

## The distant echo of Aristotle in bioethics today – and how to reduce the Noise

Corinna Delkeskamp-Hayes

**Abstract.** “The philosopher,” as Aquinas called Aristotle, owes his continued cultural impact to Christians’ appreciation of their pagan predecessors. This article applies David Bradshaw’s analysis of the reception of Aristotle in the Christian East and West to bioethics. It explores how the assimilation of Aristotle’s divine “*energia*” into the Pauline vision of a Divine-human synergy in the East informs St. Basil’s teaching about the Christian approach to medicine. It describes how the Western rendering of that term conceptually separated the divine transcendence from the created order. Deification by grace thus was replaced by moral orientation through a formally Christianized “natural law.” Some recent bioethical examples of such invocation confirm Bradshaw’s judgment that Aristotelian philosophy further alienated the West from noetic experience, thus secularizing its moral life.

In keeping philosophy theologically contextualized, Orthodoxy maintained an integrity that offers guidance even today. The Western separation of morality from the life of the Church, in contrast, eventually nourished calls for emancipation from revealed, and juridically enforced moral norms. The ensuing liberalization and pluralism have deprived the West of a societally shared vision of man’s “telos.” Today, the traditional context required to give content to moral reason is available only among believers, and for Christians only in Orthodoxy. For bioethics, the Fathers’ cautious reserve in “using Aristotle” proved more beneficial than the moral relativism that eventually resulted from Scholasticism’s unreserved embrace of philosophy, or its inability to reduce its “noise”.

**Keywords:** natural law, synergy, Christian philosophy, social consensus, Basil the Great

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**For quotation:** *Delkeskamp-Hayes C. The distant echo of Aristotle in bioethics today – and how to reduce the Noise. History of Medicine. 2015. Vol. 2. № 4. P. 431–441.*

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The Greek polis once provided the religious, economic, and social framework for Aristotle’s vision of man’s place in the cosmos, of his goal in life, and of the virtues through which that goal can be attained.

That polis is long gone. Yet some of the concepts that great philosopher developed, some of his moral insights, and some of his metaphysical intuitions can still be traced in contemporary ethical, and therefore also bio-ethical, studies. Even today, some scholars seek to re-affirm “the philosopher’s” lasting impact on the mindset of the West. They belong to a minority, to be sure, and are supported by a Roman Catholic (or, as I prefer to specify: Vatican-oriented) education system whose Christian profile is disintegrating. Nevertheless, the attempt to derive moral guidance from traditions that once shaped Western Christendom reflects a valid insight: The Enlightenment’s emancipatory project has failed:

The hope that societal flourishing and personal fulfillment for all can be secured by liberating all from the constraints imposed by an established religion has turned out to be vain. To be sure, the West still benefits from legal, economic, scientific and technological accomplishments which the scholastic secularization of the Middle Ages had initiated. But these accomplishments rested on the continued endorsement of traditional Christian moral norms. Morality, freed from concern about holiness, still can facilitate business. Today, however, even these normative remnants are eroding: Freedom, proclaimed as anomy, engenders, and cannot but celebrate, moral pluralism. Moral pluralism invites moral relativism. But relativism slowly weakens that secular normative consensus which is needed for sustaining the liberal ethos of human rights and human dignity. This erosion affects the basis needed for the continued legal, economic, scientific and technological success of the West.

Alasdair MacIntyre [1] is right: The virtues one needs for social flourishing grow only within

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Received: 20.11.15

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political communities. Invoking Aristotle's ethical wisdom, he dreams of reestablishing policies that merge Christian moral norms with socialist ideals. Those who share his dream invoke Aristotle's rational prestige in order to muster (at least sufficient voting) majority support for such policies. They proclaim "natural law" as a Christianized version of moral reason, a version developed by Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is through Aquinas that Aristotle's moral thought still influences bioethical discussions today. The first part of my essay therefore asks: 1. Which echoes of Aristotle's thought still resonate in Aquinas' theory of the natural law? And 2. Is the natural law helpful for securing a bioethical consensus?

As will turn out, the second question must be answered in the negative: In a robustly secular environment, discursive reasoning presents the only court of appeal outside of the use of force. But such reasoning is unable to provide a universally compelling rational basis, on which the desired moral consensus could be secured. Discursive reasoning is insufficient to explain why an Aristotelian-Thomistic ontology-cum-anthropology, or even an Aristotelian-Thomistic account of "reasonable action," should be more valid than, say, a utilitarian morality. Discursive reason is even unable to establish why one should try to be moral in the first place, let alone secure foundations which could establish the universal validity of any particular moral project.

The second part turns to the reception of Aristotle in the Christian East. Here no moral philosophy developed as an autonomous discipline, separated from theology's therapeutic guidance. Here Christianity's "moral mission" is not pursued in terms of a quest for rational validity. Here the distant echo of Aristotle in bioethics today raises two further questions: 3. How did the Orthodox reception of classical philosophy, in particular of Aristotle, differ from that in the West? And 4. How has that different reception affected Orthodox bioethics?

It will become clear that the robustly theological use, to which Eastern Christianity subjected Aristotelian concepts, maintained the integrity of the faith. Such use could therefore avoid the gradual self-secularization, into which the uncritical acceptance of philosophical guidance tempted the Christian West. Our exploration of the lasting impact of Aristotle on bioethics today

thus offers a suggestion: When confronting the (discursively irremediable) multiplicity of secular and non-secular approaches to bioethics, those who decide in favor of the Christian option can protect the integrity of their faith only if they block out the noise of philosophy, and especially of natural law theorizing.

### **Which echoes of Aristotle's thought still resonate in natural law theorizing today?**

In focusing on "echoes" rather than on "elements" of Aristotle's thought, this presentation is not about Aristotle. It does not ask whether and how Aquinas misunderstood, or distorted Aristotle by placing his theory into a larger theological context.<sup>1</sup> Nor is the issue Thomas' own rather sophisticated understanding of Aristotle. Instead, my subject is Aristotle's impact – via Aquinas – on contemporary bioethics, as affirmed by contemporary natural law theorists.

The core of that impact comes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN), the complete text of which had been translated in 1240 by Robert Grosseteste and been established as official textbook for theology students in Cologne by Albert the Great, Aquinas' teacher. The most important works by Aquinas, from which present day natural law theorists take their "Aristotelian" bearings are the *Summa theologiae* (ST), the *Commentary to the Nicomachean Ethics* (CNE), and the *Summa contra Gentiles* (SG). These "bearings" are provided by core Aristotelian ideas such as

– the division of studies into practical (dealing with ethics and politics) and theoretical (dealing with nature, mathematics and theology): "every intellectual activity is either practical or productive or speculative," (*Metaphysics* (Met.) VI 1025b);

– a virtue-based concept of law: The law rules life of and in the city. It is promulgated by a legislator charged with benefitting all: "all lawful things are just in one sense of the word, for what is lawful is decided by legislature, and the several decisions of the legislature we call rules of justice. Now all the various pronouncements of the law aim either at the common interest of all, or at the interest of a ruling class determined

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<sup>1</sup> For such criticisms see e.g. [2, 3].

either by excellence or in some other similar way; so that in one of its senses the term ‘just’ is applied to anything that produces and preserves the happiness, or the component parts of the happiness, of the political community” (EN 1129 b), and with making people better men and citizens (EN 1102a);

– the admission of laws that are valid for all: “By particular laws I mean those established by each people in reference to themselves, which again are divided into written and unwritten; by general laws I mean those based upon nature. In fact, there is a general idea of just and unjust in accordance with nature, as all men in a manner divine” (*Rhetoric* (Rhet.) 1373 b), or of a political justice that is valid for all: “Political Justice is of two kinds, one natural, the other conventional. A rule of justice is natural that has the same validity everywhere” (EN 1134 b 19);

– an vision of man as a social being who develops the fullness of his capacities through life in families, in communities, and as a political being in the city: “every city-state exists by nature, inasmuch as the first partnerships so exist; for the city-state is the end of the other partnerships” (*Politics* (Pol.) 1125b);

– an account of human flourishing: All human action aims at “the good” which consists in happiness achieved through the exercise of the virtues: “the Good of man is the active exercise of his soul’s faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue,” (EN 1098a). The highest virtue accords with man’s nature as intellectual and is directed towards the goal of wisdom in contemplation: “if happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be activity in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be the virtue of the best part of us...this activity is the activity of contemplation” (EN 1177a).

These ideas were, of course, modified by Aquinas, resulting in

– the idea<sup>2</sup> that “first principles of practical reasoning“ can be construed in analogy to Aristotle’s “first principles of theoretical reasoning, “with the primary principle of the latter transforming Aristotle’s statement of fact: “the Good is that at which all things aim” (EN 1094a) into an

imperative: “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.” (ST I-II Q 94.2);

– a concept of reason as the origin of the moral law, and the intellect as its addressee, so that the “natural light of reason” could be trusted with identifying that hierarchy of human goods which Aristotle also affirmed;

– the identification of Aristotle’s “law that is valid for all“ with the “eternal law,” through which God governs the world, so that by “partaking” in that eternal law human reason comprehends the “natural law“ which defines man’s moral obligations;

– the “promulgation” of that natural law by the order of the creation;

– the downgrading of Aristotle’s ‘happiness’ to a merely imperfect this-worldly foretaste of the perfect happiness promised for the soul’s afterlife, in which contemplation of Aristotle’s metaphysical prime mover is to disclose the essence of the Christian god.<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of such modifications, some bioethical implications of such a Thomistic-Aristotelian account can be formulated:

– Since man’s natural inclinations are accepted as part of the order of nature, and, therefore, as heuristic for the creator’s design, and since humans incline to preserve their life and health, both count as “goods.” Given the divine will manifested by that design, these goods impose an at least *prima facie* moral obligation on patients to accept the services offered by their physician and on the legislator to publicly fund any needed health care patients cannot provide by their own means.

– Since the destruction of a good is morally prohibited, the law must prohibit abortion, embryo-destructive research, genetic screening, physician-assisted suicide, and euthanasia.

– Since the created order of sexual complementarity is morally normative, sex-change therapies should be illegal while sexual re-orientation therapies for willing homosexuals should be publicly supported.

– Since the created order also identifies marriage, procreation, and the raising of one’s

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ST I-II Qu 94.2, adopted from Albert the Great, Aquinas’ teacher.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay, I am capitalizing “God“ when referring to Him as He is known by the Church. I use small letters (“god”) when referring to uses of the term which do not agree with that knowledge.

offspring as normative for humans, all pursuits which infringe on those “goods” (including sexual activity outside of a marriage between one man and one woman) are immoral and should be publicly denounced. Medical interventions which infringe on sexuality’s openness for procreation (i.e. contraception), interfere with the intimacy of the sexual act (i.e. *in vitro* fertilization, or IVF) or separate parenthood from child raising (i.e. gamete donation, surrogate motherhood) must be legally prohibited.

### **Is the natural law helpful for securing a bioethical consensus?**

Proponents of such a “natural law” claim that Aquinas works contain “a coherent and complete ethical theory,” “available to those who restrict themselves to a purely philosophical approach.” [4, p. 8]. They claim rational compellingness for that theory. That claim has met with many objections.

The first of these concern the need to assume some “progress” for the natural law. Modern social, or welfare states in the West rest on a normative framework of human rights. Such rights protect “public goods,” like “personal property” or “freedom of contract”. The public funding of health care rests on extensive re-distribution and regulation. It compromises the “public goods” of personal property and professional freedom (including the freedom of contract). In order to justify such compromising, “equal access to health care,” for patients without means must be stipulated as a new “public good” that trumps those other public goods. The Aristotelian-Thomistic natural law does not provide for such a superior “good”. In order to make room for new additions, that natural law must be separated from its dependence on god’s unchangeably eternal law. Natural law must be taken to be subject to a “progress” of development and specification.<sup>4</sup> Christian natural law theorists have of course very specific ideas about which changes count as

<sup>4</sup> Cf. [5, chap.3, #9]: “Our knowledge of moral laws is progressive in nature. The sense of duty and obligation was always present, but the explicit knowledge of the various norms of natural law grows with time. And certain of these norms, like the law of monogamy, were known rather late in the history of mankind, ...the knowledge of the particular precepts of natural law in all of their precise aspects and requirements will continue to grow until the end of human history”.

“progress” and which as perversion and distortion (just think of issues such as homosexuality, sex change operations, children’s rights to privacy, women’s procreative autonomy, or certain kinds of advance directives). Yet there is no rational basis on which to defend such a Christian interpretation against competing secular ones.

Another prominent criticism of the natural law takes up David Hume’s verdict against deriving moral “oughts” from a factual “is”: “the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason” [6, book III, chap. 1, #1]. The metaphysics and anthropology invoked for the natural law theory is here charged with resting on factual “is”-statements. Some proponents of the natural law<sup>5</sup> have therefore dropped such foundations. They present the moral obligations their “new natural law theory” affirms as implicit in the very notion of practical reason and its principle “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.”

Yet in order to support the policies Vaticanian moralists endorse (e.g. laws for providing publicly funded health care and for prohibiting what they consider immoral), there would have to be a general consensus about the meaning of the “good” that is to be done and the “evil” that must be avoided. Such a consensus exists at most on a very abstract, and practically useless level. To be sure, the life of a human being is normally recognized by all as “good”. The problems come however with the details, such as:

– who qualifies as “human being”? Natural law theorists, unlike their secular opponents, include unborn humans, right down to the fertilized egg. Those opponents may surely also recognize some “good” even in unborn human life, and agree that such life should not simply be wasted. But in the case of conflict, they place that good at a lower rank than, say, knowledge (realized by embryo-destructive research), optimal health for the products of IVF (realized by pre-implantation genetic screening), or the self-determination of pregnant women (realized through abortion).<sup>6</sup>

– how about non-normal conditions, as when the bearer of a human life claims his own life to be unbearable?

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. [7-8] in Germany and the United States.

<sup>6</sup> A good example for the difficulties besetting the status of the embryo is offered by [9].



Similar disagreements, obviously, beset the rankings Vaticanian natural law theorists impute to the “goods” of marriage, sexuality, procreation, and child care, in order to discredit medical services such as contraception, sexual enhancement outside of marriage, IVF, or gamete donation.

An alternative way of countering Hume’s critique is simply to deny that the metaphysical and anthropological foundations of the natural law represent mere “is-statements.” The “human nature,” in view of which moral obligations are derived, after all, refers to a Divine creation and design. The moral “oughts” grounded in that nature follow from an already teleologically earmarked “is.” But this escape route runs into the further problem of the particularity of all visions of human flourishing. One of these goes like this: The moral life imposes struggles, and costs. Aristotle’s vision of human perfection, as the focus of a city’s laws, had relied on some friendly gods ready to reward the pursuit of such perfection (EN 1179a), – at least among those free males who could afford the required life of leisure. As a Christian, Aquinas had to secure such reward for everyone. Recognizing that for most people perfect happiness is unavailable during their earthly life, he had to refer to their promised afterlife. But with such a solution, only those with robust Christian faith will conceivably find themselves motivated to bear the costs and struggles involved in the pursuit of Christian perfection, or in compliance with Christian moral norms. Confessing secularists will lack such motivation. They might well adjust any vision of “moral perfection” they still engage by reference to expected this-worldly rewards. Such people might even settle for downsizing the very project of morality (and bioethics) to considerations of prudent selfishness.

The resulting bio-ethical disagreements illustrate the moral impotence of discursive reasoning. As H.T. Engelhardt Jr. [10, pp. 18-19] remarks: “those in dispute argue from disparate perspectives and, therefore, they (1) argue past each other, (2) beg the question, (3) argue in a circle, or (4) engage in an infinite regress.” Already in the 3rd century, after all, the skeptical philosopher Agrippa observed that eight hundred previous years of philosophical analysis and argument had

proven inconclusive.”<sup>7</sup> Nor have the last two millennia-and-something of philosophical moralizing brought any agreement. As Engelhardt concludes: “There is no neutral secular moral perspective that can determine the moral facts of the matter that can establish through sound rational argument a conclusion regarding the necessary content of a canonical secular morality, bioethics, or account of the politically reasonable. Post-modernity triumphs.” Each allegedly rational or reasonable account of morality and bioethics rests on presuppositions which it cannot establish as universally valid. Secular moral philosophy takes its basic tenets ‘on faith’ just like religious morality does.

But then the validity claims of secular bioethics are intellectually no more respectable than those of religious bioethics. Aquinas had sought to render Christian moral norms more acceptable to those outside the faith by engaging the prestige of “the philosopher.” This project ever was and still is misplaced. Incorporating Aristotelian concepts into the Christian offer of moral guidance never made the sense Aquinas thought it would.

In the East, Christianity’s reception of classic Greek philosophy, and thus also of Aristotle, followed a very different path, to which the next section now turns.

#### **How did the Orthodox reception of Aristotle differ from that in the West?**

David Bradshaw’s study *Aristotle East and West* [11] distinguishes the two Christian cultures in terms of two understandings of the goal of a life of faith. One focuses on οὐσία, or the divine essence, which, as Blessed Augustine taught the West, the saints would contemplate in their eternal life. The other understanding focuses on ἐνέργεια, or those deifying energies, through which the transcendent God transforms His saints already during their earthly life: “For the East the highest form of communion with the divine is not primarily an intellectual act, but a sharing of life and activity” ([11], p. 265) More specifically, the focus on ἐνέργεια in the East is

<sup>7</sup> As Engelhardt quotes Agrippa’s views from the available sources: To resolve a moral dispute by sound rational argument, the disputants must already embrace common and true basic premises, as well as common and correct rules of evidence.

spelled out in terms of a “synergy” between God and His human creatures, which is altogether absent from Western theology: “If one were to summarize the differences between the Eastern and Western traditions in a single word, that word would be synergy ...as a form of communion with God” ([11], pp. 264f)

Aristotle, so Bradshaw shows, was the first to use ἐνέργεια as a philosophical term. Bradshaw discerns two meaning components which came to dominate in the Christian East and West respectively. In the East, the major focus was on “actuality as activity” (cf. *Met.* IX 1050a 22). This notion would later open up the possibility of referring to a shared activity, as implied in the sanctifying communion of God with man. “Knowing God” here is conceived primarily in terms of such lived communion. In the West, the major focus was on ἐνέργεια as denoting activities of the faculties of the soul, insofar as these offer a heuristic for understanding the soul’s οὐσία. When Christians later confessed their faith in a personal God, such activities came to play a role “as the natural accompaniment and manifestation of the inner personal being of the one who acts.” These activities were taken to reveal the divine essence, the object of the Augustinian contemplation. “Knowing God” here was conceived primarily in terms of such a purely theoretical vision which moreover, unlike what the Fathers of the Church maintained, was taken to reveal the Divine essence itself.

How can one explain this difference in the reception of one single Aristotelian concept? Christians in the East followed St. Paul’s emphasis on the Divine ἐνέργεια working their power in His saints (Eph. 1:19, 3:7, 20, 4:16, Phil. 3:21, Col. 1:29, 2:12). Here the terms συνεργός and συνεργέω were coined to indicate a (state or enactment of) shared activity between God and man: (1.Cor. 3:9, 2.Cor. 6:1, Phil. 2:13, 1.Thess. 3:2), working together for the kingdom of God (Col. 4:11) (see also St. John for synergy in view of the Divine Truth, 3.Jn. 1:8). To be sure, the concepts St. Paul used had been provided by philosophy. But they were employed with the goal of conveying Paul’s experience of the Divine grace, an experience which (in another letter) he also invokes when confessing “it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Western Christianity, on the other

hand, followed Augustine’s already developed preoccupation with theory, with cognitive understanding. After having cut ties with the Church in 1054, the scholastics would envisage Aristotle’s divine ἐνέργεια in the context of their project of conforming theology to philosophical assumptions.<sup>8</sup> Their concept of god had already internalized a dogma Blessed Augustine had adopted from Plato: the dogma of a divine unity conceived in terms of “simplicity.”

The Fathers of the Eastern Church, of course, also confessed God as One. But their focus was on accounting for their experience of God (or for the way in which that experience and the biblical witness about God’s Self-revelation to His human friends illuminate one another).<sup>9</sup> On both accounts (the experiential and the biblical one), they were willing to give theological weight to the diversity of forms which such Self-revelation can take. In order to render that diversity compatible with the unity of God they confessed, they stipulated a conceptual distinction. They attributed the experienced multiplicity to the Divine energies and reserved the unity for the Divine essence (or nature), – a solution that would be worked out in systematic form only centuries later by St. Gregory Palamas. As Bradshaw ([11], p. 166) quotes St. Basil of Caesarea’s *Letter 234*: “The ἐνέργεια are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His ἐνέργεια, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His ἐνέργεια come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.”

The Fathers thus used philosophical concepts as tools. They adjusted them to their theological needs. When pagan philosophy, untouched by the personal experience they sought to account for, offered concepts that would capture only one aspect of the reality they had come to know, the Fathers would twist an available concept

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<sup>8</sup> When they accepted Plotinians’ conception of esse as activity, so Bradshaw insists ([11], p. 267), they could still have made room for a Christianized version of creator-creature synergy. Yet, so one is led to conclude, they seem no longer to have known, or cared for, Paul’s witness to the synergetic experience of God’s deifying grace.

<sup>9</sup> A lovely example of such mutual illumination is presented in [12]: Here St. Gregory of Nazianzen is described as using the encounter of Moses with God on Mount Sinai in Exodus 33 “as a model for understanding his own experience”.

(i.e. energy) into supplementing what was needed in order to account for the fullness of that reality. Since pagan philosophy had remained ignorant about any complementarity between essence and energy, such complementarity had to be invented. The scholastics, on the other hand, used philosophical concepts as givens. Their major concern was to establish secular (even pagan) philosophical credentials for their theology, in order to protect that theology against philosophical criticism. This is why they never doubted the wisdom of taking up Aristotle's further notion that the prime mover's οὐσία is identical with his ἐνέργεια, – a notion which discouraged any attempt to keep both apart. Their conceptual framework had already been influenced by Blessed Augustine's very particular philosophical views about what humans can know about god during their earthly life, as distinguished from the vision enjoyed by the saints in eternity. Augustine had taught that god can be present to and known by his creatures on earth only *per similitudinem*, i.e. through his created works, or mediately.<sup>10</sup> God's philosophically stipulated intelligibility would disclose itself as knowledge *per essentiam*, i.e. as insight into his essence, in the 'beatific vision' of his resurrected saints.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the Fathers, the scholastics thus interpreted the biblical witness about the multiform ways in which the one God reveals Himself in terms of the difference between his philosophically required transcendent unity and the diversity marking his created world.

Of course, the scholastics also modified what they took over from pagan philosophy. But they did so to a much lesser extent. Aquinas modified the contemplative self-sufficiency of Aristotle's god by accounting for the other-directedness evinced by God's acts of creation and oversight ([11], p. 170). Yet here again he followed Augustine rather than the Cappadocian Fathers. In limiting what is knowable for earthly humans to the realm of created things, Aquinas

translated the ἐνέργεια manifest in creation by the Latin *operatio*. This translation again deepened the contrast. For the Fathers, "synergy" (as used by the Apostle Paul) means "participation in the Divine being" (even though, of course, not in the essence of that being, but in its energies). The scholastics aimed at something similar when trying to capture the point of Paul's concept in terms of a divine-human *co-operation*. Yet unlike *synergy*, the term *cooperation* strengthened their already strong prejudice, that such interaction had to remain limited to what happened within the created order ([11], p. 174). A really deifying contact, a true Divine-human communion, was thus excluded. As Bradshaw summarizes: The "presence of God within creatures, whether through participation in the divine perfections or through the special indwelling of grace, had to be understood in terms of efficient causality," thus imposing greater distance between god and his creatures ([11], p. 265f).

Even more significantly, the philosophical dogma of divine simplicity imposed the notion of a unity of god's being, willing and acting. It left no room for a Divine freedom of choice (cf. [11], p. 247f). If god does what he is, it becomes hard to conceive how he could have done otherwise. Such a god can no longer respond to humans' own free acceptance of God's offer of grace. "Union" between god and his saints reduces to the "union" constituted by the act of cognition. Such a cognitive focus, of course, fits with the philosophical preoccupation with divine intelligibility. Even more practically relevant, such a focus invites preoccupation with the 'lawlikeness' of god's "operations." This is how Christian moral guidance could be taken to derive from the result of such operations, the created order. This is how reason, as the faculty charged with understanding that order, could be considered competent to identify such guidance in the "natural law." Or, more properly, this is how the philosophically available Stoic teaching on "natural law" got (superficially) "Christianized": The "heart" in which Paul sees the Divine law inscribed (Rm. 2:16), no longer denotes the locus of receptivity for man's experience of the Divine will, as revealed within the communion of rightly directed worship, but as a metaphor for humans' independently competent "moral reason."

<sup>10</sup> Even human access to the divine economy of salvation is available only indirectly, i.e. as mere "created grace".

<sup>11</sup> More specifically, Bradshaw ([11], p. 265) admits that "Augustine's theory of illumination ... leaves open a certain sense in which the intellect can perceive God directly in this life without a created intermediary". But, as he points out, that theory remains obscure, and "Aquinas, under Aristotelian influence, quietly laid it aside."

Bradshaw relates these differences in Eastern and Western receptions of Aristotle to contingencies of culture, language and availability of intermediate sources. Yet some Latin Church Fathers, such as St. Irenaeus of Lyon, who had experienced theology in the East, remained faithful to Orthodoxy in spite of an inhospitable cultural context. The one crucial factor that explains the difference between Orthodox and heterodox theologies, so it seems to me, was the unity of spiritual experience that was maintained in the Tradition of the East, and that was first neglected and later broken in the West. An important step in this tragic rupture might have been the 11th century Gregorian reform, or rather Gregorian revolution that transformed the political place of the Christianity in the West (cf. [13]). With the new focus on a realm of the secular, as separated from a realm of the clerical, and as imposing its own, independently authoritative norms of validity on the discourse of the intellectual elite, the center of teaching theology moved from the monastery to the university. To put it in a nutshell: Theology no longer primarily referred to the way in which the saints of God speak “with” God in the context of an experienced presence of His Spirit. Instead, theology focused primarily on educated scholars speaking “about” a god. It is this objectifying distance which made it even conceivable that god’s Scriptural witness should be refashioned in philosophical terms. The focus was now on rational accountability, on harmonizing philosophy and religion. All of this bypassed the concern with holiness, for the sake of which all Fathers of the Church during the two millennia of her visible presence have carefully limited their engagement with philosophy.

That concern, so Bradshaw recognizes, influences not only the theology of the East, but also other areas of life. The final section traces that influence in Orthodox bioethics.

#### **How has the difference which the Orthodox reception of Aristotle makes for theology affected the *proprium* of Orthodox bioethics?**

Orthodoxy’s theologically focused reception of Aristotle connects man’s engagement with the bio-medical sciences and technologies, and thus also bioethics, not with a “moral mission” but with integrity of glorification, as the focus of the Divine-human synergy. A perfect example

of theological guidance for such engagement is offered by St. Basil of Caesarea’s answer to the question “Whether recourse to the medical art is in keeping with the practice of piety?” ([14], p. 330). The monastic setting of that work does not repudiate its universal salience. The Church never separated the vocation of monks from that of Christians in the world. Holiness can be attained inside the monastery and without, by clergy and by the non-ordained. Spiritual guidance for monks does not differ in principle, only circumstantially, from general Christian guidance. Nor does the limited scope and effectivity of medicine in St. Basil’s time diminish his continuing authority. An exhaustive application of his advice to contemporary problems of high-tech medical industry, research, and public health care is offered, for example, in [15]. To be sure, the major prohibitions (against terminating human life, or violating the integrity of marriage) are endorsed by natural law bioethics as well.<sup>12</sup> But the reasons informing these prohibitions differ, and this difference can explain certain disagreements about the degree to which such prohibitions must be imposed (e.g. in view of end of life decision making, contraception, or homologous IVF).

In the West, the separation between god and man, which the Latin translation of *ἐνέργεια* as *operatio* highlights, has relegated “religion” to a separate realm. Christians’ daily life, while surrounded by divine prohibitions and enjoinders, enjoys considerable “secular” autonomy. The “goods” addressed by natural law bioethics, such as human life, health, procreation, and marriage, are to be “pursued” with the help of medicine, and the “evil” of their violation “avoided.”<sup>13</sup> Bioethics

<sup>12</sup> Just like natural law bioethics, Orthodoxy opposes physician assisted suicide, euthanasia, abortion, embryo-destructive research, genetic screening, homosexual marriage heterologous insemination, gamete donation, surrogate motherhood, sex change operations and the ban on sexual re-orientation therapies for the willing.

<sup>13</sup> To be sure, some natural law theorists make a point of distinguishing the “basic” character of the good of human life from the “higher” level of the good of — say — the integrity of one’s conscience. That theory thus allows for the possibility that a person may sacrifice his life for the sake of such a higher good, as in the case of martyrdom. In bioethics one might think of the higher rank of the “good” of love for one’s neighbor which might motivate a person to have his dying process technologically compromised in order to donate a central organ. Even natural law theory can morally praise such a sacrifice and endorse legislation regulating its offer. But this happens very rarely.



is here primarily profession-oriented: It is mostly caretakers (and legislators) for whom guidance is offered. Orthodox bioethics, in contrast, has a pastoral focus that primarily regards the patient on his path to sanctification. Medicine is welcomed here not as an instrumental “good” in its own right. Instead, it is received as a gift that is meant to support the Divine project of restoring fallen humanity: “the medical art has been vouchsafed us by God, who directs our whole life, as a model for the cure of the soul, to guide us in the removal of what is superfluous and in the addition of what is lacking” ([14], p. 331). Patients should turn to medicine not because “health” is “good in itself”, but insofar as it sustains man’s ability to perform the good works for which he was made. Moreover, even down to its most trivial and routine details, healthcare must be contextualized by a regard for that larger project of care for the soul: Illness must be accepted as a Divine therapy, designed for re-orienting sinners towards holiness. Even the medical interventions themselves are to be welcomed as training for dispassion, and thus as a preparation for synergy with God. While medical achievements are to be welcomed in gratitude to their Divine source, the failure of a treatment is to recall Christ’s own differentiated response to the suffering he confronted: “He left some to struggle against their afflictions, rendering them more worthy of reward by trial, so it also is with us” ([14], p. 332). Each medical healing, finally, is to impress the memory of and challenge involved in the patient’s hope for resurrection.

Quite in contrast to natural law bioethics, Orthodox bioethics can encourage some patients to reject, or ask for the termination of, an available and recommended treatment. Such abstinence is commended wherever such treatment would involve an undue preoccupation with the body, not justified by its expected benefits for restoring the more important, and ultimately synergetic, care for the soul: “Whatever requires an undue amount of thought or trouble or involves a large expenditure of effort and causes our whole life to revolve, as it were, around solicitude for the flesh must be avoided by Christians” (loc. cit.). Moreover, an illness may present a Divine correction for some un-repentant sin. In such a case, patients are encouraged to abstain from medical help altogether, placing their whole trust in God: “Illness is often a punishment for sin

imposed for our conversion; ... we who belong to this class ... should bear in silence and without recourse to medicine all the afflictions ... We should, moreover, give proof of our amendment by bringing forth fruits worthy of penance” ([14], pp. 334f).

This robustly synergetic framework makes a difference, especially for the challenges presented by medicine today. Take reproduction: Natural law theorists affirm “marriage” as a “good” which disqualifies any action that compromises its integrity as “not good” and “to be avoided”, i.e. illicit. Orthodox bioethics places some forms of such compromising in a horizon of *oikonomia*. Even though children should (generally) be welcomed, sometimes illness, poverty, unemployment or psychic stress would place a mother at risk of despair, were she to endure another pregnancy. Not all husbands can maintain a needed abstinence without falling for temptation. In such cases, a couple’s pursuit of holiness may be supported (rather than hindered) by contraception. Likewise, natural law theorists are unconditionally opposed to IVF, because it compromises the integrity of the marriage act. Orthodox bioethics in addition recognizes the risk that some couples might not be spiritually strong enough to cope with persistent infertility. If their ability to grow in love cannot be hoped to develop without a child of their own, and if no destruction of human life was involved (because only one of the wife’s eggs is fertilized with sperm from her husband), technological support might be allowed in rare exceptions. Or take end of life decision making: Sometimes artificial nutrition and hydration is maintained for comatose patients with minimal probability of recovery, or for those declared “brain dead.” Unlike natural law bioethics, the pastoral focus of Orthodox bioethics calls for an evaluation of spiritual risks which such interventions may present for patients, their families, and for professional caretakers. The focus here, unlike in natural law bioethics, is on making sure that the presumed “good” of biological life is not idolized, and on cooperating with the Divine will “that all be saved”.

Orthodox bioethics rests on a presupposition which St. Basil did not need to address, given his monastic audience: The role of spiritual guidance. As Engelhardt [15] emphasizes, bioethical decisions about whether or not to accept, request,

or continue available services revolve around the spiritual state of the patient and those around him. Fallen humans are not usually qualified to assess such states. This is why bioethical decision making is not, as with natural law theory, primarily a matter of academic discussion and professional expertise. Instead, it calls for support by a spiritual father who is qualified to offer guidance. Such fathers draw on a capacity of discernment, which their own grace-sustained synergy with God secures. This is why the “basic first practical principle” of Orthodox bioethics, framed with the help of concepts from Aristotle, but in a spirit of faithfulness to such synergy, is: “find a spiritual father”.

#### **Conclusion: On how to reduce the noise**

In the West, the medical-industrial complex has come to replace the churches: Relief for suffering is found in hospitals, while the cathedrals offer cultural event-locations for those who are well. The dying no longer focus on holy unction but on expert palliative care. Bioethics expertise, while not directly lucrative, is a flourishing business. Available funding promotes its integration into “natural law:” Despite the erosion of moral compliance among believers, Vatican-oriented universities, private foundations, generous sponsors, publishers and political lobbying agencies all support the cause of a rationalized and legalized Christianity. Strengthened by the promise of money and status, natural law bioethics will not soon shut down.

For bioethicists who seek guidance from the Church and her holy Tradition, as resonating with holy teachings from all ages, the babble of natural law theorizing is noise. One must block

out, or at least tune down, the distractions and distortions which the quest for union with pagan Athens amplifies, even today. Once the legion of secular bioethical approaches is recognized as no more reasonable than the legion of religious approaches, even of Christian bioethical approaches, considerations of quality become salient. They concern issues of internal coherence and cultural resilience. The bioethics of a Christianity that sought to harness “the philosopher’s” prestige to a “moral mission” that covets political power has turned out to be self-defeating. By investing in reason, the Western faith became vulnerable to criticism in the name of reason. By seeking to enforce a legalized compliance, Vaticanian Christianity engendered internal protest, conflict, even warfare. All of this paved the way for the new secular gospel of an Enlightenment-shaped rationality, advertised as offering the added advantage of tolerance and peacefulness in the face of moral and bioethical diversity, and a charity that integrates health care into social engineering.

The bioethical orientation offered by Orthodoxy, in contrast, has remained unchanged. Its engagement with a pagan culture remains carefully channeled, the signals such luminaries as Aristotle are allowed to send remain muffled. (One might think here, e.g., of St. Basil’s reception of Aristotelian science in the *Hexaemeron*.) By abstaining from any misguided attempt at harmonizing the Divine gift of faith with fallen humans’ capacity to reason, Christianity’s unique “selling point” of a Divine-human deifying synergy was preserved. It is the “energy” recalled in this project which retains a lasting, and appropriately distant, echo from Aristotle.

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