

Aquinas on the Meaning of Technical Competence

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To begin with what should be most obvious to us within the data of our human experience, through the habit, or the virtue, or the excellence of employing skills that are constitutive of the praxis of art (*ars*) or technique (*tekhnê*) as a functioning, operative habit which points to a certain “aptness”¹ or ability in us as human subjects (an “aptness” or ability which is to be understood as only a technical or a professional form of competence),² as human beings we act on our external world to refashion it in ways which properly suit us according possibly to an idea, a form, or a model that we have constructed or have put together within ourselves through the creativity of our imagining, our thinking, and our understanding.³ “Art works upon materials furnished by nature,”⁴ things which already exist to some extent, to give them a new added form, a meaning, or a perfection⁵ which otherwise they would not have, although according to a manner that is fit, normative, right, or just because it respects the form or the nature of the available materials that we happen to be working on. We try to co-operate with the any material that is possibly given to us (which exist at our disposal) with respect to its reality: how it exists with a meaning, an intelligibility, and inclinations that somehow already exist within it.⁶ A disposition of some kind always exists within these other, existing things (in technical terms, a disposition which would exist as an active potency or a disposition which would exist as a passive potency).

In terms of examples that can be cited in ways which point to the intelligibility of art or technique as a species of procedure or way of operating: a carpenter takes wood and, with tools, he or she fashions a piece of furniture that somebody else can possibly use in some way. A carpenter co-operates with the givens of physical nature to make something new in terms of some kind of physical or mechanical augmentation, and no meanings, forms, or inclinations which belong to the wood are violated or infringed although obviously, in the co-operation and in the input of a carpenter's labor and work, different causes combine and work together. Some are active and some are passive. But on the other hand however, as we move to other examples: when someone like a teacher or a physician co-operates with external nature to work with something which is other than him or herself, the co-operation which occurs occurs in a different or in a more sophisticated kind of way as, perhaps, a larger number of causes combine and work with each other, and as a given active, efficient cause promotes the activity of other active causes.⁷ Physical changes exist as a kind of subset or lower order since other kinds of changes can also emerge and exist and as we move from physical kinds of changes toward other kind of changes that would be bereft of any kind of physicality. Physicians prescribe medicines and therapies in order to help their patients: to encourage in them the better functioning of a given set of internal principles and causes which are already working in some way within a given person to restore his or her health and which are constitutive of a given person's health. Hence, amid and through

1*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 57, a. 4.

2*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 47, a. 4, ad 2.

3*Debated Questions* VIII, q. 1, a. 1, cited by *An Aquinas Reader*, ed. Mary T. Clark (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1972), p. 251; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 93, 4.

4*Sententia Libri De anima*, 2, 1, 218.

5*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 18, a. 3, ad 1.

6*On the Principles of Nature*, 2, 6-7; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 117, a. 1.

7*De Veritate*, q. 11, a. 1.

different kinds of operation and co-operation, it can be said that “art [or technique], in its work, imitates nature.”⁸ It copies; it follows; it works with nature: with that which already exists within other, external nature as an inner nature or principle which exists within these external things and which we try to bring toward some kind of fulfillment that, possibly, it would not otherwise have, or which it would only be able to reach and to attain with great difficulty if no assistance of any kind were to be possibly given to it.⁹

More explicitly thus: in this imitation of existing things, in the imitation which occurs by observing conditions which require a respectful form of attentiveness and degrees of creativity and dexterity in the application of any art or skill, a series of steps or procedures are used from without although, despite what differences distinguish steps and procedures from each other, an intelligible unity joins them all in a oneness which points to a distinct order of efficient, instrumental causality which assists and acts on the order of causality which is already constitutive of the being of a given thing or object that we should decide to work on.¹⁰ To go back to the example of a would be carpenter, the wood that is used enjoys, for instance, a degree of pliability which exists as one of its inner dispositions and by creatively working with this wood in some way, we can make things which more fully reveal or which more fully point to the goodness and the quality of the wood that we are using as our material point of departure. Our good use points more fully to that which exists as the inner form or nature of the existing wood. Simply put, in other words, “art imitates nature...according to nature’s own way of operating.”¹¹ The work that is done on something which is other supposes a degree of understanding which we must already have of it although, through the working and the industry which occurs, we should grow in how we are to think and know about the materials which we are using as our initial point of departure. A good farmer, as he or she works with his or her land, should come to know more about the land or the soil which the farmer is supposed to cultivate.

In its praxis or in the order of its execution, an art, skill, or technique has a nature which points to a distinctive form which exists as its proper method. In its own way, this method exists as a synthesizing act. It begins with a set of more simple elements and, by combining them into compounds of one kind or another, it effects a development which should respect the intelligibility of all the combined elements or all the natures or the ways of operating that are being acted upon and put together. Potencies partially in a condition of act are being reduced and put to a further or another condition of act. In referring to the intelligibility of things or the intelligibility of natures which somehow already exist, we necessarily refer to laws of nature which are denominative of the being of these same natures. To some extent always, our art or our techniques are patterned (they exist as an order of patterned acts) and, to some extent, they are limited or they are constrained by the forms or the order of intelligibility that is being acted upon: an order of intelligibility which exists as a prior specification of law and

⁸*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 117, a. 1. See also *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 21, a. 1, obj. 1: “Now things that are produced according to art and reason imitate those that are produced according to nature (*Phys.* ii, 8).”

⁹Servais-Theodore Pinckaers, “The Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas,” trans. Mary Thomas Noble, *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 26.

¹⁰*Sententia Libri Politicorum*, Prologue, 1-4.

¹¹Leo Vincent Serroul, “Sapientis est Ordinare”: An Interpretation of the *Pars Systematica* of Bernard Lonergan's *De Deo Trino* from the Viewpoint of Order, unpublished dissertation (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), p. 58.

meaning.¹² On the one hand, a given person who is ill or who is ignorant can possibly move toward a condition of health or knowledge on his or her own according to a manner that comes wholly from within the person's self and which has not rely on something or somebody who could be other. Persons can heal themselves or they can grow in their own understanding and knowledge through their own acts of inquiry and activity. Coming to a knowledge of things on our own is both more difficult and at times it is more rewarding than being led toward an understanding of some things by a given teacher.¹³ But, on the other hand however and at the same time too, if an acceleration in our healing or learning is at times required and if it is also desired and needed as a species of necessity (as a contingently existing necessity), the services of a physician or a teacher can be needed in a way which is indispensable. As is most obvious, for instance, with the relation which exists between a teacher and a pupil, a teacher leads a student toward understanding some subject by presenting clues or images in a way that will trigger an act of understanding within a student, an act of understanding which truly belongs to the student and not to the teacher. A teacher's pedagogy imitates the order of discovery as this exists as a normative form or structure within the cognition of any student, and so a student is led through a mode of procedure which the student would have had to work through by him or herself if he or she had been forced to work on his or her own. Greater degrees of skill in terms of professional competence and ability are required for procedures which must work with a larger number of other active causes and which must thus be more co-operative than employing skills which would try to inform or to impart or perhaps impose a form on something or someone who is other than ourselves.

Despite any differences which exist as we move from one art, technique, or craft to other arts, techniques, or crafts, in general, all art is defined as "the reasoned plan of things [that is] to be made,"¹⁴ or as "right reason [that is] applied to things [that are] to be made,"¹⁵ or as "a habit [that is] concerned with making (*facere*) [something] under the guidance of reason."¹⁶ Hence, in the production of anything that is made by an artist, craftsman, or technician, the understanding or the wisdom of an artist, a craftsman, or a technician, is to be compared with a like understanding or wisdom which allegedly best exists and which, in fact, superlatively exists in God as Maker and Creator who, as a divine artist or divine craftsman, is to be understood as the first cause or as the first principle of all things which subsequently emerge and exist.¹⁷ God only differs from us as makers to the extent and because his work is not to be understood as if it were imitative in some way although, on the other hand however, we can argue that, in making things which are external to God as God exists *per se*, the creating reflects something of the understanding and the intelligibility that already exists as God and which is unique only to God. "First cause" best speaks about God as Creator since any talk about a "first principle" suggests that a real distinction does not exist between the postulation of a given first principle of order and any elements or parts that could be ordered by the postulation of a given first principle. If we are to speak about inequalities and conditions of inequality, we best speak about causes and effects and not about principles and derivatives which would exist as an ordering of consequences and results.

In contrast with goods which exist internally within the subjectivity of a given agent, a good which is

12*Sententia Libri Politicorum*, Prologue, 1-3.

13*Summa Theologiae*, 3a, q. 9, a. 4, ad 1.

14*Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 1, 1, 34. See also *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, 2, 4, 282.

15*Sententia libri Ethicorum*, 1, 1, 8; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 68, a. 4, ad 1.

16*Sententia libri Ethicorum*, 6, 3, 1153; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 57, a. 3.

17*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 9, a. 1, ad 2.

to be brought into being through the artistic or the technical activity of an acting, active agent (though it initially exists as an intention within the thinking and desiring of this same agent) – this good exists as essentially an externally effected, created good¹⁸ where the first or the primary goal is not an agent’s growth or perfection but, instead, it is the growth or the perfection of something which an agent tries to make, produce, or encourage (the good of a work as *finis operis*) although, when we speak about an external good which an agent effects or devises on the basis of plans which exist within a given agent,¹⁹ we must admit too that the good of producing something which is other than ourselves is not without some effects and consequences which can point or which redound to the goodness or the perfection of ourselves as responsibly active agents. So much depends on what kind of good is to be effected or produced by a given agent and on what could be the conditions of its production. Is the intended good a species of material good or is it an immaterial or a spiritual kind of good? As a principle that we must always recall and remember: goodness in means needs to be matched with goodness in ends if our human agency is to exist as a truly good, noble, worthy thing (with the perfection that it should have; with a perfection that does not encourage or lead us toward some kind of self-destruction). The greater the materiality the means of production, the more likely it would seem to be the case that, as human subjects, we would undergo a fewer or a lesser significant number of changes. The changes would exist at a lower level. Much depends on how physical kinds of work are joined to labors, hopes, and desires which enjoy an introverted or a heightened form of existence which is more internal than external. The effecting of external goods can exist as more of a means than as an end since a regular actuation of internal goods supposes and requires a regular actuation of external, physical, material goods if our attention and inquiry is to be liberated in ways that can point to other orders of meaning and being that can possibly exist for us in the context of our human lives.

While, as human subjects, in producing external goods, we tend to operate from a limited perspective or for a limited purpose and with methods which, more or less, tend to be somewhat fixed and established,²⁰ at the same time however, it has to be admitted that our technological order of things possesses its own kind of unlimitedness which is to be explained by how our movements of hand and body can be coordinated with movements that belong to our acts of questioning and thinking as an infinite striving belongs to us in posing and asking new questions.²¹ Our practical acts of human understanding can function with a competence which is purely mechanical or factive;²² hence, in activities which are constitutive of that which exists, in general, as the order of our “productive [human] sciences.”²³ The emergence of differing relations between this or that art or technique points

18In *1 Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, d. 40, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1, cited by Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), pp. 269-270, n. 30; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 36, 3.

19*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 57, a. 5, ad 1; *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 12, 12, 2627; *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, 2, 4, 282; 1, 1, 2. See also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 66, 3. As Aquinas notes in the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 57, a. 5, ad 1, the goodness of an agent’s activity in the production of an external good lies in the goodness of an agent’s making and not in the prior goodness of an agent’s judging about what he or she might do *morally* in a given situation. Artistic judgment is to be distinguished from moral judgment and the making of any moral judgments.

20*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 21, a. 2, ad 2; q. 57, a. 4, ad 3; 2a2ae, q. 47, a. 2, ad 3.

21*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 76, a. 5, ad 4; q. 91, a. 3, ad 2.

22*Sententia libri Ethicorum*, 6, 2, 1135; *Sententia Libri Politicorum*, Prologue, 6.

23*Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 11, 7, 2252-2253.

to forms of ordering or reordering as, in time, some arts emerge as lesser activities with a lesser degree of importance while other emerge with a greater degree of importance.²⁴ A hierarchy eventually reveals itself to us (if it has not been noticed before) and, with time, change, and further developments and shifts, an order which exists as a constituent of our human society grows in size and complexity in a way which converts this complexity into a problem and difficulty that somehow must be thought about and so, in some way, addressed and solved. The arts and skills of very many persons increasingly require more skillful forms of co-ordination and co-operation and some means of achieving consensus and agreement if a social breakdown of some kind is to be averted. Hence, as a consequence, a new, desirable species of good emerges as the good of forms of political expertise, decision, and negotiation which become more urgently needed if we are to regulate the arts, skills, and activities of many persons and groups in a way which can join them all into a greater unity that would make for the greater good and the happiness of all. A growing proliferation of skills and crafts within our human order of things unavoidably creates problems which cannot be resolved on a purely mechanical or technical level. Something more is required if a man or woman cannot be good if he or she exists as only a clever, skillful worker who can produce and make different things. If we are to live a truly good and happy life, we must engage in other kinds of acts and deeds which would be constitutive of our being able to live a better, more happy life.²⁵ Technological changes necessitate or, in other words, they lead to changes in our practical acts of human reasoning which soon begin to transcend the limited kind of practical reasoning that had existed for us when our object had been limited to meeting needs that belong more to our bodies than needs which belong to our souls. If we are more than our bodies, if as human beings we cannot be equated with the being of our bodies, other kinds of good need to be known in a way which points to other orders of act that are constitutive of the being of these other goods.

²⁴*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 1, 1.

²⁵*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 57, a. 5 & ad 1.