

**Brian Welter**

## **BOOK REVIEW:**

**Peter A. Redpath, *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas: An Introduction to Ragamuffin Ethics* (St. Louis, MO: Enroute, 2017), pp. 795  
ISBN: 978-0-9988940-3-4**

Author Peter Redpath outlines a personalist Thomism, a philosophy for the acting person. He aims to correct what he sees as misconceptions of St. Thomas’s teachings in large part due to Cartesian philosophy and the West’s deficient metaphysics. In personalist Thomism, “metaphysics and ethics are more than subjects of study;” “they are chiefly habits of the human soul, habits *generated by an organizational and moral psychology*” (21). Redpath succeeds in showing reason’s centrality to discerning and living the moral life of virtuous habits. Given the book’s topic, only the second chapter deals with God, Divine Providence, and Divine Rule directly. Other chapters focus on human happiness, the emotions, habit, the law, justice, friendship, and pleasure. Redpath notes the importance of being motivated to possess “the real desire to become morally good, an excellent human being” (2). He describes how to get there and compares the morally-motivated person to less morally-sound individuals. The author addresses “disordered understandings of human reason that Enlightenment intellectuals mistakenly claimed to be the metaphysical foundations of philosophy, science, wisdom, and truth” (3). This leads to countless fruitful comparisons between the virtuous and the vicious person.

Who should read this book? Anyone seeking the truth of virtue ethics over a social science-fabricated reality. The entire argument, focusing on hierarchy, beauty, excellence, and inherent moral goodness, shares little with contemporary society's "values." The postscript, a critique of Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*, exemplifies this by rejecting the common claim that if something doesn't hurt others it cannot be wrong: "Being wrong about anything (morally or otherwise) always causes damage to the person who is wrong" (515). This includes cases involving no one but the actor of the deed. As shown throughout Redpath's entire book, Haidt's view promotes and strengthens bad habits. While the author of *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas* never attempts a full-fledged analysis of western philosophy, criticism throughout the book helps contrast personalist Thomism with modern thinking. Readers see how these varied perspectives all share the same troubled root. Redpath notes, for instance, how Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, and Mortimer Adler observed how "a lack of a proper understanding of the nature of philosophy and a separation between science and wisdom has been the chief cause of the contemporary civilizational decline of the West" (21). The individual's virtuous and wise actions and habits directly impact society and politics.

The author connects organizational psychology with moral psychology, highlighting how both feature whole-part relationships. When indifferent to the principles put forth by Aristotle and St. Thomas, the reason that orders these relationships "inclines to become anarchic" (22). Redpath links this back to the West's philosophical problems. The decline and anarchy we see around us stem from the fact that "centuries ago, Western civilization lost its understanding of the nature of philosophy as an organizational psychology" (22). By this he specifically means the lost "understanding of the natures of metaphysics, ethics, and science *as habits of leadership excellence of the human soul*" (22). Hierarchy plays a central role in Redpath's vision, starting from the "chief end" of creation, an end "that unites and harmonizes some multitude

into being parts of the whole” (41). Ultimately, for St. Thomas, “the genus called ‘creation’ is the generating principle of all other genera and species” (46). The author’s opposition of anarchy with hierarchy is the sort of alternative vision that Catholic culture can provide an increasingly anarchic, secular America.

Whole-part relationships and habit of soul fit into the hierarchical ordering of things. As is often the case in *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Redpath shows the natural extension of this truth to other domains. This includes hierarchies in the arts and sciences where, for example, medicine rules over pharmacy and war over the arms industry. There is much that is familiar to Thomists here: *ens* (the nature of being), the nature of the perfect, the role of form in generating things. These ideas express a coherent vision, such as with the following: “Forms cause diversity in things *by causing a hierarchy, order, of perfections and imperfections in receiving the act of existing: a diversity of perfection in having existence*. This initial division separates the created order into a limited hierarchy of qualitatively more or less perfect genera” (55). The coherence of this Thomistic hierarchy legitimizes this philosophy, as we see Thomistic thought’s applicability in a consistent manner across every discipline. This is a holistic vision.

Redpath fits his discussion of the nature of the soul, including the soul’s relationship with the body, into wider notions of Thomistic organizational psychology and the nature of hierarchy. Intellectual activities hold sway over appetitive ones: “The intellectual powers are prior to the sensitive powers. For this reason, the intellectual powers direct, command, the sense powers; and the sense powers are naturally inclined to follow these directions, commands” (89). Properly-ordered hierarchy is thus efficient, just, and essential to human flourishing.

Redpath shows that Aristotle and St. Thomas outline how moral virtue leads to the harmonious ordering of the human soul whereas moral vice leads to anarchy. This is just as true at the macro level, where society and politics likewise fall into anarchy depending on the

state of virtue of individuals. There are no victimless crimes because bad moral habits harm, if no one else, the individual committing them. But the harm doesn't stay there, as Redpath explains. The "morally vicious person" promotes the "culture of death" (450). We can therefore assume the existence of a "divine rule of government" (42) that is strongly related to self-rule. This holistic vision unites the person with politics in an intimate way that eclipses the understanding of our current political class.

Redpath delineates St. Thomas's teachings on psychology, starting from the point that humans do not desire evil as such, but "in relation to something actual, some perfection" (65). Given that *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas* is six-hundred pages long, Redpath is able to go into much greater detail on human nature than Sr. Mary Angelica Neenan does in her recent and excellent little book *The Nature of the Human Soul*. He notes the hierarchical nature of the proper ordering of the human person by referring to pre-fall Adam as taught by St. Thomas: "The principle of human nature existed within a condition of a threefold perfect harmony in which man's: 1) reason and will were perfectly subject to God; 2) emotions were subject, with no resistance on their part, to taking direction from commands of human reason; and 3) the human body was perfectly subject to the human soul" (65). Post-fall, the emotions and appetites rebelled against reason, which led to the latter's confusion. The Thomistic sense of the composite nature of the human person, where "the principle that causes something to exist cannot be identical with that thing's ability to act" (73), helps explain why post-fall man is marked by anarchy, disharmony, disequilibrium, and incomplete perception and use of reason.

Redpath's discussion on friendship provides many pragmatic psychological insights. A person's external relationships reflect the relationship with the self. Because right self-relationship depends on moral virtue, only the morally virtuous enjoy real friendship, Redpath argues, because only they have the inner equilibrium, harmony, and

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peace required for friendship with others. As elsewhere in the book, the holistic perspective together with consistency and common sense draw in the reader. The author never shies from truth-telling: “Never being able to achieve intellectual or appetitive satisfaction, evil men tend to become filled with remorse, regrets; and, because they lack the qualities of soul that make a person friend-worthy, they become increasingly unable to make real friends” (452). Vice influences every corner of our lives. It prevents sound relationships with others, which then increases disharmony at the political level. “For a political scientist,” Redpath concludes, “studying friendship is more crucial than studying justice” (421). His organizational model for discussing this helps readers make links between seemingly dissimilar issues such as friendship and politics.

The length of the book testifies to the author’s ambition in covering much ground in one study. It also reflects a certain level of wordiness, making this book less than ideal as an introduction to Thomistic thought. For that, Sr. Mary Angelica Neenan’s much pithier *The Nature of the Human Soul* (2017), at 103 pages of clarity, is better suited, especially for readers interested in St. Thomas’s teachings on moral psychology and the nature of the soul. Yet Redpath’s generous elaborations on practically every major issue here make his book worthwhile too. While Neenan’s readers end wanting something more, Redpath’s can simply take up *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas* again.