Practical Syllogism, *Proairesis,* and the Virtues: Toward a Reconciliation of Virtue Ethics and Natural Law Ethics

FULVIO DI BLASI
Libera Università Maria SS. Assunta
Palermo, Italy

THE CONTEMPORARY Aristotelian-Thomistic debate in ethics is marked by a strong contrast between "natural law" and "prudence," or, what is the same, between the so called "natural law ethics" and "virtue ethics."[1] A clear example of this contrast is Daniel Mark Nelson's claim that "for Thomas, the moral life as well as reflection on it depend on prudence and not on knowledge of the natural law."[2] Another example comes from Edward A. Goerner, who considers natural law as "the bad man's view": the view of a man who obeys general extrinsic rules out of fear of punishment. According to Goerner, the full standard of right/good belongs to "the good man's view": that is to say, the view of those who possess practical wisdom and prudence.[3] Other examples could be

[1] I would like to thank Christopher Mirus for correcting my English and for his comments.

[2] Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas and the Implications for Modern Ethics* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), xii.

[3] Edward A. Goerner, "On Thomistic Natural Law: The Bad Man's View of Thomistic Natural Right," *Political Theory* 1: (1979), 101–22; Edward A. Goerner, "Thomistic Natural Right: The Good Man's View of Thomistic Natural Law," *Political Theory* 3 (1983): 393–418. Goerner's interpretation of Aquinas is not reliable. His legalistic concept of natural law should be rather traced back to the utilitarian natural law theory advanced by John Austin (1790–1859) in *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined and the Uses of the Study of Jurisprudence* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971). But one can also think of Ethical (Rational) Egoism as described (and criticized) by Henry B. Veatch in his *Human Rights: Fact*

cited,[4] but what is important now is to focus on the theoretical root of the contrast: namely, the difficulty (apparently insurmountable) of joining together the *universal* nature, or character, of law and the *contingent and particular* nature of moral life.[5] Precisely because of its universal character, law, allegedly, cannot reach "the particular" and so cannot be a real guide for moral life. The particular has therefore "priority," and the nature of the good is "fragile."[6]

Usually, even authors who try to reconcile law and virtue, by means of rediscovering the concepts of natural inclinations, first principles of practical reason, and so on, accept this dualism. On the one hand, there is the realm of *universality*, with natural law, natural inclinations, first precepts (or principles), inclination to happiness, and so on. On the other hand, we have the realm of *particularity*, with prudence and the virtues.[7]

---

or Fancy? (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 33–48. A good response to Goerner is found in Pamela Hall, "Goerner on Thomistic Natural Law," *Political Theory* 4 (1990), 638–49; see her *Narrative and the Natural Law: An Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Hall's main criticism coincides with the one Veatch addressed to Ethical Egoism: that is, the incapacity to go beyond a mere technical rationality and to reach the ethical dimension of human life. I am afraid to say that in his "Response to Hall." *Political Theory* 4 (1990): 650–55, Goerner shows no sign of accepting Hall's invitation to focus on a moral meaning of natural law.

[4] In Italy, the most important example would be Giuseppe Abbà: see his *Lex et Virtus: Studi sull'Evoluzione della Dottrina Morale di san Tommaso d'Aquino* (Roma: LAS, 1983); *Felicità, Vita Buona e Virtù: Saggio di Filosofia Morale* (Roma: LAS, 1989); *Quale Impostazione per la Filosofia Morale?* (Roma: LAS, 1996). I criticized Abbà's concept of natural law in my *God and the Natural Law: A Rereading of Thomas Aquinas* [Italian edition: 1999] (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2003). Abbà's work is remarkable, though, and deserves close attention.

[5] Thomas S. Hibbs focuses correctly on this epistemological problem in his "Principles and Prudence: The Aristotelianism of Thomas's Account of Moral Knowledge," *The New Scholasticism* 3 (1987): 271–84.

[6] I am thinking, of course, of Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). For a recent criticism of Nussbaum (but also of Nancy Sherman and Sarah Broadie) on "the priority of the particular," see Moira M. Walsh, "The Role of Universal Knowledge in Aristotelian Moral Virtue," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 73–88. Walsh's strongest claim is that every act of *phronêsis* "presupposes at least implicit knowledge of the universal human *telos*."

[7] See Maria Carl, "Law, Virtue, and Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Theory," *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 425–48. The best example of this tendency is given by the exponents of the so called neoclassical theory of natural law: namely, Germain Grisez, John Finnis, Joseph Boyle, Robert George, William May, etc. For a basic

Stanley Hauerwas, appropriately, has spoken about a "context versus principle debate."[8]

The opposition between natural law and prudence is also the outcome of the trend that the contemporary rediscovery of practical reason has taken over the last fifty years or so. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon area, this rediscovery is marked by a strong cultural reaction to Hume's "is–ought" question and, more generally, to modern philosophy's approach to ethics.[9] To the Humean idea that moral judgments as such are no more than a matter of feelings or emotions, philosophers object today that there is "the perception that moral reasoning does occur, that there can be logical linkages between various moral judgments of a kind that emotivism itself could not allow for ('therefore' and 'if . . . then . . .' are obviously not used as expressions of feeling)."[10] This clear perception led both to the *analysis* of practical reasoning in terms of (objective) *reasons for action*, and to the search for the first value-premises (basic reasons for actions) of moral reasoning. Hart's "internal point of view" played a significant role in this context.[11] The value-character of the good as it exists in practical reasoning cannot simply be deduced from a theoretical "is–knowledge"; and this insight, claim Grisez, Finnis, and others, is exactly what grounded Aristotle's and Aquinas's ethical theories.

For my present purposes it is important to stress that this trend, even if valuable under several respects, increases the "natural law vs. prudence debate" because it leads to a rediscovery of natural law simply in terms of *universal* moral (or premoral) principles (or values). Practical knowledge is a kind of "value knowledge" but it still belongs to the realm of our *universal* and *abstract* knowledge. Even the natural inclinations, in this context, seem to aim merely at universal objects: that is, the general human values, rights.[12]

---

bibliography on (and criticism of) this school of thought let me refer again to my *God and the Natural Law.*

[8] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 49. I found this appropriate expression by Hauerwas while reading Thomas Hibbs, "Principles and Prudence: The Aristotelianism of Thomas's Account of Moral Knowledge."

[9] The obvious reference is to G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 175–95.

[10] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 19.

[11] See Herbert L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

[12] Russell Hittinger focuses correctly on this narrow approach typical of contemporary natural law theory in his "Natural Law and Virtue: Theories at Cross Purposes," in *Natural Law Theory: Contemporary Essays*, ed. Robert P. George (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42–70.

Contemporary interpretations of the practical syllogism also reveal the difficulty of joining together universal (theoretical?) knowledge and particular, or contingent, moral life. These interpretations tend either to take "action" in a metaphorical way or to take "syllogism" in a metaphorical way. The practical syllogism, in other words, either does not really conclude in the action but in a statement/proposition *peri tas praxeis*—which regards, relates to an action—or is not a proper syllogism at all, "syllogism" being just a nontechnical term which refers to the various arguments used by the agent as justifications of his action.[13] In both cases, a universal moral law, or a universal moral knowledge, could not be really *practical* because there is no logical connection between the universal (knowledge) and the particular (action). If there is still *room for something else* between the end of practical reasoning and the action, then it follows that the real cause, the engine, the final *dominus* of our behavior is not our reason or intellect but *something else* (Autonomous will? Emotion? . . . ?). On the other hand, it is obvious that a nondeductive reasoning cannot be addressed by any conclusive objective moral criticism.

I think there are strong reasons to distrust the relevant terminology and the concepts used in the contemporary debate as misleading with respect to both Aristotle's and Aquinas's ethical theories. Natural law certainly relates, in the first place, to universal principles; but these principles are grasped through induction from experience. They not only can be (better) understood in and through experience of moral action, but are also properly *practical* only when they in turn can reach and guide that experience. Natural law can be a true moral guide only if it is truly able to reach the particular action to be performed here and

[13] For this way to look at the contemporary debate, see Giuseppe Nicolaci, "Può l'Azione Concludere un Sillogismo? Sulla Teoria Aristotelica del Sillogismo Pratico" (hereafter, "Può l'Azione Concludere un Sillogismo?") [1994], in G. Nicolaci, *Metafisica e metafora: Interpretazioni aristoteliche* (Palermo: L'EPOS Società Editrice, 1999), 95–110. Examples of the first tendency are Anthony Kenny, "Practical Inference," *Analysis* 26(1965–66): 65–75; and David Charles, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 84–96. Examples of the second tendency are G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1957]), 57–66; G. E. M. Anscombe, "Thought and Action in Aristotle" [1965] in *Aristotle's Ethics: Issues and Interpretations*, eds. James J. Walsh and Henry L. Shapiro (Belmon, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1967), 56–69; William F. R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); and again Kenny, "Practical Inference."

now. The way in which the concepts of "universal" and "particular" should be used in natural law theory needs to be revisited. I think this reexamination should be made through Aristotle's concepts of *sullogismos tôn praktôn* (practical syllogism) and *proairesis* (ethical, deliberated choice). My opinion is that Aristotle's theory of practical syllogism is one of the two main paradigms of Aquinas's natural law theory, the other being the Stoics' concept of God's law as developed by Christian philosophy and theology.

To have a practical syllogism, the agent has to find and formulate the two premises from which the conclusion flows. Practical syllogism is the last step of what we call moral, or practical, reasoning. There are two levels of this reasoning interacting with each other. The major premise depends on a scientific reasoning that starts with the first intellectual apprehension of the universal good(s). The minor premise depends on a prudential reasoning that starts with the apprehension of a particular good. In each case, reasoning is *practical* due to the inclination to, or attraction by, the good to be achieved in action. This means that reasoning is practical due to the work of the appetite toward a particular action, and that moral choice happens when the two interacting reasoning processes match (only) one specific course of action. "Practical" relates to action; practical reason, consequently, is more "practical" the closer it is to the (particular) action. The same applies to "natural law": The more it is "practical," the more it is the effective source of moral action.

In what follows, I will show that Aristotle's *proairesis* (moral choice) depends, first, on a scientific level of moral reasoning that corresponds to Aquinas's concepts of "first notion and first principle of practical reason," "first and secondary precepts of natural law," and *"synderesis"*; and, second, on a prudential level of practical reasoning that corresponds to Aquinas's concept of prudence. This means that prudence depends on what we would call ethical scientific knowledge. Furthermore, I will show that Aristotle's concept of practical syllogism depends, from the beginning to the end, on the interplay between intellect *(nous)* and appetite or inclination *(orexis)*, and is supposed to effectively reach and cause the particular action. Surprisingly, as we will see, this corresponds very well to Aquinas's definition of natural law.

More particularly, the first section is meant to correctly frame the theory of practical syllogism in the context of Aristotle's physics. "Practical syllogism" is supposed to explain how *physical* movements happen—specifically, those movements (ours) of which thought is a cause. But since thought alone does not move anything, practical syllogism cannot be reduced to a pure theoretical object; it must be a unity of thought

and appetite. In a sense, from this point on, the whole article intends to explain exactly *what thought* and *what appetite* compose the practical syllogism. Section two *(What Thought? What Appetite?)* locates them by using the distinction of the parts of the soul that Aristotle gives in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The most relevant conclusion here is that the thought involved in the practical syllogism cannot be primarily the thought of *phronêsis* but a higher thought that relates to the concept of *nous*. Section three *(Why Nous?)* aims at carefully explaining this point. Section four *(Orexis and the Virtues)* addresses directly the union between thought and appetite. This union originates the knowledge of the good as such, and explains Aristotle's key concept of *"desiring nous."* At this point we will be able to reach a clear account of the concepts of practical syllogism and *proairesis*. This section will also clarify why moral dispositions affect correct practical reasoning, or, in other words, why evil people, for both Aristotle and Aquinas, do not understand ethics. Finally, the fifth section *(Debitum Actum et Finem)* summarizes and specifies better the connection between Aristotle's theory of the practical syllogism and Aquinas's concept of natural law.

An Inquiry on *Physis*[14]

The key point for a correct understanding of Aristotle's concept of practical syllogism is that it does not relate to an inquiry on *logos* but on *physis*. That is to say, Aristotle approaches the practical syllogism in an effort to figure out how movements happen (or are generated) in material reality, and more particularly, in those animals which move by using their reason: human beings. This means, in turn, that the practical syllogism is supposed to be precisely: (a) what directly causes the action (or what concludes in *acting*); and (b) what causes the action as the conclusion of a real *deductive* rational process (proper syllogism). What Aristotle wonders is "how thought can push us to act or not to act, to move or, according to the circumstances, not to move."[15]

> But how is it that thought is sometimes followed by action, sometimes not; sometimes by movement, sometimes not? What happens seems parallel to the case of thinking and inferring about the immovable objects. There the end is truth seen *[theôrêma]* (for, when one thinks the

[14] The argument of this section follows the line taken by Nicolaci, "Può l'Azione Concludere un Sillogismo?" This is the best article I have read so far on Aristotle's ethics and the concept of practical reason; let me refer to it for a deeper understanding of the subject. I am also indebted to Nicolaci for the clarifying and insightful discussions I had with him while working on this article.

[15] Nicolaci, "Può l'Azione Concludere un Sillogismo?," 95.

> two propositions, one thinks and puts together the conclusion), but here the two propositions result in a conclusion which is an action.[16]

A syllogism "is a discourse in which, certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so."[17] As Carlo Natali has recently pointed out, it is clear that Aristotle "tries to demonstrate that all deductions made according to" this definition "must take the form of one of the three types of syllogism"[18] described in the *Prior Analytics*, and *practical* deduction is one of them. That Aristotle thinks this way about the practical syllogism is evident in a key passage of book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> The one opinion is universal, the other is concerned with the particular facts, and here we come to something within the sphere of perception; when a single opinion results from the two, the soul must in one type of case affirm the conclusion, while in the case of opinions concerned with production it must immediately act (e.g., if everything sweet ought to be tasted, and this is sweet, in the sense of being one of the particular sweet things, the man who can act and is not restrained must at the same time actually act accordingly).[19]

It would be misleading to try to formalize this example in order to understand the practical syllogism, for the simple reason that, at least for Aristotle, a practical syllogism could not even be *thought* or *expressed by*

---

[16] Aristotle, *Movement of Animals* (hereafter, *MA*) 7.701a8–12. See ibid., line 20: "And the conclusion 'I must make a coat' is an action." The translations from Aristotle are from *The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[17] Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* 1.24b19–20.

[18] Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*, trans. G. Parks (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 64–65.

[19] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter, *NE*) 7.1147a25–31. For the other famous examples of walking, making a house, and making a coat, see Aristotle, *MA* 7.701a12–24. Charles (*Aristotle's Philosophy of Action*, 91–92) cites *NE* 7.1147a25–31, and other similar passages, as evidences that, in Aristotle, "the conclusion of the syllogism is a proposition and not an action." His argument rests on the possibility, admitted by Aristotle, of being "restrained" from acting. In this case, Charles says, "the action will not follow, although the conclusion may be drawn. Hence the conclusion is not the action." I think Charles confused the agent's point of view (or internal point of view, from which the practical syllogism must be examined) with an external (third person) point of view. Charles's argument is the same as saying that the action of 'weighing down the accelerator' does not cause the movement of the car because, for instance, there is a wall preventing it from going forward.

words.[20] The attempts, for instance by Anthony Kenny and Elizabeth Anscombe, to prove either logically right or logically wrong the examples given by Aristotle are already, *as attempts,* a misinterpretation of Aristotle's concept of the practical syllogism. I hope this point will be a bit clearer later in the article. What is important in the above passage is rather that it makes clear that Aristotle was thinking of a real *deduction*, in which a conclusion follows from the connection of a *major* with a *minor* premise. And this fact raises again, and more strongly, the key question: "How can thought push us to act or not to act?"

The reason why this question is so embarrassing is that, according to Aristotle, "intellect *[dianoia]* itself . . . moves nothing."[21] The faculty of the soul that moves is, rather, *orexis* (appetite).[22] This means in turn that, for the practical syllogism to exist, it should be an intrinsic unity of thought *(nous/dianoia)* and appetite *(orexis)*. And this is what "practical" is supposed to mean when it joins the *generic* "syllogism" to indicate the existence of a particular *specific* nature. A practical syllogism is a syllogism in which, from the beginning (major premise) to the end (conclusion), *nous* and *orexis* work together as an intrinsic unity.

This unity may look like a kind of "monster":[23] a reasoning which requires desire for its logical steps and which does not conclude with an object theoretically identifiable. How can thought and appetite be joined together? And what does this mean exactly? The term "monster" fits well. Indeed, I hope the practical syllogism will look more and more monstrous as I go on—otherwise we might miss the point, failing to focus on what is simultaneously rational and appetitive. However, this monster does not look to me bigger or more threatening than the union of body and spirit (or mind) that we experience daily in the strange creature called human being. Descartes saw this monster clearly, but when he tried to join *res extensa* and *res cogitans* he unhappily failed. Maybe the attempt itself was his mistake.

---

[20] On this point, see again Nicolaci, "Può l'Azione Concludere un Sillogismo?," 106–7.

[21] Aristotle, *NE* 6.1139a35–36. The use of *dianoia* is important because it refers generically to the whole intellectual part of the soul. This means, for example, that not even *phronêsis* in itself can cause the movement. See Aristotle, *On the Soul* (hereafter *"OS"*) 3.10.432b26–27, where it is specified that neither the calculative part of the soul nor *nous* can be the cause of movement. The reason given is remarkable, and we must keep it in mind during the present discussion: "mind as speculative *[theoretikos]* never thinks *[theorei]* what is practicable *[prakton]*." That is, *theoretikon* cannot *theorei* the action.

[22] Aristotle, *OS* 3.10.433a10–29.

[23] See Harold H. Joachim, *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics, A Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

Spirit and body do exist together: This is the only reasonable starting point in order to understand human life. And thought and desire exist together in the acting human being: This is, I think, Aristotle's reasonable starting point.

What Thought? What Appetite?

Let us take for granted that, according to Aristotle, moral action is the outcome of a real deductive (syllogistic) reasoning characterized by an intrinsic unity of thought and appetite. The question now is: "What thought and what appetite are required exactly?" I am going to answer this question by using the distinction of the parts of the soul which Aristotle outlines in the first and sixth books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This distinction is made specifically for ethical purposes and does not perfectly correspond to the distinction between vegetative, sentient, and rational soul of the *De Anima*.[24]

At the end of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1102a5–1103a10), Aristotle introduces the study of the ethical virtues by distinguishing three parts of the soul. He says first (1102a27–28) that there are two parts of the soul, one with *logos (logon echon)* and one without *logos (alogon)*. This is usually translated as "rational" part and "irrational" part, and this is more or less accurate. However, I need to stress here what the real Greek term is because *logos*, by itself, is not the best term to indicate what *we* would call rational part of the soul. We usually refer "rational" to the whole intellectual activity, and we usually include will (the rational desire) in it. Now, *logos*, of course, does not refer to the will—which, as I am going to explain below, belongs to the part of the soul without *logos*—but it does not even refer here to the whole intellectual sphere—which includes also *nous* and *epistêmê*, and for which the most appropriate generic term would probably be *dianoia* (which still would not include the will). *Logos* is the word *(verbum)* of the intellectual part of the soul: It is thought speaking, and, in so doing, is either true or false. *Rule* would be a better translation because Aristotle is focusing here not on the intellectual part of the human being as such but on the *orthos logos*, the *right rule* of the moral action. This is what his ethics is all about, and, accordingly, he draws his first distinction inside the soul: that is, the part with the rule and the part without it.

Immediately after, he further distinguishes in two parts the part of the soul without *logos*: that is, (a) the vegetative part, common to all living beings (1102a32–1102b12); and (b) a part without *logos* but which shares

[24] On this point, see Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 61, 118. Broadie refers, in turn, to William W. Fortenbaugh, *Aristotle on Emotion* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1975).

somehow in the *logos* (1102b13–35). This is the appetitive part of the soul: the *epithumêtikon*, and in general the *orektikon* (b30). The stress here is on *epithumêtikon* because *epithumia* is the specific kind of *orexis* (desire) having pleasure as its object.[25] This desire is what can divert man from the virtuous action—the action in conformity with the *orthos logos*—since "it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones."[26] The action in conformity with *orthos logos* is the action in which the desire for the good as pleasure *(epithumia)* does not prevail over the desire for the good as noble, or morally beautiful *(boulêsis)*. The moral virtues, which Aristotle examines in the books II, III, IV, and V, are precisely the perfections of the appetitive part of the soul making human beings able to live in harmony with their desires—in confomity with *orthos logos*—and to achieve not only the best moral good but also the highest pleasure. It is very important not to make the mistake of thinking that moral virtues affect just a sort of *animal part* of the soul. The appetitive part includes all the three kinds of *orexis*: *epithumia*, *boulêsis* (the will), and *thumos* (the sanguine desire for the good, we would say). And the moral virtues are supposed to perfect all these tendencies making them share in the *(orthos) logos*.[27]

In the lines 1103a1–3 Aristotle adds another distinction. He says that also the part with *logos* "will be twofold, one subdivision having it in the strict sense and in itself, and the other having a tendency to obey as one does one's father." It is obvious that we do not have here a real fourth part because the second one of this last distinction corresponds to the appetitive part. Aristotle is stressing now the fact that this part is not totally without *logos* because it is supposed to desire in conformity with it. When this happens, the *logos* somehow is also in the appetite. So far, therefore,

[25] See Aristotle, *OS* 3.3.414b5–6.

[26] Aristotle, *NE* 2.3.1104b10–11.

[27] Even if Aristotle says explicitly that also the other animals possess *epithumia*, I think there is no reason to restrict the concept of *epithumia*—when applied to human beings—to the animal/sentient pleasures only. *Epithumia* is the desire/attraction for the *good as pleasurable*. In this sense, every sentient being possesses it. But in the human being what is pleasurable comes also from the rational activities. The extremes of the vices are always caused by focusing only, or too much, on *epithumia*: This point is clear in Aristotle, and it is true of every ethical virtue. To imagine, for instance, that the moral desire causing injustice is just a kind of *epithumia* we share with other not-rational animals would make unintelligible all the human pleasures connected with power, money, pride, envy, etc. For Aquinas is clear that "intelligible delight is through the will, as sensible delight is through the appetite of concupiscence" (*Contra Gentiles*, trans. by A. C. Pegis [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975], book 1, ch. 72).

we have three parts of the soul: the vegetative (without *logos*), the appetitive (sharing in the *logos*), and the one with the *logos* in itself.

Let us go now to the beginning of the sixth book, where Aristotle begins his discussion of the intellectual virtues *(aretai dianoêtikai)*. To this purpose he needs an additional distinction, this time making the total four. He says (1139a3–15) that there are two parts of the soul which possesses *logos*, "one by which we contemplate the kind of things whose principles cannot be otherwise, and one by which we contemplate variable things." These parts are, respectively, the *epistêmonikon* (scientific) and the *logistikon* (calculative). "We must, then, learn what is the best state *[hexis]* of each of these two parts; for this is the excellence *[aretê]* of each" (a15–17). These *aretai* are *dianoêtikai* because they are "the best state" of *dianoia* (thought). So, beginning with line 1139b15, Aristotle begins his examination of the five "states by virtue of which the soul possesses truth by way of affirmation or denial:" that is, *technê* (art); *epistêmê* (scientific, or demonstrative, knowledge); *phronêsis* (practical wisdom, or prudence); *sophia* (wisdom); and *nous* (intellect in the strict sense: the intellectual act by which we grasp the first principles of knowledge).[28]

It is not perfectly clear if Aristotle thinks of all these five states in terms of *dianoetical virtues*[29] (let me use this unambiguous Aristotelian term—as we do in Italy—instead of "intellectual virtues"). I believe he did, and for two main reasons. The first is Aristotle's constant use of *hexis*, which is the technical term indicating the genus of the virtues.[30] The second is that all those five states seem to admit a better or a worse condition according to their correct exercise, and this is what the term "virtue" basically refers to. So, we have three dianoetical virtues for the the *epistêmonikon*—*sophia, nous,* and *epistêmê*—and two for the *logistikon*—*phronêsis* and *teknê*. And we have four parts of the soul with respect to *logos*: the vegetative (without *logos*), the *orektikon* (appetitive: sharing in *logos*), the *epistêmonikon* (scientific), and the *logistikon* (calculative).

Now, whatever the opinion about the exact number of the dianoetical virtues, there is no doubt that *phronêsis* is the virtue of the *logistikon*

[28] As it will appear later in the article, this first description of *nous* is only a partial description.

[29] Marcello Zanatta, recovering an old interpretation advanced by Plutarch, Aspasio, and Alexander of Aphrodisia, argues that the dianoetical virtues, for Aristotle, are indeed two—*sophía* and *phrónesis*—and that Aristotle's intention in the sixth book is rather to discuss dialectically the traditional five-virtue platonic opinion. See Zanatta's critical edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1986), 902–3.

[30] See Aristotle, *NE* 2.4.1105b19–1106a13. See ibid. 1.13.1103a4–6, in which Aristotle lists three examples of dianoetical virtues: *sophia*, *sunesis* (which refers to the *nous*-knowledge), and *epistêmê*.

with respect to *praxis*, moral action. If there is another virtue of the *logistikon*, it cannot be other than *technê*, which deals with *poiêsis*, production. There is also no doubt that ethical virtues are the excellence of the *orektikon*, the appetitive part.

What is striking about all this is that we have got a clear account, or location in the soul, of both *phronêsis* and the moral virtues, but it is not clear at all how we can get either *proairesis* (deliberated choice, the efficient cause of moral action) or the practical syllogism. Or better, it is perfectly clear that we cannot get either of them by focusing only on *phronêsis* and on the moral virtues.

It is true that in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a31–33 Aristotle says that the two principles of *proairesis*, as the efficient cause of the moral action, are *orexis* (desire) and *logos* ("reasoning with a view to an end"). And that is why, in order to have a good (moral) choice, we need a true *logos*—a true calculation of the means—and a right desire—*orexin orthen* (1139a23–24). We need, in other words, both *phronêsis*, making *true* the calculation of the means, and the moral virtues, making *right* the desire. However, Aristotle says also that *proairesis* is not the principle of the moral action in terms of final cause (1139a31–32). And he adds that *proairesis* cannot exist without (a) *nous,* (b) *dianoia*, and (c) the ethical virtues (1139a33–34). Now, it is obvious that *nous* cannot be located in the *logistikon* part of the soul. This reference, consequently, takes *proairesis*, much beyond *phronêsis*, to the scientific part of the soul. But it is also curious that Aristotle, immediately after mentioning *logos* and *orexis* as the principles of *proairesis*, uses the generic term *dianoia*, as if he wanted again to take *proairesis* to the scientific part of the soul, but with a connotation not already implicit in the term *nous*. In other words, the lines 1139a33–34 add to the logos-orexis lines (1139a31–33) both (1) *nous* and *dianoia* as different references to the scientific part of the soul, and (2) *ethical virtues* as the excellence of orexis. No word is chosen by chance here but, for my present purposes, I do not need to focus more on the exegesis of these passages.

I need, rather, to recall that, both in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1139a17–19) and in the *De Anima* (433a9–27), when Aristotle starts wondering how it can be that thought causes our actions, he always uses *nous*—a term that, again, does not fit the *logistikon* part of the soul.[31] Moreover, and most importantly, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle defines *proairesis*, not only as *orexis bouleutikê* (1139a23)[32]—a term that certainly fits

[31] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (hereafter *MP*) E.1.1025b22.

[32] See Aristotle, *NE* 3.1113a10–11, where the discussion is focused on *boulêsis* and the process of deliberation.

the calculative part of the soul—but also as *orektikos nous* (1139b4)—which does not refer at all to the calculative—and as *orexis dianoêtikê* (1139b5)—which refers above all to the scientific part of the soul. This is certainly a good puzzle. But we can already be sure that the solution, whatever it is, does not lie primarily either in *phronêsis* or in the *logistikon*.

Why *Nous*?

The crucial question now is: "Why does Aristotle focus on *nous* and not on *logos*?" The first answer is certainly that for the practical syllogism to start it needs (as all demonstrations do) universal principles/knowledge, which are not known by way of demonstration. *Nous*, under this respect, is the origin of every human reasoning and, in a sense, of thought itself. If thought has a role to play in our movements as humans, it should be first of all at the level where its possibility to be, and to be true, is generated, and where all reasoning start.

But *nous* is even more. It is the beginning and the end of our intellectual activity. It is the eye of the mind, and its seeing, whether the first principles of demonstration or each simple apprehension, "can never be in error."[33] *Nous* is to thought what *aisthêsis* (perception) is to sense-knowledge, its object being not the perceptible thing *(to aisthêton)* but the intelligible thing *(to noeton)*. *Nous*, in other words, is the direct, immediate, constant, intuitive intellectual knowledge we have of reality while our mind is wandering around by using its *logos* (that is, by reasoning). In this sense, *nous* is different from, and constantly grounds and originates, *dianoia* in its more specific meaning(s) of scientific *(epistêmonikos)* and calculating *(logistikos)* reason. And always in this sense, *logos,* whether *epistêmonikos* or *logistikos*, works always in order to achieve a better intellectual sight *(nous)* of reality.[34]

At the level of our universal knowledge of reality *nous* speaks becoming *scientific dianoia*, and, in so doing, it can be (not in itself but because of the *logos*) either true or false. That is why, if thought has part in our movements, it must be—at the highest level, where the major premise is generated—both *nous* of the first notions and principles, and scientific *dianoia* of the ethical reality. *Phronêsis* is not yet in the picture, since it belongs to the *logistikon*, and, consequently, it cannot be *epistêmê* (science).[35] But *epistêmê* is exactly what we need at this first level of practical activity, and that is why Aristotle, when he distinguishes our knowledge into the theoretical,

[33] Aristotle, *OS* 3.6.430b26–30.

[34] This is also present in Plato's subordination of *diánoia* (mathematical knowledge) to the intuitive knowledge *(noêsis)* which takes man to the world of ideas.

[35] Aristotle, *NE* 6.5.1140b1–2.

the practical, and the productive, talks about *dianoia praktike* and *epistêmê praktike*.[36] As Enrico Berti has forcefully pointed out, the first meaning of "practical reason" in Aristotle belongs to science and not to prudence. And this is what the *Nicomachean Ethics* is supposed to be: a reflexive, scientific treatment of ethical reality able to help the choices of people who want to be good.[37]

The reason Aristotle wants to ground *proairesis* on *nous* (and *dianoia*), rather than on the *logistikon*, should now be a little clearer, but there is much more to say. *Nous* grounds intellectual practical activity also at the second level—where the minor premise is generated—when, looking for its completion in the action, it becomes *calculative dianoia*. "The one opinion is universal, the other is concerned with the particular facts, and here we come to something within the sphere of perception *[aisthêsis]*" (*NE* 7, 1147a25–31). Let us try to get deeper into Aristotle's mind's eye. On the one hand, reasoning about particulars requires the universal *nous/dianoia* knowledge which generates the major premise (e.g., "everything sweet ought to be tasted"). But on the other hand it requires "the eye of the intellect" grasping, through *aisthêsis*, the nature of the particular thing which is going to be the object of the process of deliberation, and will produce the minor premise (e.g., "this is sweet, in the sense of being one of the particular sweet things").[38] And this explains the famous as well as difficult passage of *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 11, 1143a35–1143b6:

> And comprehension *[nous]* is concerned with the ultimates in both directions; for both the primary definitions and the ultimates are objects of comprehension *[nous]* and not of argument *[logos]*, and in demonstrations comprehension *[nous]* grasps the unchangeable and primary definitions, while in practical reasoning *[en tais praktikais]* it grasps the last and contingent fact, i.e., the second proposition [*protaseôs*: premise]. For

[36] Aristotle, *MP* 6.1.1025a25; 2.1026b4–5; Aristotle, *Topics* 6.6.145a15–16; 8.1.157a10–11. *Politiké epistéme* is "science," according to Aristotle, because there is demonstrative science, not only of what is necessary, but also of what is "for the most part" *(hos epi to polu)*: this is an epistemological trait that ethics shares also with physics. See Enrico Berti, "Ragione Pratica e Normatività in Aristotele" (hereafter "Ragione Pratica") in *Ragione Pratica, Libertà, Normatività*, ed. M. S. Sorondo (Roma: Herder–Università Lateranense, 1991), 28.

[37] Berti, "Ragione Pratica," 27–43.

[38] An important specification: All this is supposed to be a real rational process; that is, a process that spontaneously happens in ordinary people's minds. Precisely because we are spontaneously rational this way, we can also *reflexively* focus on our intellectual activity (e.g., writing the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and try to make our rational processes more consistent. In other words, scientific *dianoia*, before being a (reflexive) science, is one of the ways our mind constantly, and spontaneously, works.

> these are the starting-points of that for the sake of which, since the universals are reached from the particulars; of these therefore we must have perception *[aisthêsin]*, and this is comprehension *[nous]*.

Epistemologically, the *nous* grasping the (intelligible) particulars through *aisthêsis* comes (through induction) before all our universal knowledge, but this is not my focus now. What is important to see is, rather, that practical reasoning is the gathering together, in an *aisthêsis*-experience, of a universal *nous/dianoia* and of a particular *nous/dianoia*, each of them trying to focus clearly on their respective objects: the major premise for the former and the minor for the latter. These premises are the conclusions of two different *dianoiai*: the scientific and the calculative, respectively. They are both grounded on *nous*. They can both be true or false (a) because *nous* is the objective ground of the truth, and (b) because *dianoia (logos)* can make mistakes. They both look for their own completion in the same *aisthêsis*-experience and in the context of a dialectical interplay, back and forth from scientific to calculative. But "when a single opinion *[doxa]* results from the two, the soul must in one type of case affirm the conclusion, while in the case of opinions concerned with production it must immediately act." If the agent does still have a doubt on one of the two premises, or on their becoming one, if he does still have time to *reflect* on them, the practical syllogism (either true or false) is not concluded.[39]

Now, all this, although very interesting, cannot be enough. For the practical syllogism to start it needs the presence, at its very origin, of the proper principle of movement: *orexis*. If *nous* does not *desire*, it will not develop into *dianoia*, it will not descend to the second premise, and it will never become action. For practical reasoning, from its very beginning, is nothing more than a search for the good to be achieved here and now: a search for the action.

Orexis and the Virtues

This is the last crucial passage of my discussion. If it is true that Aristotle focuses on *nous* as the source and the leader of the syllogism's steps, it is also true that, for him, *nous* is still not the cause of our movements. We need therefore another source and another leader. And this is *orexis*.

Without *orexis*, *nous* could not start its *dianoetical* movement at the level of the major premise—since "everything sweet ought to be tasted" is not just a theoretical knowledge. But it could not even say "this is sweet" at

[39] This does not mean necessarily that the agent will not act. It means simply that the agent does not always act on the basis of a practical syllogism: that is, on the basis of a perfect harmony between his thought and his appetite.

the level of the minor premise. Here we are really meeting the monster because, for practical reasoning to exist, we need a *desiring nous* at the level of our universal knowledge, and a *desiring nous* at the level of our particular (calculative) knowledge, and a *desiring nous* as the conclusion.

I think Aquinas understood very well the concept of *desiring nous* when, while explaining his natural law theory, he wrote that the first notion of practical reason is not *ens* but *bonum*:[40] a term which signifies the relationship between the *ens* known and the will tending toward it. *Bonum* is a primitive concept, but still a complex one which depends, is grounded, on knowledge of the *ens*.[41] For Aquinas, the first principle of practical reason is *bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, malum vitandum*.[42] That is, for the *nous* to originate movements it must know reality—at the very first level in which it is infallibly true—as attractive, as good; and it can do so only if it is informed by, or intrinsically joined to, *orexis*. Building on Aristotle, Aquinas will say that "all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit." Aquinas calls these kind of *first intellectual apprehensions* first principles of practical reason or first precepts of natural law; interestingly enough, they are for him exactly the level of natural law that "cannot be changed" and "cannot be abolished from the heart of man."[43] In other words, for Aquinas practical reasoning could not even start without a *habit* of intellectual, immediate, knowledge of notions and principles (which includes the *seeds* of the virtues); he called this habit *synderesis*. But as soon as *nous* becomes scientific *dianoia*, getting to know moral rules and more specific principles of action, natural law (its secondary precepts) can either change or be "blotted out from men's hearts."[44]

But let me go back to the main question I want to address here: "What is the impact of *orexis* on *nous* in practical knowledge?"

Orexis "arises through perception *[aisthêsis]* or through imagination *[phantasia]* and thought"[45] but, of course, it always relates and tends to particulars. The object of *orexis* is not a "truth seen *[theôrêma]*" and, consequently, properly speaking it cannot be *thought* or *expressed* by words. "Mind as speculative *[theoretikos]* never thinks *[theorei]* what is practicable *[praktov]*."[46] *Theoretikon* cannot *theorei orexis*. This is why Aristotle, in the

[40] Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2.
[41] Thomas Aquinas, *DV,* q. 1, a. 1.
[42] Aquinas, *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2.
[43] Aquinas, *ST* I–II, q. 94, aa. 5–6.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Aristotle, *MA* 7.701a35–36.
[46] Aristotle, *OS* 3.10.432b26–27.

Metaphysics, opposes "truth" to "action" when he writes that "philosophy should be called knowledge *[epistêmê]* of the truth. For the end of theoretical knowledge is truth, while that of practical knowledge is action."[47] *Orexis* (and not *phronêsis*, which in itself belongs to *dianoia* and to *theoria*) makes the particular present to, and active in, the *nous*. In so doing it makes *nous* practical. But the union between *orexis* and *nous* as such is not any more thinkable. Even if this union contains "truth" it is not, properly speaking, *just* "truth" because it is not *just* "thought." When we try to write either the major premise, or the minor premise, or the conclusion of a practical syllogism we abstractly isolate their theoretical aspects, missing at the same time their real nature. This is also the reason why Aristotle's ethics is intrinsically *dialectical*: because the ethical dialogue requires a common starting point at the practical level of *orexis* (moral desire, or values, for those who prefer this terminology). The dialogue, in other words, starts as soon as the interlocutors discover to share at least one love, or value.

Nous is always right but *orexis* is always right only at the very first level of *nous*-knowledge; then, *orexis*, as well as *logos*, can be either right or wrong. *Orexis* depends on *dianoia*, but a mere mistake in the dianoetical process would not make *orexis* intrinsically wrong: For Aristotle, such a mistake would rather make the action involuntary. The reason why *orexis* can be either right or wrong is that *orexis* is intrinsically complex *(epithumia, boulêsis, thumos)*.[48] In order to work correctly *orexis* requires (the perfection of) the moral virtues. Commenting on Aristotle concerning this point, Aquinas writes that "the rectitude of the appetitive faculty in regard to the end [determined for man by nature: that is, known by *nous*] is the measure of truth for practical reason."[49] Now, if we focus on the nature of *orexis* as the engine of practical reason—that is, as what leads (practical) thought toward its (particular) object—this fact acquires a tremendous importance. It means basically that, developing into *dianoia*, both at the level of the first premise and at the level of the second premise, *nous* depends on the moral dispositions of the agent. Scientific and calculative reasoning follow the directions and the paths given by the desire. When *nous* does not desire the right way, its (practical) knowledge will be distorted, misdirected; above all, the *epistêmonikos logos* will not focus on the right things and will not

[47] Aristotle, *MP* 2.1.993b20–21.

[48] In Thomistic philosophy the reason is more complex. I have sketched a more complete account of it in the third chapter of my *God and the Natural Law*.

[49] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, OP (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1998), 6, lect. 2, 1131.

formulate, or develop, the right moral rules and principles. As a consequence, also the *logistikos logos* will be misdirected, and the action will be immoral.

A wrong moral desire impedes a correct universal knowledge of what is good. This is the reason why Aristotle says that neither "the ignorance in *proairesis*"—which causes vice—nor "the ignorance of the universal"—that is a cause for blame—make the action involuntary.[50] This ignorance is a bad work of *dianoia*—both in formulating the major premise and in calculating the moral choice—that is due to an evil moral desire. The thought is *in itself incorrect* because of the bad moral disposition, but it is nevertheless *correctly* following that disposition. So, as far as *orexis* and the moral intention are concerned, the action is voluntary and the person evil/vicious. Aristotle had strong epistemological reasons to say that ethics is studied in order to be good, and that evil people cannot understand ethical science.

Our "*proairesis* and practical syllogism" puzzle should by now have been solved. *Proairesis* is the conclusion of the practical syllogism; as such, it is a mixture of *nous* and *orexis*. It is, at the same time, the perfection of the practical *nous*—which searches for its good in the action—and the efficient cause of the movement—that is, what directly and effectively causes it. This perfection is attained both through the scientific *dianoia* and through the calculative *dianoia*. *Proairesis* is, consequently, also the perfection of practical *dianoia*. *Proairesis* is, therefore, *orektikos nous* and *orexis dianoêtikê*; and, in the more specific sense of *dianoia* related to the second premise, it is also *orexis bouleutikê*. *Phronêsis* is concerned only with this last sense, while the ethical virtues affect the whole process of the practical syllogism as the excellence of *orexis*.

Let me summarize now the discussion of practical syllogism as related specifically, not to Aristotle's ethics, but to Aristotle's *physics*. Practical syllogism does not exist if not in the acting rational agent; it is his first-person knowledge of his action as action. This is Aristotle's conclusion about the physics of rational action: that it happens due to a combined work of thought and appetite and according to a kind of syllogism. In other words, the rational action happens (1) when the agent, *for whatever reason,* reaches *right now* the value-conclusion that he should act upon the maxim "everything sweet ought to be tasted" (or that "I need a covering," or "I should go to the store," or "I should exercise")—that is, when this maxim is right now what is chiefly moving his rational desire or appetite—and (2) when he reaches the conclusion that "this is sweet" (or

[50] Aristotle, *NE* 3.1.1110b31–35.

that "this cloak is a covering," or "the car downstairs is the best way to go to the store," or "soccer right now is for me the best way to exercise"). When the actual appetite-premise matches the identified (best) means, no other conceptual element is required for the action to happen. If the action does not happen (besides the case of material impediments), it means that the agent is still doubtful, *reasoning* about either the right maxim/desire or the best means or both. The examples of practical syllogisms given by Aristotle appear as perfect examples as soon as we consider (1) that real examples, for him, cannot be written down, and (2) that every example is supposed to be a way of looking, from the agent's perspective, at the action he actually did. In this sense, we might account for John's action by saying that he tasted the apple pie on the assumption that it was a moral obligation for him to taste everything sweet and that that apple pie was the sweet thing he saw as available to him at the time he tasted it. That both assumptions might have been wrong, unreasonable, or grounded on other complex reasoning does not change the fact that in the end John acted upon a kind of syllogism.

If we want to help John—that is, if we shift our focus from physics to ethics—we do not have to try to formulate a different syllogism for him to use, but to form better both his scientific moral knowledge and his moral desire. That is to say, we have (1) to teach him how to focus on better moral concepts, principles, and maxims, and (2) to give him a better education in virtue. This is precisely the point of Aristotle's ethics, and this is why he did not think of giving a special place in it to the practical syllogism as such.[51] Good practical syllogisms will just follow good moral education and good scientific study of ethical reality. Some contemporary interpreters, like Kenny and Anscombe, try to reach a sort of theoretically complete (multiple-step) account of the reasoning behind what I have now identified as the real practical syllogism; they miss the point that the complete syllogism is a conclusion of the agent's discursive reasoning, not the reasoning itself. Moreover, they wonder how the syllogism, whatever its formulation, can actually compel the agent to act, missing the point that no third-person formulation of the syllogism can lead anyone to act. We should add that a contingent action cannot be reduced to any abstract description; except for God, Who has perfect

[51] Even when we can formulate a deductive (syllogistic) argument that is directly applicable to action—for example, (a) abortion is always wrong, (b) this particular medical procedure is an abortion, (c) this particular medical procedure cannot be done—it will be a practical syllogism only for those who will act upon it; and it will be a better syllogism for those who have a better moral apprehension of its premises.

knowledge of every singular, there is no way to know for sure what the real apprehension of the premises was for the agent. Most of the time, the agent himself has difficulty in reaching an adequate knowledge of why exactly he did what he did. To have a perfect knowledge of a practical syllogism means no more and no less than to have perfect knowledge, with respect to one particular action, of someone's moral conscience—indeed, of the person's complete state of mind.

Debitum Actum et Finem

The reason focusing too much on *phronêsis* is misleading in order to understand practical reasoning should by now be evident. Practical syllogism is grounded first of all on *nous*. And *nous*, in Aristotle, refers to an intellectual objective knowledge acquired by induction. This knowledge grounds the work of *logos* both at the level of the major premise and at the level of the minor premise. But both the practical character and the correct working of the *nous-dianoia* knowledge depend on (the excellence of) the appetite—*orexis*—and always refers to, and finds its completion or perfection in, the concrete action which concludes the syllogism. Practical knowledge is, first of all, the lived moral knowledge of the rationally acting agent; only remotely it is knowledge—either reflexive or not—of first values or practical principles (major-premise level) and knowledge of suitable means (minor-premise level). Practical knowledge, properly speaking, cannot be separated from the (particular and concrete) action. A universal knowledge of the good is practical only *secundum quid*, as far as it is directed to the action. Otherwise it would be theoretical knowledge, no longer searching, but *contemplating* the good. This is a very important point: For Aquinas the intellectual *(nous)* knowledge of the good is not practical knowledge, because "practical" is only what relates to the action—and action relates to the means. If you are already enjoying the end, or the good, your intellectual knowledge of it is theoretical.[52] What now about natural law?

I already mentioned some connections between the first two levels of the practical syllogism and some of the main concepts involved in Aquinas's natural law theory: that is, the first notion and the first principle of practical reason, the first and the secondary precepts of natural law, and the habit of *synderesis*. If I am right, this connection is already a remarkable thing because it shows that this natural-law knowledge depends not only on (the intellectual virtue of) prudence—as some

[52] In *ST* I–II q. 3, a. 5, Aquinas explains explicitly that happiness or beatitude is not an activity of the practical intellect, because practical intellect relates to the means, not to the end alone.

contemporary scholars are trying to stress—but also and primarily on a *scientific* ethical knowledge and on the ethical virtues. But if I am really right, Aquinas should have defined natural law also at the practical level of *proairesis*, that is, with reference to the effective cause of the concrete action to be performed here and now. Did he do that? Actually, in *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 91, a. 2, the first article devoted to the natural law and in which Aquinas addresses the question "Whether there is in us a natural law," we find exactly the following definition:

> it is evident that all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, in so far as, namely, from its being imprinted on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end *[naturalem inclinationem ad debitum actum et finem]*: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law.

This is certainly Aquinas's most precise and technical definition of natural law. Here there is no doubt that this "natural inclination" is a kind of intellectual and rational *orexis*, but what should surprise us is that the definition is all but simple. In fact, it refers both to the inclination to the *proper end* and to the inclination to the *proper* (or *due*) *act*. These two inclinations are not the same thing. The first one refers to the intellectual (theoretical) knowledge of the end as good; the second one refers to the inclination to the concrete action to be performed here and now.[53] This inclination depends on the work of practical reason, which identifies the right action to do *(recta ratio)*. The knowledge of the right action as such is a practical knowledge, and it matches very well Aristotle's concept of *proairesis*. So, it seems very much that Aquinas, on the line of Aristotle's theory of action, conceived of his natural law also as *practical*, namely, as an effective guide of moral action. Such an approach to natural law theory has extraordinary consequences. But this is a topic for another article. N V

[53] I explained the logical meaning of "law" and "natural law" in Aquinas (also with respect to the concept of "inclination") in my "Natural Law as Inclination to God," forthcoming.