

Feminist Thomist Reception: How does Aquinas's Theological Anthropology Intersect with Modern Feminist Theological Conceptions of the Self Relating to the Hierarchy of Gender?

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The history of the subjugation of women often finds its roots within one of the creation accounts in the book of Genesis in the Bible, where God creates man and decides that he should not live in the Garden of Eden by himself, so God puts the man into a deep sleep and forms the woman from his ribs. This narrative is one of the principal arguments used for views that subjugate women and argue for their inferiority. The interpretation of this narrative has been a consistent stumbling block for most of history as it is used to assert the lesser place of women within Christian creation traditions.

In recent times, we strive for the equality and affirmation of women, and it is within this new horizon that feminist thought arrives on the scene. The work to be done by feminist reconstructionists is infinite, given the history of subjugating women as inferior in nature, intellect, capabilities, and virtue, to name a few. As our context evolves and we begin to address the history of inequality and degradation from men's relations with women, we see how much of our framework still bears the fragments of this reality. Hence, misogyny throughout historical writings must be understood thoroughly to correct consciously the implicit and sometimes explicit notions of female degradation. This contemporary evaluation of thought, and reconstruction where needed, is a requirement for any responsible scholar today. Only through an informed and careful

analysis of those texts can we ensure that we do not fall into the same entrapments of misogyny.

It is often easy to recognize the misogyny in the writings of Aquinas; however, the fact that we still study his works means this conscious reading is a new responsibility that must be taken on to acknowledge views and comments contrary to our current affirmation of equality. I am not suggesting that we rid ourselves of Aquinas's work. On the contrary, I would argue that if we could only study thinkers who never had harmful or outright wrong conceptions of reality and human nature, we would not have anyone to study. However, I argue that we cannot take Aquinas's teaching as it stands, and thoughtful interpretation must commence in order to mitigate the threats within Aquinas's writings that undermine the equal personhood of women.

I will defend my thesis that Aquinas's philosophical/theological anthropology, via his doctrine of the common good and hierarchy within creation, is threatened by his views regarding the inferiority of women. This is especially due to modern and scientific advances and, more importantly, because of his own assertions as they relate to the common good. His principle of the inherent common good in all creation is met with internal conflict and cannot stand true when the supposed inferiorities of women are maintained. Therefore, one must critique Aquinas with his own system. I argue that through careful analysis and reconstruction, we can amend Aquinas's problematic views of women to the modern egalitarian individual. In order to defend my thesis, this work will consist of three movements. First, I will offer an exposition of Aquinas's anthropology of the common good in creation, paying close attention to the coherence of his arguments, especially as it relates to the common good in humanity. Second, I will illustrate instances of Aquinas's hierarchical views regarding the nature of personhood as it relates to gender and why men are the arbiters of women in his model. Finally, I will focus on feminist reception and reconstruction from Aquinas' thought, seeking to remedy the tension within his views regarding women and his judged missteps while preserving the philosophical system in his writings.

I. Aquinas's Anthropology of the Common Good

Aquinas's anthropology is one of the more challenging aspects of his theological writings to understand for current scholars, especially feminist scholars. One must ask the question when evaluating his anthropology: what should be kept relative to feminist philosophy and theology; what must be disposed of, and why? Discussing the common good and its place within lawful society, Aquinas states, "Actions are indeed concerned with particular matters: but those particular matters are referable to the common good, not as to a common genus or species, but as to a common final cause, according as the common good is said to be the common end."¹ Aquinas's theory of the common good is rooted in the goodness of creation and the virtue of all people, while at the same time, it disparages women for their supposed lack thereof that bars them from being active and decision-making participants within their homes and societies. He states in another work, "A wife is naturally subject to her husband as governor, and it is not within the power of a person subject to another to depart from his rule."² This relationship between husband and wife is hierarchical, but it also enforces rules and laws within the home. He continues: "For the female needs the male, not merely for the sake of generation, as in the case of other animals, but also for the sake of government, since the male is both more perfect in reasoning and stronger in his powers."³ How can one uphold the common good and value of all creation, and yet divide it as to impose hierarchy and deficiency upon women? Throughout Aquinas's anthropology, the theme of women falling short in various ways is prevalent, and we see this from his method.

Beginning with Aquinas's methodological assumptions concerning women's nature, I argue that we must thoroughly root out its blemishes. DeCrane states on this issue that "This methodology involved observations at the level of biological functioning that were used to draw conclusions about a presumably related metaphysical reality."⁴ Therefore, by following Aquinas's methodology, we draw reductionistic conclusions that equate metaphysical reality with physical capabilities and structure. We can see how this methodology is particularly disparaging towards women because while Aquinas did not have a proper understanding of biology, he still inferred from it that the nature of woman was

lacking, passive, and submissive. Aquinas presumed “that the male was more capable (relatively but significantly) of employing rationality and reasoning.”⁵ Aquinas employed many different pieces of empirical evidence to show women’s inferior status, such as reasoning capabilities and biological reproductive functions. While it may not be fair to judge Aquinas on conclusions regarding women’s reproduction with much scrutiny because of the lack of scientific information available to him at the time, it still illustrates the faulty methodology he employs to argue for gendered hierarchy. Moreover, it is necessary to critique his reductionist conclusions from which he judges women’s rationality and capabilities to be less than men through his faulty conceptions of biology.

Discussing Aquinas, it would not be suitable if we did not recognize Aristotle’s influence throughout large portions of his thought. Aquinas is deeply indebted to the thoughts of Aristotle, and the topic of generation is no exception.⁶ The influence of Aristotle’s ideas was widespread even after his death and into the Middle Ages. Therefore, his comments and arguments toward women’s general inferiority enforced a view of women that demeaned their equal personhood and deprived women of complete humanity. Borden Sharkey states, “Aristotle not only describes women as... deformed and misbegotten males; he also understands women as incapable of fully actualizing that feature most distinctive to human beings: our rationality.”⁷ Aristotle’s position, being even more misconstrued than Aquinas’s, thought that a woman would conceive a female child only out of defect.⁸ While Aquinas disagrees with Aristotle’s statement that women are misbegotten males and exist due to defective natures, he still maintains them as subordinate figures within the home and public sphere because of their supposed biological inferiorities.

There is no affirming space for women’s equality within Aquinas’s writings as it currently stands: “The experience of women is virtually absent from Aquinas’s text. The principle of the common good has historically often been invoked in ways that have been detrimental to women. Social systems that are predicated on women’s corporate inability to name their experiences on their own terms are most often the norm.”⁹ Women’s experiences have been recorded and interpreted primarily through the eyes of men. This outside observance has led to the assumed superiority of man in

every way. Discussing the complexity of Aquinas's anthropology regarding women, DeCrane states,

The faulty anthropology of most traditional theology encouraged women to suppress their own full personhood and flourishing for the sake of the "common good" of a group...The retrieved principle of the common good offers important correctives to any culture based on personal gratification, hierarchy, gender (or other) discrimination, and class stratification. Moreover, there are important principles embedded in Aquinas's development of the common good that can function on behalf of the full flourishing of women, but only if the text and its underlying presumptions are rigorously critiqued.¹⁰

DeCrane emphasizes the subordinate role that women have been forced to take in order to "make room" for others by putting themselves not only last, but also as being unable to actualize the responsibility of active participation in deciding the necessary stipulations for achieving the common good. However, echoing the task of reconstruction, we can use certain principles of Aquinas's theory of the common good to rebuild these faulty and harmful assumptions. Additionally, while it is outside the scope of this work to explore, one of the most dangerous outworkings of Aquinas's anthropology, alongside his subjugation of women, is the threat of dualism within the Christian tradition. The outworkings of Aquinas's view affirm the shared "species making" capabilities but result in two different manifestations of being human.¹¹

II. Instances of Aquinas's Hierarchy and Female Subjugation

Throughout Aquinas's work is the theme of the inferiority of women, beginning with the existence of woman created from man's ribs in the Genesis account of creation, which is an essential foundation for Aquinas's theory of hierarchy between women and men. Regarding the creation of woman, he states that she was created "indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation."¹² Therefore, according to Aquinas, a woman's usefulness is primarily dependent on her ability to

reproduce.¹³ In Ia Question 92, article 2, Aquinas addresses whether it was proper of God for Eve to be formed from Adam's body. In response to this question, Aquinas gives four reasons why God's creation in this way represents how relations between the two sexes ought to function.

First and foremost, Aquinas states that Eve's formation from the body of Adam preserves the natural and necessary hierarchy. Man's helper within this life, responsible for procreation, came from man, while man himself came from God. Aquinas is making a claim regarding the relative proximity of women and men in relation to God. This hierarchy and relation of beings dictate specific roles in marital life. Second, essential to Aquinas's framework is the indissoluble nature of marriage. Within this, Aquinas finds hierarchy to be a natural and valuable tool in preserving the unity of the two. Third, by establishing man as the *paterfamilias*, Aquinas identifies man as responsible for overseeing the family's affairs. Fourth, and finally, the hierarchy between man and woman due to their created nature harkens back to the relationship between Christ and the church, signified as the man and the bride.¹⁴

As illustrated above, Aquinas regularly uses a literal interpretation of scripture to affirm the validity of his doctrine. However, we should "reject Aquinas's literal use of scripture (particularly Genesis, but other texts as well) to justify unequal relationships of authority between women and men as ordained by God."¹⁵ Not only does a literal reading of scripture prove to be lacking in many instances, but also whenever a group of people is shut out of the interpretation of scripture and judgments regarding their nature are done from the outside looking in, we are bound to have faulty, presumptuous, and wrong conclusions. The use of scripture to subjugate women has been a powerful tool because it does not harken to the authority of men, but instead harkens to God's authority over women. This misuse of power, through a narrowly literalistic reading of Genesis, is especially problematic because it hastily achieves legitimacy on androcentric interpretations of God's will for creation and the common good.

Aquinas assumes that difference and unique characteristics are grounds for subjugation, hierarchy, and inequality. For example, in Ia Question 96, article 3, Aquinas sidesteps any argument against inequality by saying that even if there were no Original Sin, there

would still be differences in age, appearance, and gender that, in theory, form a natural hierarchy: “We must need admit that in the primitive state there would have been some inequality, at least as regards sex, because generation depends upon diversity of sex.”¹⁶ Although not a global theme in Aquinas’s work, he equates diversity with inequality, difference, and unique characteristics with hierarchy and subjugation in many areas.¹⁷ Aquinas does not have a conception of difference as such when it comes to biological characteristics. Instead, difference is automatically stratified and then oftentimes subjugated since it is automatically seen as inferior and lacking in specific essential capacities. This is a flawed assumption on Aquinas’s part, especially as it relates to a modern audience because diversity and equality are not at odds with one another. Instead of Aquinas’s approach, we might introduce an egalitarian model that states that equality can be conterminous with diversity, difference, and unique characteristics.

We see Aquinas’s jabs at women in small and unusual ways as well. For example, in *IIa IIae* Question 149 article 4 concerning sobriety, Aquinas states that certain populations ought to be more cautious when consuming alcohol. The reasoning for his claim is that “in women there is not sufficient strength of mind to resist concupiscence.”¹⁸ This mode of reasoning follows his same reductionist conclusions of equating a false knowledge of women’s biology with their rational capacities, as we stated earlier. Aquinas does not uphold the reasonable conclusion that women should be cautious while consuming alcohol because, generally, they weigh less than men and, therefore, are more prone to become intoxicated compared to a man drinking the same amount. Instead of this reasonable conclusion, he makes a moral claim that, yet again, women’s intellect is not sufficient for the task at hand. According to Aquinas, “Women cannot exercise their mental powers to the same extent that men can.”¹⁹

Aquinas does not have the scientific rationality of modern audiences to maintain some of these views. Therefore, to afford him an exception, rather than interrogating his assumptions based on modern scientific advances, would be to accept his faulty and harmful presuppositions. As stated prior, while I do not call for Aquinas’s work to be discarded, it must be amended and reconciled with our current climate and knowledge of biological and rational

capacities and potencies.

It is worth noting that scholarship regarding Aquinas's views on women and subsequent reconstruction is divided. For example, Hartel argues that although Aquinas has misogynistic writings, the project of searching and reconstruction will expose an integral feminism existent in Aquinas's writings. However, if we define feminism in this context loosely as the project to affirm women as more truly human than they have been allowed to be, with a focus on cultivating intellect, reason, virtue, freedom, and bodily autonomy on equal footing with men, then it seems that there is not an existent integral feminism in Aquinas's writings. Hartel argues that what he calls "integral feminism" begins with the existence of the female human, and from this point, he makes claims regarding the nature of this integral feminism within Aquinas's writings. However, I do not find his argument convincing since he appeals to Aquinas's insistence that all people, and specifically women, are not simply means to an end but ends within themselves. This affirmation that all people are ends within themselves convinces Hartel that within Aquinas's writings, we can find an integral feminism appropriate to medieval thought.²⁰ Nevertheless, in response to Hartel, Aquinas's equivocation of diversity with inequality seems wholly incompatible with affirming an integral feminism existent within the text, which instead affirms that diversity ought to have no relation with inequality or hierarchy between women and men. Another facet that we must discuss regarding Aquinas's writings is how his context and foundations of misogyny raise the question of culpability within his writings.

Whenever we are engaging with an argument from a different context, as historical thinkers, we must use a methodology of historical consciousness as we delve into our interpretive efforts. In this case, concerning Aquinas's misogyny, the question must be asked: how culpable can we hold Aquinas to his views on women and their capabilities? Is it simply a result of his social environment, or can we hold him to a standard that still does not condone his thoughts as merely the teachings of the day? If we argue that his views were simply a result of his social environment, personal responsibility for his misogyny should not be the focal point because his views were presupposed in his culture and environment and, therefore, permissible for his time. Conversely, while I think that a

significant portion of his opinions can be attributed to his social surroundings, there still exists in his writings many views in which he could have been more affirming of women. If he reasoned further and had not taken a reductionist approach that equated women's physical nature with their metaphysical nature instead, he could have affirmed the status of women in a more holistic way instead of subjugating them further in the name of Christian doctrine.

This criticism of Aquinas is fair considering there were prominent thinkers in Aquinas's time, and before his time, who did not arrive at the same conclusions of inequality that Aquinas did. For example, Socrates and Glaucon, in *Republic V*, discuss the laws and upbringing of women. They state that assigning different tasks to men and women on the basis of gender would be akin to assigning different tasks to bald and long-haired men on the basis of hair length, a clearly ridiculous proposition to illustrate the error in this kind of thought. They continue by saying that if one affirms that the only difference between women and men is that women bear children while men beget children, then one ought to also affirm that the wives, guardians, and women in society have equally valued ways of life as that of their male counterparts.²¹

III. Feminist Reception: Rebuilding and Finding Compatibility through Reconstruction

As I have argued, there exists an internal conflict within Aquinas's writings between upholding the essential qualities of his doctrine of the common good and his views regarding women. These two concepts are mutually exclusive, and one cannot have a common good that is good for all if one does not affirm the equal nature of all. Therefore, if we are to uphold Aquinas's philosophical system, we must address these issues and correct certain thoughts that undermine his work concerning misconceptions of women and their created nature. Thus, we find ourselves within the project of feminist critique and historical reconstruction, which is a necessary project as it relates to women's equality.

Throughout most of history, especially in western Christian traditions, we are left with the task of reconstructing (or constructing for the first time) the affirmation and equality of women that has been previously neglected. However, as stated prior, we must not discard Aquinas's thoughts wholesale without careful analysis. We

must not overlook the significant contributions he made that support the efforts of feminist thought. Cahill puts forward an “Aristotelian—Thomistic ethical tradition to argue that it is possible to establish shared moral values, at least at a fundamental and general level.”²² This type of rebuilding is necessary because Aquinas does not want to make room for women within the sphere of decisions and authority. Centore further contends:

He does not seem to sufficiently recognise, at least in his formal writings, the many other ways in which women can relate to men in the intellectual and emotional levels. What is woman fitted for, he asks, if not reproduction, for with respect to any one man another man would have been much more effective as a helper in anything else.²³

Through a careful reconstruction effort to discern what ought to remain and what is incompatible, we can study and understand these texts without implicitly (or explicitly) participating in their missteps. Through these reconstructions listed prior, we can rebuild Aquinas’s thought so that the equal personhood of every individual is upheld.

Some may find my argument unnecessary given the affirmation of women's equality today in society and home life; therefore, this conversation would merely stir up conflict. I will address this critique in two ways. First, feminist reconstruction is seeking a larger global presence than just within contemporary academia. While feminist issues are predominantly addressed in the West, there are many areas of the world that use language not dissimilar to that of Aquinas; however, it would be naive to presume the academy has excised their harmful biases altogether. There still exist many places that hold to the harmful conclusions of hierarchy and gender subordination. To say that this argument is unnecessary would be to blind oneself to the global climate regarding the affirmation of women and the global need for reconstruction and recognition of women’s capabilities. Second, the power of language, in the way it shapes our conceptions of the world, must not be understated. Harmful biases still exist, both explicit and implicit, and blatant exercises of power against women are sustained by the use of exclusionary vocabulary. For example, when using language to discuss the existence of humans, most often, we use the term "mankind" instead of “humankind,” a term that is inclusive of all people. Some may critique this stance regarding issues of language

and particular vocabulary, deeming it too inconsequential to change small phrases and words. However, language holds within itself modes of being and action that are not neutral. The ways in which exclusionary and power-entrenched language perpetuate subjugation and harm are subtle, but consequential nonetheless. Language controls the norms of discourse, and if Aquinas is to be used prominently in philosophical discourse rather than dismissed on grounds of misogyny, the very language he uses must be interrogated—even if he is interrogated by his own language, such as his notions of the common good.

IV. Conclusion

We have moved our way through history seeking to understand the common interpretive entrapments of the creation narrative in Genesis and the subsequent use of this passage in prominent thinkers such as Aquinas as it relates to women's equality. These faulty and androcentric interpretations of scripture have found their way into—and to the detriment of—great medieval works. These interpretations sullied the dignity and respect of women as misbegotten forms of their male counterparts, lacking in virtue, inherently weak, and deficient in capacities of reason. Within this tradition, we have sought to understand how Aquinas's problematic views regarding women not only do a disservice to his readers, but also to his argument by creating internal conflict.

This work has argued that Aquinas's conception of the common good in creation is threatened by his views regarding women's lesser capabilities. Furthermore, by holding to the principles of the day, he made his philosophy inconsistent. Therefore, this work aimed to understand Aquinas's philosophical/theological anthropology, analyze his instances of writing that are not only misogynistic but are a disservice to his theory of the common good, and finally, participate in the task of historical feminist reconstruction of his philosophical texts. I have contributed to the ongoing task of reconstruction in the field of philosophical/theological anthropology, even if leaving much to be desired due to the sheer magnitude of the task at hand in other areas, such as medieval metaphysics, ethics, and more.

While there is much work to be done, we have acknowledged that, in so many ways, the harmful biases against the nature of

women have undermined their equal personhood, thereby launching a violent intellectual attack on women reading these works thereafter. For seminal thinkers like Aquinas to maintain their rightful place as intellectual paragons in the history of philosophy, feminist reconstruction must be a priority. Therefore, they may continue to promote the common good, which all true philosophy claims to purport.

Notes

- ¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II Q 90, a 2, ad 2.
- ² Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 123,4.
- ³ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 123, 3.
- ⁴ DeCrane, 97.
- ⁵ DeCrane, 97.
- ⁶ Pasnau, 103.
- ⁷ Sharkey, 81.
- ⁸ Aristotle and Peck, 4.6 775a 14-21.
- ⁹ DeCrane, 86.
- ¹⁰ DeCrane, 86.
- ¹¹ DeCrane, 98.
- ¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia Q 92, a 1, c.
- ¹³ Centore, 45.
- ¹⁴ Centore, 42-3.
- ¹⁵ DeCrane, 99.
- ¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia Q 96 a 3, c.
- ¹⁷ For further exploration, see his discussion of creation as differentiation in I.66.
- ¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae Q 149, a 4, c.
- ¹⁹ Centore, 38.
- ²⁰ Hartel, 545-6.
- ²¹ Plato, 454 c.
- ²² Cahill, 2.
- ²³ Centore, 45.

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