaphysical and theological understanding of inequality among men

La concepción antropológico-metafísica y teológica de Tomás de Aquino en torno a la  
desigualdad entre los hombres

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### Abstract

Thomas Aquinas' conception of inequality among men is explored here, stressing the importance of its metaphysical-theological implications, including, of course, the consideration of the state of original innocence. Georges Duby's *The Three Orders. Feudal Society Imagined* has served as the initial motivation for the research, since there is no mention there of Aquinas' position on the matter. The implications that this whole question of equality/inequality among men present in relation to the question of serfdom reveal in a special way the bridge that exists between the metaphysical-anthropological considerations and the social theory of Aquinas himself. The paper argues that, although Thomas considers a series of inequalities among men -both natural and moral-, at the same time, there can be no doubt about his affirmation of a fundamental equality among them. The identical basis of human perfection for all lies in the ontological equality attributable to all members of that species. In this regard, the argument proceeds to a metaphysical analysis of the concepts of *aequalitas*, *similitudo*, *identitas* and *unitas*, in their relation to *humanitas*, concluding that among men it must be said that there is a fundamental equality, not likeness. It is established that there are two ways -one positive and the other negative- to show this equality. Regarding

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the first way, the question of the *imago Dei* appears as something *communis omnibus hominibus*. As for the negative manifestation of equality, there is the question of servitude, whose examination in Thomas Aquinas is closely linked to the teaching of two Fathers of the Church, Augustine and Gregory the Great. In conclusion, it is established that for Aquinas there are no people innately superior to others, and that, consequently, to judge that some have *de iure* certain authority over others, the moral merit of the subjects must be taken into account.

**Keywords:** Thomas Aquinas, Natural Inequality, Equality, Prelapsarian State, Serfdom.

## Resumen

Se explora aquí la concepción de Tomás de Aquino en torno a la desigualdad entre los hombres, acentuando la importancia de sus connotaciones metafísico-teológicas, incluida, desde luego, la consideración del estado de inocencia original. El libro de Georges Duby, *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* ha servido de motivación inicial para la investigación, ya que allí no se hace mención de la posición del Aquinate sobre la materia. Las implicancias que toda esta cuestión de la igualdad/desigualdad entre los hombres presenta en relación a la cuestión de la servidumbre, revelan de modo especial el puente existente entre las consideraciones metafísico-antropológicas y la teoría social del propio Aquinate. El trabajo plantea que, a pesar de que Tomás postula una serie de desigualdades entre los hombres -tanto naturales cuanto morales-, al mismo tiempo no puede dudarse de la afirmación por parte de él de una fundamental igualdad entre ellos. La idéntica base de perfección humana para todos reside en la igualdad ontológica atribuible a todos los miembros de esa especie. Al respecto, se procede a un análisis metafísico de los conceptos de *aequalitas*, *similitudo*, *identitas* y *unitas*, en su relación a la *humanitas*, concluyendo que entre los hombres debe decirse que hay fundamentalmente igualdad, no semejanza. Se establece que hay dos vías -una positiva y otra negativa- para mostrar esa igualdad. En cuanto a la primera vía, aparece la cuestión de la *imago Dei*, algo *communis omnibus hominibus*. En cuanto a la manifestación negativa de la igualdad, aparece la cuestión de la servidumbre, cuyo examen en Tomás de Aquino se hace en estrecho vínculo con la enseñanza de dos



Padres de la Iglesia, Agustín y Gregorio Magno. A modo de conclusión se establece que para el Aquinate no hay gente innatamente superior a otra, y que, en consecuencia, para juzgar que algunos tengan *de iure* cierta autoridad sobre otros, debe atenderse al mérito moral de los sujetos.

**Palabras clave:** Tomás de Aquino, Desigualdad natural, Igualdad, Estado prelapsario, Servidumbre.

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### **Introduction: Inequalities among men? Yes, but at the same time a fundamental equality between them**

Almost half a century ago, Georges Duby published *The Three Orders. Feudal Society Imagined*: one of the gems of contemporary medieval studies. In short, the tripartite model—that conception of society divided into *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores*, which two northern French bishops, Adalbero of Laon and Gerard of Cambrai, originally articulated at the beginning of the eleventh century—is presented there as a way of justifying the inequality inherent in hierarchy and seigniorial exploitation, to uphold the collapsing monarchy. In sum, it is an ideological system of values serving power, one that would inform Western history practically until the French Revolution. Curiously, however, in his detailed analysis of the intellectual construction of that ‘imaginary’, Duby overlooks any reference to Thomas Aquinas. It is beyond my reach to determine the exact reasons for this omission, but whatever he may have had in mind, for me it presents itself, if not as a provocation, at least as a source of concern. How does Thomas Aquinas’s succinct yet significant allusion to social tripartition (*S. th.*, I, q. 108, a. 2), and his other exposition in *S. th.*, II-II, q. 118, a. 1 regarding each man’s ethical duty to seek external wealth only to the extent required by his condition of life, fit into that picture so magnificently painted by the historian of the *École des Annales*? This, then, is what chiefly interests me to investigate. However, before delving fully into the

matter, a preliminary step is required: to present Thomas Aquinas's anthropological-metaphysical theory concerning inequality among men, which he develops within a theological framework. Such is the aim of this first work, which, as a continuation, will later include—in a second work—an examination of inequality among men from an economic-social and political point of view, even though the question of 'slavery' as a negative way of deducing the fundamental equality of all men has already been anticipated here.

For Saint Thomas, there are human inequalities that are just: not all are the result of sin, as Duby assumes every time he refers to the foundation of social differences according to the medieval thinkers or ideologues he surveys in his exposition. In Aquinas's case, the inequalities based on social tripartition are a type of inequality per the original nature of man as conceived by the Creator, and they possess a metaphysical foundation that can be investigated. Therefore, to understand the ultimate expression of the issue as formulated in economic-social and political terms, it is advisable first to consider some anthropological and metaphysical distinctions present in the work of the Scholastic.

### 1. Natural and Moral Inequalities Even in the Prelapsarian State

It is clear that Thomas envisions a universe organized and dynamic according to the diversity of species (*ordinata connexio in omnibus partibus universi*, as we read in *Super Sent.*, II, d. 10, q. 1, a. 2), related to each other hierarchically and actively, if not in all respects, at least in decisive aspects: "God from the beginning, to secure perfection (*perfectio*) in the universe, has set therein creatures of various and unequal natures (*diversas et inaequales*), according to His wisdom, and without injustice, since no diversity of merit is presupposed (*nulla tamen praesupposita meritorum diversitate*)."<sup>2</sup>

Advancing along this same line of argument, when addressing in *S. th.*, I, q. 96 the human condition before original sin, Thomas posits the existence of a certain disparity (*disparitas*) and consequent complementarity among men: not only regarding the different

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<sup>2</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 65, a. 2, ad 3; *cfr.* *C.G.*, II, ch. 45; Luscombe (2003, p. 66) and Blanchette (2003, pp. 230-31 and 236).

constitution of bodies (that is, the fact that “some would have been born more robust in body (*robustiores*) than others, and also greater (*maiores*), and more beautiful (*pulchriores*), and all ways better disposed”)<sup>3</sup> or the diversity (*diversitas*) of sex or age, but also in the psychic aspect, namely, in terms of moral virtue (*iustitia*) and intellectual virtue (*scientia*). Now, just as the differences related to the first aspect would have been *natural*, the latter two would have been *deliberate*: in the state of original innocence, *non enim ex necessitate homo operabatur, sed per liberum arbitrium*. And since man, in that state, would have acted with complete and perfect freedom, “hence some would have *made a greater advance* (*profecissent*) in virtue and knowledge than others.”<sup>4</sup> I highlight the term ‘advance’ to emphasize—given the discussion that follows immediately below—the fact that for Thomas Aquinas, in the state of original innocence, knowledge (together with justice) is a perfection that is not naturally distributed unequally among men, but rather something in which some *freely progress* more than others, by reason of their greater moral virtue. Ultimately, there are no people naturally endowed with better moral and intellectual capacities than others.

That this disparity in the collective nature of man already involves the intervention of freedom—by reason of which some individuals will bear more moral fruit than others—is entirely decisive, as will be seen later in the second part of this argument (that is, in a follow-up work to this one). Indeed, what must be recognized is that the various human inequalities, in their most relevant sense—which is the ethical one—are, in Thomas’s view, both in the state of original innocence and in the postlapsarian state, ultimately the result of human deliberation and convention, not of an immutable natural law to which some kind of evolutionary selection, such as the *survival of the fittest*,<sup>5</sup> could later be associated.

An interpreter with whom we will have the opportunity to engage more thoroughly in the continuation of this work has stated that “for Thomas, as for Aristotle, *this inequality* in disposition [of men to superiority over others in wisdom and righteousness] is *by nature*.”<sup>6</sup> To claim that God initially established a natural inequality among men, in Aquinas’s

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<sup>3</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 3, my emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> *Cfr.* Healy, 1972, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Beer, 1986, p. 403, my emphasis.

judgment, is false regarding the most relevant aspect of that inequality, which concerns the use of freedom, both in relation to knowledge and to moral virtue.<sup>7</sup>

In support of his interpretation, Beer cites a text from Aquinas that is worth pausing over. Summarising the fundamental part of the argument formulated there by Thomas, Beer states:

Although all persons need training to fulfil their potential, *they are not born equal in this regard*. A disposition to virtue is common to human nature, according to Thomas. «But», he continues, «since such a disposition has a certain latitude, it happens that different degrees of this disposition are becoming to different men in respect of the individual nature» (*S. th.*, I-II, q. 51, a. 1).<sup>8</sup>

What Beer points out constitutes a half-truth, and the misunderstanding to which this interpretation leads is dispelled by analysing what Aquinas goes on to argue in that same text—something Beer, by the way, does not address. Indeed, the different *natural* basis indicated by Thomas there to support that some individuals are *naturally superior in intelligence* to others consists of a field or sphere of action that does not depend at all on human freedom: it is limited solely to an *organic disposition*. In Thomas's words: “insofar as one man, from the disposition of his organs of sense, is more apt than another to understand well (*inquantum unus homo, ex dispositione organorum, est magis aptus ad bene*

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<sup>7</sup> *Cfr.* *S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Beer, 1986, pp. 402-03, my emphasis. Perpère, 2014, p. 378 interprets the same as Beer, when he states that Thomas “maintains that there is a natural equality in terms of dignity and freedom, but not with respect to the natural faculties with which we are born. It gives the impression that some were born to rule, not by nature, but by their ‘natural powers.’ It is precisely these that justify the differences in roles among some and others.” Certainly, this kind of interpretation is incapable of overcoming the criticism of a certain anti-Thomism towards the supposed conservative position of Thomas Aquinas: “the power of one man over another would not be inherent to human nature ‘inasmuch as it supposes inequality between one man and another and insofar as there have always been men capable of leading and teaching others who need to be guided and to learn’ (C. Martínez Ruiz, ‘Propiedad y poder en los Comentarios al Segundo Libro de las Sentencias,’ p. 75), but rather the issue is precisely the opposite: there are differences among men because if all were totally and completely equal, there would be no possibility of hierarchical order” (Perpère, 2014, p. 379). Indeed, this reply by Perpère to Martínez Ruiz only serves to reaffirm that the particular concretion of ethical-social and political inequality among men would be given in a natural and innate way.

*intelligendum quam alius*), since we need the sensitive powers for the operation of the intellect.”<sup>9</sup> Certainly, at no point does Thomas conclude that this natural aptitude makes the subject who possesses it more capable than others of ruling. Regarding a natural *moral superiority*, attention must be paid to the final part of that text by Thomas. There Aquinas maintains that no one is naturally more advanced than another in the virtue of justice by any subjective disposition, since all men are initially equal in conditions as regards the exercise of that virtue; accepting that all possess equally *the nurseries of virtue*, which are called ‘principles of common law’. The reason for this absence of a higher disposition on the part of any subject toward moral virtue is that the inclination to the good in this case is entirely of the volitional power, and not, as was the case with knowledge, by virtue of a physical, organic support. Thomas concludes by clarifying that, on the other hand, a certain organic support is accepted for other moral virtues of a lower rank than justice, such as chastity or meekness.<sup>10</sup>

Inequalities among men that arise from freedom and moral action carry within them social and political implications that find expression in the concept of ‘organicity’, that is, in the recognition of the functioning of the political community based on various members endowed with different social and civic capacities (*officia*, offices) that complement one another. This division of labour within the social body is comparable to the division of functions in the physical body.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 51, a. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Est enim aliqua dispositio naturalis quae debetur humanae speciei, extra quam nullus homo invenitur. Et haec est naturalis secundum naturam speciei. Sed quia talis dispositio quandam latitudinem habet, contingit diversos gradus huiusmodi dispositionis convenire diversis hominibus secundum naturam individui [*up to here what Beer has been summarized*]. (...) Secundum vero naturam individui, [*cognitive aspect of the matter*:] est aliquis habitus cognoscitivus secundum inchoationem naturalis, inquantum unus homo, *ex dispositione organorum*, est magis aptus ad bene intelligendum quam alius, inquantum ad operationem intellectus indigemus virtutibus sensitivis. [*Volitional aspect of the matter*:] *In appetitivis autem potentiis non est aliquis habitus naturalis secundum inchoationem, ex parte ipsius animae, quantum ad ipsam substantiam habitus*, sed solum quantum ad principia quaedam ipsius, sicut principia iuris communis dicuntur esse seminalia virtutum. Et hoc ideo, quia inclinatio ad objecta propria, quae videtur esse inchoatio habitus, non pertinet ad habitum, sed magis pertinet ad ipsam rationem potentiarum. Sed ex parte corporis, secundum naturam individui, sunt aliqui habitus appetitivi secundum inchoationes naturales. Sunt enim quidam dispositi *ex propria corporis complexione* ad castitatem vel mansuetudinem, vel ad aliquid huiusmodi” (*S. th.*, I-II, q. 51, a. 1, my emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> “Patet enim multa esse necessaria multitudini hominum, ut cibus, potus, vestimentum, domus, et alia huiusmodi, quae impossibile est quod per unum procurentur. Et ideo oportet diversorum esse *diversa officia*: sicut et in corpore *diversa membra* ad diversos actus ordinantur” (*C.G.*, III, ch. 136, my emphasis). And as



## 2. Equality in the Species: Identical Basis of Human Perfection for All

Thomas's argument regarding the afore mentioned accidental natural inequalities—which are of little importance—and all the moral and political inequalities that might be based (or not) on them, cannot be considered in isolation from the consideration of an even more *fundamental natural equality* among the members of the human species: unlike angels, who for Thomas do not constitute a single species but many, “all men are of one species (*omnes homines sunt unius speciei*).”<sup>12</sup>

First and foremost, the existence of this fundamental equality can be established by reason of an identical absence of imperfection in each and every man, had they persisted in the state of original innocence. Indeed, the conclusion of Thomas's argument regarding human inequalities in the prelapsarian state is that “in those who were thus surpassed (*qui excederentur*) [by others], there would have been no defect or fault (*defectus sive peccatum*) either in soul or body.”<sup>13</sup>

That is to say, although in that original condition, due to free action, some individuals would have developed their moral and spiritual capacities more than others (and even their bodily potentialities differently because of climate, the stars, or whatever factors), in all cases, an absolute and inviolable basis of human perfection and purity would always have been maintained.

In short, while there is naturally no “ceiling” for human perfection, there is a “floor.” There is no ceiling because there is freedom. But there is a floor because there is an identical nature.

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Thomas says in *ibid.*, ch. 134, that “*distributio diversorum officiorum in diversas personas fit divina providentia, secundum quod quidam inclinatur magis ad hoc officium quam ad alia*”. The diversity of offices is not only ordained by God but also rests upon the various natural and/or acquired inclinations of the individual members who constitute the social organism. For the assertion that divine providence underlies the fact of human inequality and the consequent social organization, see also *S. th.*, I, q. 113, a. 2, ad 3.

<sup>12</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 108, a. 1, ad 3.

<sup>13</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 3.



### 3. A Positive Way to Show Equality: the *imago Dei communis omnibus hominibus*

When delving into that fundamental natural equality among all members of the human species, a positive way to clarify the issue appears in the thought of Saint Thomas, in line with his assertion of an equal or same fundamental ‘dignity’ (*dignitas*) in all men, by virtue of the fact that each of them is a person, and consequently an ‘image of God’ (*imago Dei*). This philosophical-theological formula, of biblical origin and rich patristic and medieval tradition, offers suggestive explanations and nuances about what it means to be a human person, both in its ontological aspect and in its moral variety and dynamism. Thomas dedicates an entire *quaestio* to this topic in his *Summa Theologiae* (q. 93), in which he basically holds that only rational creatures—among which man is counted—are divine images, insofar as only this type of creature is capable of imitating divine rationality; something forbidden to infrarational creatures, which can only be called ‘vestiges of God’ (cf. a. 2). Thus, “that in which the image (*ratio imaginis*) chiefly consists” is “the intellectual nature (*intellectualis natura*)” (a. 3).

In a. 4 of the same *quaestio*, the question is explicitly posed: “whether the image of God is found [or not] in every man”. The answer is unequivocal: the fundamental way to consider that man is the image of God is because he possesses that “natural aptitude” which “consists in the very nature of the mind,” and because this aptitude is not lacking in any human being, it must be said that this is the image “common to all men (*communis omnibus hominibus*),” that is, which “is found in all men (*in omnibus hominibus*)”. Then, certainly, there are more perfect ways of resembling God, according to the degree of perfection in the knowledge and love of the divine being that each one acquires, as occurs in the case of the just and the blessed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding the dynamism inherent to the *imago Dei*, in the Prologue to *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, and drawing already on the Greek patristics (from Saint John Damascene backwards), Thomas announces that in his moral discourse he will focus specifically on the aspect of freedom proper to the rational being—as master of his own acts—in order to characterize the greater or lesser intensity with which man can be the image of God. A good synthesis of this formulation can be found in Finnis, 1998, p. 313, especially note 85.

Consequently, if what dignity (*dignitas*) entails is personal being, that is, the individual substance of rational nature,<sup>15</sup> what specifically matters in that attribution of nobility or dignity is properly the species (*natura*)—the human species—not its contingent individual variations, depending on whether these themselves have a greater or lesser fulfillment of the capacities that said nature provides. Indeed, it is that “specific nature” of the rational kind, which “subsists in the very form and actuality—soul—of each individual of the species.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Thomistic affirmation of universal human equality occurs beyond the consideration of any supervening inequality, as well as within a vision of man as *imago Dei* (a vision which, in Chesterton’s judgment, 1910, p. 258, Burke -the father of conservatism- believed he could happily dispense with; precisely because in him a common human nature is no longer conceived).

#### 4. On the Concept of *aequalitas* in Relation to *humanitas* (the Human Species)

Be that as it may, all men are said to be images of God; the doubt might persist still as to whether the use of the term ‘equality’ is strictly correct when referring to the identity of all human individuals within the same species. To resolve this question in Thomas Aquinas, it is helpful to clarify what he thinks about these four concepts: *aequalitas*, *similitudo*, *identitas*, and *unitas*, along with their relation to *humanitas*, which is the *definitio hominis*.<sup>17</sup>

The definition of the first of these is almost common sense: “equality is sameness of quantity in distinct things (*aequalitas est rerum distinctarum eadem quantitas*).”<sup>18</sup> However, when the distinct things are distinct men, an analysis is required whose details go beyond common sense. Thus, based on *Commentary on Metaphysics*, VII, 5 and *Compendium theologiae*, ch. 154, it is first necessary to observe the distinction between ‘subject’ (Peter), the ‘substance’ of that subject (*homo*), and the ‘essential principles’ of that substance (*humanitas*). Indeed, every human subject or individual—Peter or John (“Socrates or Plato,”

<sup>15</sup> *Cfr. S. th.*, I, q. 29, a. 3, ad 2; *Super Sent.*, I, d. 23, q. 1, a. 1 and d. 26, q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Finnis, 1998, p. 176, n. 206.

<sup>17</sup> *Compendium theologiae*, ch. 154.

<sup>18</sup> *Q. de pot.*, q. 8, a. 3, ad 15.

in Thomas's expression)—is the concrete exemplification of *homo*. And 'man' (*homo*), for his part, is he who has 'humanity' (*homo dicatur qui humanitatem habet*). *Humanitas* indicates "only the essential principles of man, leaving out all other factors [incidental and individual] (*essentialia principia hominis sola cum praecisione aliorum*)."<sup>19</sup> It is a formal principle of that human substance (*humanitas accipitur ut principium formale eius, quod est quod quid erat esse*) which is *homo*:

'humanity' is not absolutely the same as 'man' (*humanitas autem pro tanto non est omnino idem cum homine*), because it implies only the essential principles of man (*importat tantum principia essentialia hominis*) and excludes all accidents". Instead, "although a man's accidents are not contained in his intelligible expression, still 'man' does not signify something apart from his accidents (*non tamen homo significat aliquid separatum ab accidentibus*). Therefore, 'man' signifies as a whole and 'humanity' as a part."<sup>20</sup>

For this last reason, namely, that the term 'man' refers to the whole human being (not only to his essential part, as the term 'humanity' does), we say that Socrates is *a* man—that is, a concrete man, "composed of this flesh and these bones and this soul in particular (*compositus ex iis carnibus et iis ossibus et hac anima*)."<sup>21</sup>

What we then need to determine is whether, invariably in every case, the humanity of Socrates is equal to the humanity of Plato, or whether there can be some kind of essential inequality between two human exemplars. Regarding this, the first thing to note is the reason why, according to Thomas Aquinas, all men are 'equal', and not merely 'like', insofar as they participate in the human species. Indeed, if we ask: do all men, without exception, have

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<sup>19</sup> *Compendium theologiae*, ch. 154.

<sup>20</sup> *In Met.*, VII, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Compendium theologiae*, ch. 154.

the same amount of humanity -a virtual quantity, it is understood?,<sup>22</sup> Thomas's answer is clear:

Where we have equality in respect of virtual quantity (*aequalitas secundum quantitatem virtualem*), equality includes likeness and something besides (*includit in se similitudinem, et aliquid plus*), because it excludes excess. For whatever things have a common form (*in una forma*), may be said to be alike (*similia*), even if they do not participate in that form equally (*inaequaliter*), just as the air may be said to be like fire in heat; but they cannot be said to be equal (*aequalia*), if one participates in the form more perfectly (*perfectius*) than another.<sup>23</sup>

Equality in every single exemplar of the human species is an equality of virtual quantity: there is the same amount of human species, that is, of formal perfection. It is not that some have more humanity and others less, as if in this case the 'equality of proportion' (*aequalitas proportionis*) could be applied instead of the 'equality of quantity' (*aequalitas quantitatis*).<sup>24</sup> And this equal participation in the same form, in the case of two or more human beings, occurs because "nature always produces its equal (*natura semper facit sibi aequale*)."<sup>25</sup> That is to say, when it causes something, it does not do so unequally, but from the *unity* of its being (*aequalitas ab unitate causetur*).<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is impossible for human nature to present variation in the generation of its offspring. Indeed, the key concept here is that of 'unity':

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<sup>22</sup> *Quantitas virtutis* or *virtualis* is that one: "quae attenditur secundum perfectionem alicuius naturae vel formae, quae quidem quantitas designatur secundum quod dicitur aliquid magis vel minus calidum, inquantum est perfectius vel minus perfectum in caliditate," and that is why it differs from the *quantitas molis* (of mass), *vel quantitas dimensiva*, *quae in solis rebus corporalibus est* (*S. th.*, I, q. 42, a. 1, ad 1).

<sup>23</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 42, a. 1, ad 2.

<sup>24</sup> "Duplex est aequalitas; scilicet quantitatis, et proportionis. Aequalitas quidem quantitatis est quae attenditur inter duas quantitates ejusdem mensurae, sicut bicubiti ad bicubitum [something that is two cubits long is equal in quantity to something else that is two cubits long]; sed aequalitas proportionis est quae attenditur inter duas proportionales ejusdem speciei, sicut dupli ad duplum [as 2:4 is equally proportional to 3:6]" (*Super Sent.*, IV, d. 32, q. 1, a. 3). "Attenditur enim aequalitas proportionis, quando aequaliter se habet hoc ad illud, sicut aliud ad alterum" (*Super Sent.*, II, d. 27, q. 1, a. 3).

<sup>25</sup> *Q. de pot.*, q. 3, a. 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Q. de pot.*, q. 3, a. 15.

when there is ‘unity’ in regard to the complete concept of the species, we speak of «identity» (*quando est unitas secundum rationem perfectam speciei, dicitur identitas*). But, when there is no unity in regard to the whole concept of the species, we speak of «likeness» (*quando autem est unitas non secundum totam rationem speciei, dicitur similitudo*), such that, if someone says that things that are generically one are ‘like’ (*ea quae sunt unum genere, sunt similia*), then those which are specifically one are the ‘same’ (*ea vero quae sunt unum specie, sunt eadem*).<sup>27</sup>

Excluded, then, is the ‘likeness’ of nature; we see that the concept of *aequalitas* requires that of *unitas*: the equality of species in two individuals is their unity in that species: “many equal quadrangles (*tetragona*), that is, figures which have four angles and are equal in size and equiangular (*isagona*), that is, having equal angles, are considered to be the same (*accipiuntur ut idem*). And in such things as these, equality provides the unity of their specific nature (*aequalitas in eis est quasi unitas secundum rationem speciei*).”<sup>28</sup> That is to say, beyond the accidental differences or variations of those quadrilaterals, all of them are gathered under the same specific reason.

If with ‘equality’ appears ‘unity’, with this certainly appears ‘sameness’, that is, the specific identity of two or more things: *identitas est unitas vel unio*. One mode of being identical is that “things that (...) are many in being (*plura secundum esse*) (...) are said to be the same insofar as they agree in some respect (*et tamen dicuntur idem in quantum in aliquo uno conveniunt*).”<sup>29</sup> Thus, in all men there is identity (*identitas*) in the species—*humanitas*—and not merely a generic likeness. That is, logically considered, the species is the same in John and Peter. We say ‘logically’ because ‘substantially’ the species individuated in John and that individuated in Peter is distinct. Now, from the logical point of view, one does not say that the species is ‘equal’ in one and the other case, but the ‘same’, because equality involves a relation of discrete quantities, that is, a doubling of subjects: and logically there

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<sup>27</sup> *In Met.*, X, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *In Met.*, X, 4.

<sup>29</sup> *In Met.*, V, 11.

are not two distinct species—two different ‘humanities’—one for John and another for Peter. They possess an identical ‘humanity’. What is, in any case, ‘equal’ is the way in which that species really exists in one subject and the other. Those who are ‘equal’ are Peter and John, who participate in the ‘same’ species. Hence, “Avicenna says that equality in two equal things is not numerically identical, but only in a specific way is it the same (*non est eadem numero aequalitas in duobus aequalibus, sed specie tantum*).”<sup>30</sup>

An important consequence of all this analysis we have made regarding the equality of two or more human subjects is that having established that these subjects have the same virtual quantity of humanity, it is then inadequate to establish relativity or movement regarding that equality in quantity (as, once again in Chesterton’s judgment, happens in authors such as Burke, Tennyson, Wells, and the like). The impossibility of establishing such a dynamism is due to the fact that then we would no longer be in the realm of ‘equality’ but in that of ‘adequacy’; or, to put it in Burkean terms, in that of ‘adaptation.’<sup>31</sup> This is something Aquinas opposes emphatically, expressing that “it does not seem well said that ‘equal’ sometimes imports movement towards equality, for such movement does not mean ‘equal’ or ‘equality’, but ‘adequacy’ (*non videtur bene dictum, quod aequale quandoque importat motum ad aequalitatem: huiusmodi enim motum non significat aequale sive aequalitas, sed adaequatio*).”<sup>32</sup> And if in the case of Thomas Aquinas, *adaequatio* applies to the distance from the image of God that constitutes one’s divine exemplar, God himself, in the modern case, it is conceived as the strenuous attempt by beings considered inferior to conform to the superior.

Thus, once the fundamental human equality among all men is established (thus between male and female, Jew and pagan, Greek and barbarian, *dominus* and *servus*), one is then in a position to properly grasp the existing inequalities among them. Of course, it could be objected that the assertion of a fundamental ontological equality among all men is practically irrelevant when considering the question of equality or inequality from a social

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<sup>30</sup> *Super Sent.*, II, d. 40, q. 1, a. 4, ad 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Cfr.* Chesterton, 1910, p. 260.

<sup>32</sup> *Q. de 108 articulis*, q. 44.

and political point of view. To respond to this objection, it is first advisable to examine the treatment offered by Thomas Aquinas to the question of slavery or, more precisely, servitude.

## 5. The Negative Manifestation of Equality: The Question of Slavery (*servitus*)

Essentially associated with despotic rule (*despoticus principatus*)—which contrasts with political rule (*politicus principatus*)—<sup>33</sup>the question of slavery (*servitus*) can be taken as a negative or inverse, yet decisively relevant, demonstration of universal human equality. Indeed, this issue specifically connects the legal-social with the metaphysical. And, similar to the theme of the *imago Dei*, it is a topic with a long patristic tradition. Taking the case of Gregory the Great, one observes clearly established principles of the matter that Thomas Aquinas would later take up. In his *Moralia in Iob* and subsequently in his *Regula pastoralis*, Gregory repeatedly emphasizes that *omnes namque homines natura aequales sumus*, for *omnes homines natura aequales genuit*, and that, consequently, “let us return unceasingly to our heart, and assiduously consider, that we are created on an equality with others (*ad cor nostrum sine cessatione redeamus, et consideremus assidue quod sumus aequaliter cum ceteris conditi*).”<sup>34</sup> This will provide Thomas Aquinas with the opportunity to express,

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. *Super Pol.*, I, 3, lin. 145-162 (Thomas Aquinas, 2007, p. 29); *S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Moralia in Iob*, liber XXI, ch. xv, n. 22 (CCL 143A, p. 1082, lin. 4-5 and lin. 12-13) and liber XXVI, ch. xxvi, n. 46 (CCL 143B, p. 1302, lin. 123-25) (Gregory the Great, 1845, pp. 533-34; 1847, p. 169). There is an expression that is repeated frequently in *Moralia in Iob*, liber XXI, ch. xv: “aequalitas conditionis” (n. 22, lin. 3-4 and lin. 18; n. 24, lin. 41, lin. 47-48 and lin. 52-53); other significant expressions in this regard are: “planitiem naturalis aequalitatis” (n. 22, lin. 11-12), “communis natura” (n. 24, lin. 60-61). Gregorio reprehends to “he that is confined within the same natural condition as others, scorns to look on them as his equals (*qui aequa ceteris naturae conditione constringitur, ex aequo respicere ceteros dedignatur*),” and to “it [that] despises those beneath it, and does not acknowledge them to be its equals in order of nature, and believes that it has exceeded those also in the merits of its life, whom it has surpassed by the accident of rank (*subiectos despicit eosque aequales sibi naturae ordine non agnoscit; et quos sorte potestatis excesserit, transcendisse se etiam uitae meritis credit*)” (liber XXVI, cap. xxvi, n. 44, lin. 34-35 and 29-32). In his *Pastoral Care*, Part Two, ch. 6, pp. 59-67, Gregory the Great condenses practically in the same terms what is set forth in *Moralia in Iob*, liber XXI, ch. xv, nn. 22-24 (CCL 143A, pp. 1082-83) and liber XXVI, 44-46 (CCL 143B, pp. 1291-1302), adding a few more observations related to the duty of the pastor not to consider himself above the rest. There Gregory returns to that Augustinian idea that “by nature a man is made superior to the beasts, but not to other men; it is, therefore, said to him that he is to be feared by beasts, but not by men. Evidently, to wish to be feared by an equal is to lord it over others, contrary to the natural order” (*ibid.*, p. 60). Whoever that “puts himself on an eminence in his own estimation, and though he has his own limitations by reason of the equality of nature with others, he disdains to regard others as being on his level” is wrong (*ibid.*, p. 61).



comparing the different angelic species with the single human species, that “the demons are not equal in nature (*non sunt aequales secundum naturam*); and so among them there exists a natural precedence (*naturalis praelatio*); which is not the case with men, who are naturally equal (*in hominibus non contingit, qui natura sunt pares*).”<sup>35</sup> This will decisively impact the way the hierarchy proper to human communities is conceived, differentiating it from the hierarchical manner in which angels and the cosmic universe relate. For if in the latter two cases, the whole harbours distinct species, in the case of human society, even admitting hierarchy, it occurs within the joint framework of a single and identical species for all existing scales or degrees within it.<sup>36</sup>

Gregory’s teaching is substantially identical to that expressed almost two centuries earlier by Augustine of Hippo in *De civitate Dei*, XIX, ch. 14-16, whose central meaning is that both despotic mastership and its correlate in servitude are a kind of punishment (*servitus, quae est poena*) existing because of original sin;<sup>37</sup> something, as Augustine teaches, intrinsically associated with one human being conquering another, reducing and compelling them to service.<sup>38</sup> It follows, consequently, that as long as men are free and treat each other freely, no one could justly be subjected to the yoke of another; and that, for this reason, God did not institute man to be a despotic ruler, but a leader whose staff was none other than *consilium*: “those who rule (*qui imperant*)” “in the family of the just man (*in domo iusti*),” akin to “our righteous fathers [the patriarchs] (*iusti patres nostri*),” “they rule not from a love of power, but from a sense of the duty they owe to others — not because they are proud of authority, but because they love mercy (*neque enim dominandi cupiditate imperant, sed officio consulendi; nec principandi superbia, sed providendi misericordia*);”<sup>39</sup> “hence the righteous men in primitive times were made shepherds of cattle rather than kings of men (*inde primi iusti, pastores pecorum magis quam reges hominum constituti sunt*).”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 109, a. 2, ad 3.

<sup>36</sup> The discussion on the concept of ‘hierarchy’ in the thought of Thomas Aquinas has a respectable tradition, of which one of the latest exponents is Reese (2022).

<sup>37</sup> *Super Sent.*, IV, d. 36, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 3.

<sup>38</sup> See Argüello, 2024, pp. 50-51.

<sup>39</sup> *De civitate Dei*, XIX, ch. 14 and ch. 16 (Aurelius Augustine, 1871, pp. 323 and 326); *cfr.* *S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *De civitate Dei*, XIX, ch. 15 (Aurelius Augustine, 1871, p. 324). “For our ancient fathers are recorded to have been not kings of men, but shepherds of flocks,” emulates St. Gregory the Great, 1950, p. 60.

In this way, the patristic—especially Gregorian—treatment of natural equality reverts to how a Christian—specifically a bishop—should conduct political leadership, namely, by treating his subjects in view of that fundamental condition of equality.

Of course, alongside Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas will go beyond this Augustinian-Gregorian teaching, by considering the lawfulness and even necessity of *dominium* in a political sense (for in those Fathers, *dominium* is reductively considered as something resulting from original sin). However, this advancement does not hinder Aquinas from fully assenting to the afore mentioned patristic teaching on the fundamental equality of all men, by virtue of the fact that the human soul is equally dignified in all individuals of our species, and therefore, it cannot be enslaved or treated in a specifically unequal way, under penalty of thereby debasing humanity. This is something Thomas fully and consistently affirms.

And on social issues, Thomas will not only advance speculatively alongside Aristotle but also Roman Law. Therefore, before concluding, I would like to dwell for a moment on some observations Thomas makes about slavery in relation to natural law. Indeed, *servitus*, as well as war (*bellum*), are matters of *ius gentium*, not *ius naturale*. However, even though for Thomas this question of servitude or slavery is something in which *ius gentium* differs from *ius naturale*, the practice of *servitus* still maintains some connection with natural law, as can be observed in the following passage:

slavery (*servitus*) is against the first intention of nature (*intentionem naturae*), but not against the second; for natural reason (*naturalis ratio*) inclines to this, and nature seeks this, namely that any given thing be good; but from the fact that someone sins, it is also nature's inclination that he incur punishment (*poenam*) for his sin; and thus slavery was introduced as a punishment for sin (*et sic servitus in poenam peccati introducta est*).<sup>41</sup>

The reason for this grounding of servitude in the default intention of nature lies—as is read there—in the fact that “when nature cannot bring something to a greater perfection, it leads it to a lesser one.” For this reason, Aquinas holds that servitude opposes natural law only in

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<sup>41</sup> *Super Sent.*, IV, d. 36, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2.

the strict sense (its *prima intentio*), but not in the broader sense (its *secunda intentio*); thus, here *ius gentium* is considered as the path taken by nature to order human relations as justly as possible. As he will maintain in *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 5, ad 3, servitude represents an ‘addition’ (*additio*) to natural law, not exactly a violation of it. This indicates the existence of that “influence of social conditions upon the conclusions of the natural law,” that is, “the relation of second nature to the first.”<sup>42</sup>

Certainly, as Brett (1994, p. 45) notes, Thomas does not conceive servitude as an absolute condition of the life of the *servus*, but only as a state of life that affects him relatively; specifically, something that involves external physical subjection and obedience, but not, on the contrary, his interior freedom: “one man serves another not with his mind but with his body (*est autem homo alterius servus non secundum mentem, sed secundum corpus*).”<sup>43</sup> In this sense, it is not properly an anthropological state constituting the being of the subject, but a contingent social state that could vary according to changing circumstances. The aforementioned citation from *Super Sententiarum*, IV, d. 36, ends with a pertinent warning in this regard: “Nor is it unfitting for something natural [*e.g.*, mastership in a general sense] to be impeded by something that is unnatural in this way [*e.g.*, mastership in a despotic sense] (*nec est inconveniens aliquid naturale per hoc quod est contra naturam hoc modo impedi*ri).” That is, just as servitude could serve nature to fulfil certain human needs, it could also be considered an obstacle to it. In other words, Thomas’s acceptance of the possibility of servitude *by default* does not mean he embraces it, that is, that he consecrates it as a matter

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<sup>42</sup> Klubertanz & Land, 1951, p. 245. In a manner very much like the Baron de Montesquieu *avant la lettre*, Thomas points out that variations, determinations, or additions to natural law must be measured according to the diversity of human realities depending on time and place: “lex naturalis secundum diversos status recipit determinationes diversas, et jus positivum etiam variatur secundum diversas hominum condiciones in diversis temporibus” (*Super Sent.*, IV, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4; *cfr.* ad 3); “necesse est quod praecepta legis diversificentur secundum diversos modos communitatum” (*S. th.*, I-II, q. 100, a. 2). In this sense, it is worth noting with Deploige, 1923, pp. 346-349, that “entre la philosophie morale de saint Thomas et le droit naturel, dont la forme propre aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles provoqua précisément la réaction sociologique, la différence est éclatante”. Indeed, “sous prétexte que ses principes sont rigoureusement déduits de la nature de l’homme, le droit naturel revendique pour tout son contenu une valeur universelle en même temps qu’il lui attribue un caractère immuable; et il réprouve comme anomalies désordonnées tout ce qui s’écarte de l’ordre idéal tel qu’il l’a défini”. In this regard, “non seulement la puissante attaque des sociologues ne fait point brèche dans l’édifice thomiste, mais celui-ci, en même temps qu’il reste inébranlé et solide, est assez vaste et hospitalier pour abriter la sociologie elle-même”.

<sup>43</sup> *S. th.*, II-II, q. 122, a. 4.

of human nature. In this sense, it is worth saying that “the ‘addition’ of servitude would only make sense if it could be shown to eschew injury,”<sup>44</sup> that is, if it prevents more harm than would occur if it did not exist.

Nevertheless, from that cited text in *Super Sententiarum*, there remains something to say about the consideration that servitude was introduced as a penalty for sin. If, as the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* had already established in its *Institutiones* (I, 2, §2), “by that law [of nature] all men are originally born free (*iure enim naturali ab initio omnes homines liberi nascebantur*),”<sup>45</sup> the question then is why some men should somehow pay by servile subjection to others. To glimpse some explanation from Aquinas on the matter, it is advisable first to refer once more to the aforementioned Church Fathers. Indeed, following the same teaching of Justinian’s *Institutes*, which there—immediately before the cited phrase—had established that wars that arose among men, along with the captivity that followed and then slavery, are contrary to the law of nature (*bella etenim orta sunt et captivitates secutae et servitutes [...] sunt iuri naturali contrariae*),<sup>46</sup> Saint Augustine will maintain—in *De civitate Dei*, XIX, 15—that same connection between slavery and captivity as a result of war, as if servitude following capture by the victor were a penalty milder than death at his hands. And on the occasion of his commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*, Saint Thomas will also consider this association between servitude and war, thus noting the distinction between slavery as

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<sup>44</sup> Brett, 1994, p. 57.

<sup>45</sup> *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 1922, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 1922, p. 8. “[...] by the law of nature all men were born free (*iure naturali omnes liberi nascerentur*); and manumission was not heard of, as slavery (*servitus*) was unknown. But when slavery came in by the law of nations, the boon of manumission followed. And whereas we all were denominated by the one natural name of ‘men,’ the law of nations introduced a division into three kinds of men, namely, freemen, and in opposition to them, slaves; and thirdly, freedmen who had ceased to be slaves (*uno naturali nomine homines appellaremur, jure gentium tria genera hominum esse coeperunt, liberi et his contrarium servi et tertium genus libertini, qui desiderant esse servi*)” (*Institutiones*, I, 5; *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 1922, p. 17). This idea, besides being literally reproduced in *Digesta*, I, 1, §4 (*Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 1893, p. 1), also appears in other passages: “Florentinus [points out that] (...) *servitus est constitutio iuris gentium, qua quis domino alieno contra naturam subicitur*” (I, 5, §4; *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 1893, p. 7). “[Ulpianus points out that] *quod attinet ad ius civile, servi pro nullis habentur: non tamen et iure naturali, quia, quod ad ius naturale attinet, omnes homines aequales sunt*” (L, 17, §32; *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 1893, p. 869).

natural suitability (*secundum aptitudinem naturalem*) and that which is the result of a legal convention (*secundum legem inter homines positam*).<sup>47</sup>

In sum, it is clear that for Thomas Aquinas, if servitude is institutionalised, that is, legalised, its mediate cause is original sin, and its immediate cause the captivity produced at the end of a war. The guilt in the latter case is having lost the war, and the penalty imposed accordingly is servitude imposed by the victorious enemy: the subjected then suffers the impotence—and even sadness—of not being able to live for himself as an end in himself—that is, the condition of being free— but instead having to live for another.<sup>48</sup> This explains why in *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 57, a. 3, ad 2, Thomas observes: “the fact that this particular man (*hunc hominem*) should be a slave rather than another man (*servum magis quam alium*), is based not on natural reason, but on some resultant utility (*non habet rationem naturalem, sed solum secundum aliquam utilitatem consequentem*),” thus removing any possible justification of servitude based on belonging to a particular race or social position, intellectual aptitude, or any human condition.

Of course, in the whole of his teaching, this doctrine on servitude does not accord with a society genuinely established politically, where all citizens could enjoy full freedom, even if they must submit to whatever authority.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the patristic doctrine of fundamental equality can be useful to understand the special medieval radicality in Thomas's use of Aristotelian doctrine concerning political mastership. For if there certainly exists a mastership according to which someone must rule and lead other free men (*sic etiam ille qui habet officium gubernandi et dirigendi liberos*,

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<sup>47</sup> “For we speak of slavery and slaves (*servire et servus*) in two ways. One way regards natural suitability [...]. But there is also a kind of slave or servitude (*servus vel serviens*) by human law. For law declares that war captives are slaves of the victors, and almost all peoples observe it (*hoc iure*), and so also, we call it a common law of peoples (*ius gentium*)” (*Super Pol.*, I, 4, lin. 13-21; Thomas Aquinas, 2007, p. 34).

<sup>48</sup> *Cfr. Super Sent.*, II, d. 44, q. 1, a. 3; *S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 4.

<sup>49</sup> “Ex quo iustum politicum consistit in liberis et aequalibus, quibuscumque non inest hoc, scilicet quod sint liberi et aequales, his non est adinvicem politicum iustum, quod est iustum simpliciter, sed quoddam iustum, idest dominativum vel paternum, quod est iustum secundum quid, in quantum habet aliquam similitudinem politici iusti. (...) dominativum et paternum iustum, etiam si esset simpliciter iustum, non esset politicum iustum, quia iustum politicum est secundum legem et in quibus nata est esse lex, et huiusmodi sunt illi quibus competit aequalitas quantum ad hoc quod est principari et subici, ita scilicet quod unus eorum non subicitur alteri sicut servus subicitur domino et filius patri, unde in his non est politicum iustum” (*Super Ethic.*, V, 11, lin. 84-90 and 185-194).

*dominus dici potest*, S. th. I, q. 96, a. 4), the understanding of what ‘free subject’ means in this case may be profoundly enriched by the Christian doctrine of equality that inspires the teachings of Gregory and Augustine. And this naturally leads us to a reflection on political trifunctionality, a subject that will be addressed in the follow-up article. In treating that topic, one must not lose sight of that fundamental equality in the freedom and dignity of all citizens, beyond the different and unequal offices that each one is called to exercise in each case.

## Conclusion

In interpreting this entire issue concerning the fundamental conception that Thomas Aquinas presents regarding inequality among men, what seems to be primarily at stake is whether, for him, there are or not people innately superior to others. If one accepts that there are, then it would be affirmed that Thomas holds that some persons were indeed born to rule, just as others were born to obey. The differences in socio-political roles between some and others would be justified based on that innate condition.

In my view, first of all, it must be taken into account that there is no doubt that, for Thomas Aquinas, there are *de iure* people more apt than others to rule:

[...] we find order (*ordo*) among men. For those who excel in intelligence are *naturally* rulers (*illi qui intellectu praeminent, naturaliter dominantur*), whereas those who are less intelligent, but strong in body (*illi vero qui sunt intellectu deficientes, corpore vero robusti*), seem made by nature for service (*instituti ad serviendum*), as Aristotle says in his *Politics* (I. ii. 13 seqq.).<sup>50</sup>

Now then, the *ordo* natural to be observed among men is an order of strictly moral character. That is to say, the hierarchical human order that follows nature is one established according to the merit that men obtain in the cultivation of their virtues, that is, from the exercise of their intelligence and their practice of justice. Therefore, *naturaliter* here must be interpreted

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<sup>50</sup> C.G., III, ch. 81, my emphasis; *cfr. Super Pol.*, I, 3, lin. 218-239 (Thomas Aquinas, 2007, p. 30).

as *de iure* (i.e., by principle of natural order), and not in a naturalistic sense, namely, that there are men who were born more intelligent than others, that is, without the need to have freely exercised their intellectual faculty. And, in parallel, it is not that those with robust bodies and deficient intellect were born that way, but that they have freely derived their *modus vivendi* toward the preeminence of physical exercise over intellectual exercise. Of course, *de facto* the natural or ideal order can be inverted, and those who rule are not the most optimally prepared. Even Aristotle himself, in *Politics*, I, 5, 1254b1-3, leaves open the possibility that his postulation of the natural character of slavery includes some freedom, insofar as he expresses that those who are “in bad or corrupted natures” are men in whom “the body will often appear to rule over the soul,” thus arriving at “an evil and unnatural condition” (my emphasis). That is, the defect alluded to here is already of a moral type, not merely innate or physical. Thomas’s commentary on this is, if anything, clearer: “In [morally] diseased human beings (*hominibus pestilentibus*) and those wrongly disposed, the body very often rules the soul (*corpus principatur anime*), since such human beings prefer bodily convenience to what is fitting for the soul (*commodum corporis commodo anime*). And this happens because these human beings are disposed wrongly and contrary to nature (*male dispositi et preter naturam*).”<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the aptitude for govern, even while harboring some biological—today we might say genetic or epigenetic—or involuntary dispositions of whatever kind, does not reside exclusively or primarily in those *natural* factors, e.g., some innate charisma, an inherited economic or social position, or similar matters; for someone to ultimately be endowed with the aptitude to command, he needs to *voluntarily* exercise himself to reach that position of superiority. Specifically, that aptitude exists precisely by reason of virtue and morally acquired wisdom, that is, by reason of the development of practical intelligence and a sense of justice.<sup>52</sup> Of course, such development logically has a natural basis of subjective conditions which, however, when evaluating moral merit, prove indifferent or of little weight. No one obtains the aptitude to command by the mere possession of these conditions. On the contrary,

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<sup>51</sup> *Super Pol.*, I, 3, lin. 137-142, my emphasis (Thomas Aquinas, 2007, p. 29).

<sup>52</sup> *Cfr. S. th.*, I, q. 96, a. 3.





what is required above all is moral and intellectual virtue, meritoriously acquired, since some men *make themselves apt, becoming more* skilful or intellectually more capable than others.

In sum, the aptitude to rule present in some subjects is not a metaphysical matter but a moral one, which will have the consequence that, for its historical realisation, it is not a matter of natural law, but of positive law, with the consequent free social consent required in relation to it. In this sense, in principle—*de iure*—any member of the community, from any social class or professional order, could ascend in *ordo* or *gradus* to become prince or bishop, provided (or rather, having come to possess) the gifts of practical wisdom and sense of justice required for such offices. Therefore, the only way to hierarchically differentiate individuals of an identical human species, and thus judge that some have *de iure* certain authority over the rest, is by attending to the moral, that is, voluntary, merit of the subjects; for apart from this merit, there are no human beings naturally superior in species with respect to others.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “Although some humans are superior to others in virtue, Aquinas holds that their being of the same species precludes any human from having *natural* authority over another” (Murphy, 1997, p. 328, my emphasis).

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