



Aquinas on Slavery: An Aristotelian Puzzle

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The present article deals with the Aristotelic doctrine of natural servitude, and the Thomistic comment on the same, as well as the slight yet important difference that emerges from the confrontation of Aristotle's doctrine with Thomas's own. At first glance they are one and the same, one of the main objectives of this paper is to fully express the differences; a task not only important for the sake of both authors, but for the important role that such a study plays in a democratic and liberal society as today's. The difficulties that Thomas finds in the Aristotelic doctrine of servitude make us ponder upon whether we have or have not, as a society, overlooked their importance.

Introduction

Among Aristotle's doctrines the theory of natural servitude, exposed in the first book of the *Politics*, is particularly controversial. This doctrine – a true cornerstone of scandal in a democratic society – has relevance for the following motives, among others:

- 1) It constitutes one of the most important theoretic attempts to fundament a natural inequality of men. In times where the rejuvenated liberalism – or simply renamed – has been proclaimed triumphant in the struggle of utopias, the old Aristotelic doctrine sets a few problems to the anthropological assumptions made by the liberalism. In sum, it reminds us of the existence of natural capacities that constitute a handicap in the search of self interest.
- 2) From the historic point of view, the theory of natural slavery played an important role in the so called Indian matter. As it is known the arguments in favor of the conquest and domain of the native Americans had a clear Aristotelic background. The most significant landmark in this matter was the meeting of Valladolid, where Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda confronted Bartolomé de las Casas with Aristotelic arguments. A classic

study of these confrontations and arguments is the well known book by Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians*.

Now that the motives have been exposed, the justification to include this paper in a Thomistic Congress becomes easier. These motives are more than enough to justify the importance of the topic.

I chose to write about Thomas Aquinas to underline his importance as a figure of the Scholastic; his reputation as a Christian commentator of Aristotle is indisputable.

Aquinas had a fundamental role in the assimilation of some of Aristotle's works in Western Europe. When some of the Aristotelic works began to appear in Christian Europe, unknown until that moment, a movement against this Philosopher arose since his introduction by the Arabs. It must be taken into consideration that the Fathers of the Church – especially Saint Augustine – had drunk the waters of Neo-Platonism and, therefore, Aristotle was – to a certain degree – a stranger to the ruling Christian culture. The achievement made by Aquinas was to discover the textual Aristotle – free of Arabic interpretations – and the consequent insertion in the Scholastic structure.

The purpose of this paper is double:

- a) To point out the existing differences between Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas on the topic of slavery.
- b) To explain the limits that Aquinas finds in the Aristotelic doctrine.

To do so, I will concentrate on Thomas Aquinas' commentary to the *Politics*. I center on this text for it is the most extended *locus* on the topic. Other references made to the *Corpus thomisticum* are merely incidental.

However, the approach will not be easy, due mainly to the lack of clarity on Aquinas' behalf to distinguish when he is or is not critical of the authors he comments, especially when they are an authority. This deference or comprehension must be understood in the context of the medieval tradition of *expositio*. To expose – or to comment in the Thomistic sense – is to explain a particular text in the light of the text itself and its author. To expose is not to criticize and a minimum of interpretation is called for. To expose is to make explicit and, in some cases, to do so considering the frame that the *Opera omnia* of the commented author provides. Consequently, it is difficult to distinguish those theses assumed by Aquinas from those that are not. It is thus convenient to make a reference to the strictly Aristotelic thesis on slavery.

Aristotle's texts

Aristotle makes his way in the dissertation starting from the existence of relations between masters and slaves in the household, in a domestic environment. Meaning, “a complete household consist of slaves and freemen” (*Aristotle, Politics*, I, 2, 1253b4).¹

The departure point is the *factum* of slavery. Aristotle simply applies the method explained in his *Ethics* (to consider, first, the fact). Regarding such event, Aristotle exposes two opposite opinions: that of those who consider the despotic lordship natural and that of those who consider that slavery lacks a natural fundament.

Aristotle will try to reconcile both opinions by distinguishing “natural slavery” from “conventional slavery”. Meaning that there are legal slaves who ought to be free, and legally free slaves who should be, by nature, slaves. Either way, Aristotle accepts the existence of men whose natural disposition is that of a slave.

A slave (*doulos*) is:

he who is by nature not his own but another's man, is by nature a slave; and he may be said to be another's man who, being a slave, is also a possession. And a possession may be defined as an instrument of action, separable from the possessor.
(*Politics*, I, 2, 1254a 15 ff.)

And the he adds:

But is there any one thus intended by nature to be a slave, and for whom such a condition is an expedient and right, or rather is not all slavery a violation of nature? There is no difficulty in answering this question, on grounds both of reason and of fact. For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.
(*Politics*, I, 2, 1254a 17 ff.)

Aristotle tries to prove the existence of persons born to either rule or serve in two ways:

1) With the argument:

¹ Translated by B. Jowett. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Ptinceton University Press, 1991.

For in all things which form a composite whole and which are made up of parts, whether continuous or discrete, a distinction between the ruling and the subject element comes to light. Such a duality exists in living creatures, originating from nature as a whole.

(*Politics*, I, 2, 1254a 29 ff.)

- 2) Enunciating a series of examples from which he can make an analogical induction:
 - a) The domain of the soul over the body in the living being.
 - b) The relationship between man and domestic animals.
 - c) The relationship between male and female.

In the examples listed – according to Aristotle – the best for the inferior is the subordination to the superior, for such a relationship is natural. Thus, within the multiple relations of men, there must be a similar relationship, some are born to rule and others to obey. For both kinds of men the best is to rely on their natural disposition.

However, in spite of the clarity with which the Stagirite exposes his theory, he is aware of the pragmatic difficulty to determine who is by nature a slave. To solve such difficulty, Aristotle proposes *prima facie* a rather large criterion which he will explore later on:

Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (...), the lower sort are by nature slaves, (...). For he who can be, and therefore is, another's, and he who participates in reason enough apprehend, but not to have...

(*Politics*, I, 2, 1254b 15 ff.)

Still, the problem will be to determine who is more like an animal rather than a man and who uses the mind in such a rudimentary way that he is not likely to rule, but to obey.

To define the degree of rationality Aristotle discards the following:

- a) The criterion of body, for he recognizes that sometimes a slave has the same body as a man.
- b) The criterion of soul, for the beauty (quality) of the soul is hardly visible.
- c) The criterion of the conqueror, for even the most rational can be defeated by the strongest.
- d) The criterion of the cradle (birth), since superior parents can give birth to inferior sons.

In spite of the difficulties to determine who is a slave and who is not, Aristotle seems willing to accept the convenience of slavery:

We see then that there is some foundation for this difference of opinion, and that all are not either slaves by nature or freemen by nature, and also that there is in some cases a marked distinction between the two classes...

(*Politics*, I, 2, 1255b 5 ff.)

Unfortunately Aristotle fails to tell us how he distinguished those *well defined* cases of natural servitude.

Saint Thomas' interpretation

First, an observation of a hermeneutic nature, elementary perhaps, but still relevant: the Greek *doulos*, the Roman *servus* and the Medieval *servus* do not have the same meaning for the simple reason that the Aristotelic *doulos* is contextualized in a pro-slavery society and the Thomistic *servus* in a feudal society. We must not forget that feudal servitude is not equivalent to Greek slavery, since when Moerbeke translated for Saint Thomas the term *doulos* for *servus*, he was making a literal translation without considering the social context.

In fact, what kind of *servi* knew Thomas? The feudal *servi*, especially during the decadency of the feudal regime, already previewed a change in the socioeconomic structure. Thomas Aquinas would hardly have a complete comprehension of what the Greek slavery meant.

In his study – as always – Aquinas makes no judgment on the Stagirite; he simply exposes and systemizes. Evidently a certain sympathy towards Aristotle can be observed, and may lead us to affirm that Saint Thomas does assume, at least partially, the Aristotelic doctrine. We infer this sympathy from the lack of open criticism, for Thomas does not generally hesitate to be disagreeable when he needs to (i.e. the Arab authors).

Still, the Thomist interpretation of the Stagirite is “soft” enough to escape from radical slavery; as to what Thomas' doctrine concerns, it is preferable to speak of a natural servitude rather than of a natural slavery.

Aquinas considers that servitude is just, for there are naturally men capable of ordering and men capable of complying to these orders:

“Propter eminentiam rationis in quibusdam, et defectum in aliis isti sunt naturaliter domini aliorum, secundum quod etiam Salomon dicit (Prov. XI, 29), quod ‘*quid stultus est, serviet sapienti*’”

(*In octo libros Politicorum Aristotelis expositio*, I, lec. 3)

Although Aquinas thinks that Aristotle does indeed demonstrate the existence of natural servitude, he does not consider such a conclusion conditioned:

Postquam Philosophus ostendit, quod aliqui naturaliter sunt servi quibus expedit servire et iustum est, hic ostendit, quod etiam contraria opinio est secundum aliquam partem vera.

(Aquino, *In Pol.*, I, 4, 43)

The way in which Thomas variegates the justice within servitude is rather clever, to understand it fully it is necessary to comprehend a few metaphysical terms. If not, we would incur to think that Thomas simply glosses over this particular passage of the *Politics*:

Dicitur enim iustum simpliciter quod est iustum secundum suam naturam: iustum autem secundum quid quod refertur ad commoditatem humanam, quam lex intendit, quia propter utilitatem hominum omnes leges positae sunt.

Quia igitur hoc non est iustum secundum naturam quod quicumque ab hostibus vincuntur sint servi, cum plerumque contingat sapientes ab insipientibus superari, dicit hoc non esse simpliciter iustum; est tamen ad commodum humanae vitae.

(Aquino, *In Pol.*, I, 4, 47)

Thomas considers servitude something just, yet he distinguishes two kind of justice: justice *simpliciter* and justice *secundum quid*. Servitude is not just *simpliciter*, since all men are equal by essence, even more since all men have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Human nature is not predicable equivocally for every individual. Servant are as humans as their masters. Every man is truly a human person and, subsequently, is an individual substance of rational nature with an eternal destiny that is loved personally by the Creator. Attending to human nature considered in itself, all men are equal and, because of that, there is no preeminence of one over the other. The master as participant of the human nature has no domain over the servant. Servant and lord are essentially men.

Servitude is just *secundum quid*, under a particular scope. “Dicitur iustum simpliciter quod est iustum secundum suam naturam: iustum autem secundum quid quod refertur ad commoditatem humanam”.

This idea is complemented in *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 57, 3, ad. 2:

Ad secundum dicendum quod hunc hominem esse servum, absolute considerando, magis quam alium, non habet rationem naturalem: sed solum secundum aliquam utilitatem consequentem, in quantum utile est huic quod regatur a sapientiori, et illi quod ab hoc iuветur, ut dicitur in "*Politica*". Et ideo servitus pertinens ad ius gentium est naturalis secundo modo, sed non primo.

In other words, servitude is legit by its consequences. The relationship between servant and lord is just only and only if it implies retribution, a wellbeing for both of the parts that constitute the relation. "Human comfort" is the fundament of this relationship.

"Human comfort" does not refer to the lord, for whom having a servant is certainly a commodity. "Human comfort" refers solely to the servant. Just servitude implies comfort for the servant, otherwise the relationship is unfair.

The definition of "human comfort" constitutes a problem. Aquinas is not explicit enough about the definition, however, it is certainly not a comfort constituted on materiality. By "comfort" Aquinas understands the group of material commodities, as well as cultural and spiritual, that allow men to reach their final end, namely God.

To accuse Aquinas' doctrine of being "angelical" would not be entirely correct. Firstly, the context where Aquinas develops is Christian. Subsequently, men have a spiritual dimension, and human plenitude can only be achieved within the same. When Thomas points out that authority exists only to make it possible for men to reach God freely and willingly, he is being consistent with his anthropology.

On the other hand, Aquinas is conscious of the material needs that man has. In fact, Thomas even affirms that virtue is easier to achieve when there is a minimum of satisfied needs. Nothing farther than a justification of any grotesque vision that would imply the justification of an unfair practice: "endure the injustices of your master on earth, for you, servant, will be rewarded in heaven".

The key aspect of the doctrine is the conception of rationality that Aristotle and Thomas have. For both, rationality is multiform, whether it is that of a carpenter, physician, philosopher or politician. However, these distinct types of rationality do not have the same function. The rationality of the carpenter is ordered to the production of chairs, yet not to cure any sickness; the mind of the philosopher will do to prove arguments, not to the ruling of people.

In other words, if human nature predicates equivocally for all the members of its species, it is also true that nature's predication has a certain analogical character. Each man actualizes human nature in a different way: there are robust and weak men, geniuses and simpletons, theorists and pragmatists. If there are men more apt to certain practical activities rather than theoretical ones, the logical conclusion is that those who are theorists refrain from doing the work of the pragmatists, and vice versa. The platonic input – received through Aristotle – is patent (we must remember the structure and dynamic of the ideal republic). The comfort of a servant is originated by the ruling of a proper master, the most apt to rule. The servant-lord relation is complementary. The master possesses virtues that the servant has only to a certain degree. The main difference between master and servant resides in their own particular virtues, for virtues are habits, accidents of quality. The idea is certainly paternalistic.

It must be taken into consideration that while for Aristotle the *doulos* has only the rational ability to comprehend his master's orders, for Saint Thomas the servant has full rational capabilities, though not the same type of rationality as his master.

However, it must be reminded that both Aristotle and Aquinas speak about two kinds of virtues: natural and acquired ones.

Acquired virtues are those habits subsequent to the repetition of any act, moral or intellectual, according to the perfection of will and intellect. Natural virtues are somewhat ambiguous. They are a special disposition of the particular nature through which it is "easier" for a particular man, for example, to be serene or orderly.

The best thing for a *servus* is to obey his master. Who is this master? Any man with preeminent wisdom that can only be achieved with personal effort and a certain natural disposition. In this sense it is just and natural that the wise rules over the *servant*. This is, however, justice *secundum quid*, and for this it cannot be considered a substantial inequality but merely incidental.

We find it convenient to warn that the Thomist notion of wisdom is more complicated than the Aristotelic one. For Aristotle such a virtue is fundamentally theoretical, for Thomas this notion can be found within the veteran-testamentary tradition. The *Sapientia ordis* calls as much for prudence as for a rectitude of the heart. In other words, wisdom is prudence and justice in a sublime degree. Being so, should wise men rule, the benefit of the servants ought to be even greater than if it were the servants who ruled themselves.

So far we appear to encounter an Aquinas who justifies *servitudo*, however, Aquinas – following in the footsteps of Aristotle – finds great difficulties in the practical application of the theory and ends up discarding it.

There are four main great difficulties. The first two can be found explicitly in the *Politics*. The third one is explained by Saint Thomas. The fourth and last is Aquinas' original.

- 1) Sometimes the body of a slave has a free soul, and vice versa.
- 2) The beauty of the soul cannot be easily detected.
- 3) Nature does not operate with bare necessity, but with a relative one (*ut in pluribus*). Because of that, healthy and moral parents can spawn evil and weak sons. This difficulty discards any racist or classicist connotation in the notion of *servitudo*.
- 4) Education and costumes play a fundamental role in the formation of habits:

Contingit autem quod filii diversificantur a parentibus in bonitate vel malitia non solum propter dispositionem naturalem corporis sed etiam propter rationem quae non ex necessitate sequitur naturalem inclinationem: unde contingit quod homines qui sunt similes parentibus in dispositione naturali, propter aliam instructionem et consuetudinem sunt in moribus dissimiles.

(Aquino, *InPol.*, I, 4, 52)

These difficulties make it almost impossible to point out who is a servant by natural disposition. Even more, *servitudo* is not by itself a definitive state, the fact that someone lacks a certain natural disposition does not mean that he cannot afford to reach the corresponding virtues by his own efforts. It simply implies that this particular person, lacking the natural disposition, will have to work harder and longer. Everyone needs all virtues to their own perfection; some, however, according to their function and natural disposition, need a few more virtues than others.

Conclusions

- 1) Apparently Aristotle and Saint Thomas speak of servitude in the same way, but Aquinas discards Aristotle's doctrine to the point of making instead of a doctrine of slavery, a doctrine of the incidental inequality of men. Men are unequal because of their education, costumes, environment and their own natural dispositions, as well as the exercise of freedom. The combination of these variables explains why some men rule over others.

- 2) Consequently, Saint Thomas sees little utility or practical applications in the existence of natural virtues. Aquinas recognizes the difficulties implied in the detection of natural dispositions, and even more, education seems to play an ever important role in the determination of a person; the environment can certainly modify the natural dispositions of a child. Should a child who was born with a “natural gift to command” be raised in an environment that inhibits his abilities, he will lose them. And vice versa, a youngster with little intellectual aptitude could grow into a great intellectual should he be fed properly, raised among cultivated men, study at Paris University and be taught by Albert Magnus. It is in this point where Saint Thomas distances himself from Aristotle. Apparently, the Stagirite’s naturalism did not allow Thomas to move freely enough as his own notion of freedom did.
- 3) In Thomas’ interpretation of the Aristotelic doctrine a tendency to explain it in order to fundament authority can be observed. Domain is natural only if society – as a whole of order – requires a dominant principle. The master is this dominant principle. This justification would seem close to contractualism, mainly because the fundament of authority is not human nature *in se ipsam* considered, but in terms of its consequence. As men need others by nature (there is no contractualism in this point), the organization which emerges from such group requires dominant elements. The justification for such elements, the masters, is nothing but their utility.
- 4) Only wise men are capable of intellectual and moral ordering to the doing of good, and this makes it their moral duty to rule. However, because of the difficulties to determine who is wise – mainly because of difficulty number four – Thomas makes, prudently, no political proposal parting from the theory of natural servitude.
- 5) The notion of wisdom is key to understanding the difference between Aquinas and Aristotle. The Christian context where Aquinas develops must not be overlooked. In Christianity wisdom is a synthetic virtue with moral connotations. King David was a wise king not so much because of his extended domains over Israel, but mainly because he ruled with justice towards his people. This kind of wisdom is not strictly intellectual but a *modus vivendi*. The Christian who is wise sees reality *sub specie aeternitatis*, and while ruling he is conscious – he must be – that he is in debt with God.
- 6) From society’s point of view, both doctrines are distinct. There is great difference between Greek slavery and Feudal *servitudo*. The feudal *servus* is not owned by his lord. Greek slaves were. The *servus* certainly lacked liberties like free transit or willingly contracting himself to another feud, just like a basketball player cannot willingly be contracted by another team, being obligated by his previous contract. It is a good analogy, it

underlines the contractual spirit of feudal servitude. The *servus* has, as well as obligations, certain liberties. There is no point of comparison with Greek slavery.

- 7) Finally, we must point out that this is perhaps the weakest passage of Thomas' philosophy. Aquinas never seemed to be completely confident with it, and hoped to work on it at a later stage.² It cannot be overlooked that his other political text – *De regimine principum* – was never completed.

² As Professor Ignasi Saranyana made me notice while discussing the present communication.