ON PRACTICAL THINKING AND ST. THOMAS

A Contemporary Account of Practical Thinking

John Finnis has drawn a sharp distinction between theoretical thinking or knowing and practical thinking or knowing. The truths of ethics are not, he insists, to be somehow derived or discovered from some prior speculative or theoretical inquiry, or from some set of assertions about human nature. Ethical truths arise from practical thinking, not theoretical. Finnis also claims that this is the position of St. Thomas.[1] It is on this claim above all that most of his critics have disagreed with him. While these critics may not agree among themselves about what St. Thomas' position really was, they certainly agree that it was not the same as Finnis'. They all wish to assert, in some form or another, that, for St. Thomas, ethics has a theoretical root or basis and that ethical claims are not, in the last resort, the same as practical prescriptions.[2]

Before assessing the rightness or wrongness of Finnis' claims, whether about St. Thomas or about the nature of practical thinking, it is necessary to understand what he says is meant by practical thinking. Here a certain difficultly arises. Finnis seems to say conflicting things on the matter. He asserts, for instance, the following. On the one hand practical knowledge is knowledge of certain truths about human goods; on the other hand practical judgments are not 'is' judgments and do not state matters of fact. On the one hand it is the case that the basic goods Finnis lists are really goods; on the other hand the judgment that these basic goods are really goods is a practical judgment, and practical

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[1] Finnis first made these claims in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* and *Fundamentals of Ethics*, but he has repeated them with little change in his more recent book *Aquinas. Moral, Political and Legal Theory*.

[2] See especially Hittinger, *A Critique of the New Natural Law Theory*, McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica*, and Schultz, 'Is-Ought: Prescribing and a Present Controversy,' and '"Ought"-judgments: a Descriptive Analysis from a Thomist Perspective,' pp. 400-426.

judgments express an 'is to be' or an 'ought', not an 'is'. On the one hand practical judgments express genuine knowledge and genuine truths; on the other hand practical judgments are prescriptions.[3]

The same conflict, or tension, comes out in another way. When Finnis rejects the idea, adopted by certain natural law theorists, that ethics can be founded on truths of nature, he seems simply to be concerned to deny that judgments about such and such being good can be derived from judgments about all men having a natural desire for such and such. Now this denial does not, by itself, rule out the possibility that judgments of good are derivable from some sort of theoretical judgments. All it rules out is the possibility that judgments of good are derivable from theoretical judgments *about nature*. But Finnis rejects this way of interpreting his denial. Those, he says, who try to proceed from a theoretical 'is' judgment, even an 'is' judgment that such and such 'is reasonable' or 'is just', to a practical judgment that such and 'ought to be done' are committing a logical error. In other words, the underivability of judgments of good from judgments about nature is not, for Finnis, merely a rejection of appeals to nature in ethics. It is inseparable from his claim that judgments of good are practical and not theoretical in any way at all.[4]

Finnis himself, unlike some of this opponents,[5] sees no conflict in his various remarks about the nature of practical knowledge. For him they constitute a consistent unity. To take him at his word, then, we must suppose that, in his view, a judgment that such and such is a good is both a truth, a piece of knowledge, and at the same time, and

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[3] *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 34-37, 42 and note, 52, 64, 79; *Fundamentals of Ethics*, pp. 2, 4, 14, 16.
[4] *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 33-36, 39-41, 66-67; *Fundamentals of Ethics*, pp. 13-17.
[5] See the review of these opponents in Schultz, '"Ought"-judgments: a Descriptive Analysis.'

by that very fact, a prescription. The knowledge and the prescription cannot be separable such that the knowledge could stand on its own without the prescription. If this were possible the knowledge would not, by itself, be practical, which, according to Finnis, it must be if judgments of good are really prescriptive. In fact Finnis' typical and favorite way of expressing judgments of good brings this out rather nicely. He prefers to say, not that such and such is a good, but that such and such is a good to be pursued.[6] In this way he is able to stress the fact that what he has in mind by practical knowledge is knowledge that already, *qua* knowledge, is prescriptive. So while certain of his remarks may appear misleading, so that at one time he seems to be talking of a kind of knowledge and at another time not of knowledge but of prescription, in fact this is not so. Rather, or so we must suppose, he is trying to express a different concept, a concept of knowledge that at the same time, and *eo ipso*, is prescriptive. Such a concept, he suggests, has been forgotten by contemporary philosophers and needs to be recovered.[7]

Criticism of This Account

Such seems to be Finnis' view of practical knowing. But if this is indeed his view--and it is hard to see what other view he could consistently be maintaining--then one can readily show that that view must be false. A given judgment that such and such is good may indeed express both knowledge and prescription but it cannot do both in the same respect and with the same part of itself. It cannot be the case that the knowledge and the prescription are one and the same moment in the judgment instead of moments that are in principle separable from each other. This can be shown by the following three arguments.

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[6] *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 42, 44-45, 63; *Fundamentals of Ethics*, pp. 11-12.
[7] *Fundamentals of Ethics*, p. 2.

(1) If the knowledge and the prescription are the same part of the judgment, then, in the phrase ‘a good to be pursued’, the term ‘good’ should mean the same as the term ‘to be pursued’ and vice versa. But in that case there would, strictly speaking, be no need for two distinct terms since one of them would be redundant. Accordingly the expressions ‘friendship, play, etc. are goods to be pursued’ (which Finnis uses to assert his basic goods) would reduce to ‘friendship is to be pursued is to be pursued’ or ‘friendship is a good is a good’. Yet Finnis does think that these two terms have independent significance. Indeed he must think so, otherwise the principle ‘the good is to be pursued’, which, following St. Thomas, he accepts as the first principle of practical reasoning, would reduce to ‘what is to be pursued is to be pursued’ or ‘the good is the good’. Such tautologous sentences, while they may express well enough the principle of identity, cannot function as the first principle of practical reasoning. They give no instruction, even in general terms, about what to do.

Perhaps, however, it is not necessary, if Finnis’ theory is to work, that the terms ‘good’ and ‘to be pursued’ should mean the same. So let us suppose they mean something different. Now the term ‘to be pursued’ clearly has the function of expressing prescriptivity. It indicates that the judgments in which it occurs are to be understood as prescriptions. Finnis is indeed fond of phrases like ‘a good to be pursued’ for just this reason, that they make manifest that the judgments in which they appear are not bare statements of fact, asserting what is the case, but injunctions indicating what is to be done. So if the term ‘good’ is to mean something different from what the term ‘to be pursued’ means, it cannot express the element of prescription. Accordingly in such judgments as ‘friendship is a good to be pursued’, if we separate off the ‘to be pursued’

and leave behind only 'friendship is a good', we must be left with something that, taken as such, is not a prescription. But then it will be false that judgments of goodness, precisely as such judgments, are prescriptions, and false that the knowledge and the prescription are the same part or moment of the judgment.

So whichever side of the dilemma we take, Finnis' theory fails.

(2) If we are presented with a prescription such as 'this is to be done or pursued', we may always ask why it should be done or pursued. An answer to this question cannot take the form of another prescription. If it did we would have to count as a proper reply an answer of the form 'this is to be done because this is to be done'. But such a reply is not a proper one. It merely repeats the original prescription all over again and fails to give any reason in justification. It does make sense, however, to say in reply to the question why such and such is to be done, that such and such is to be done because it is good or worthwhile. But if the term 'good' were by itself prescriptive, as Finnis' theory requires, then this reply would reduce to 'this is to be done because this is to be done', which is not a reply.

On the other hand, Finnis also says that judgments that such and such is a good are the ultimates in practical reasoning that bring such reasoning to an end.[8] But then they cannot be prescriptive because, as just argued, a prescription does not bring reasoning to an end. They must instead convey some positive information, which is not the mere repetition of a prescription. Hence to predicate 'good' of something cannot, as such, be to prescribe it.

So again, whichever side of the dilemma we take, Finnis' theory fails.

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[8] *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 36, 78; *Fundamentals of Ethics*, pp. 34-35, 51-52.

(3) Finnis maintains that judgments that such and such is a good can be said to be true or false. To uphold this he gives an account of truth characterized by two theses: first that "every sentence is true in virtue of something somehow (however indirectly) accessible to both speaker and interpreter" and second that "every true sentence is compatible, i.e. co-assertible, with every other true sentence."[9] This is a weak notion of truth and says nothing about the agreement of mind and thing that constitutes the classical notion of truth (adopted, of course, by St. Thomas himself).[10] That Finnis adopts this weak notion of truth is not surprising. The classical notion of truth as the agreement between mind and thing implies that wherever there is some truth to be known there is also some thing to be known. But to say that judgments that such and such is a good are true because in them some thing is known or said to be the way it really is (or not to be the way it really is not) is to say that such judgments are statements of what is the case and not also prescriptions.[11] Finnis, therefore, is prevented by his theory from adopting the classical notion of truth.

While this result need not, by itself, lead to any difficulties, it does, in Finnis' case, have the consequence that what he means by true cannot be distinguished from what R.M. Hare means by objective and rational. The judgments of good that Hare's theory issues in can be established by appeal to something accessible to both speaker and hearer, and these judgments are also compatible with each other and with sentences

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[9] *Fundamentals of Ethics*, p. 64.

[10] *De Veritate*, q.1, a.1.

[11] Prescriptions can be said to be true in the sense that they are in agreement with right desire, that is, that they enjoin the pursuit of what is really worth pursuing (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a29-31). But only what is really desirable and good is really worth pursuing, and the truth of a judgment that such and such is really desirable and good is a matter of agreement between mind and thing. Hence truth as agreement with right desire brings us back to truth in the full and classical sense of truth mentioned in the text.

acknowledged by Hare himself to be true. Yet it is notorious that Hare denies what Finnis is most concerned to assert, that judgments of good are cognitive or constitute pieces of knowledge.[12] It thus becomes impossible to separate what Finnis means by knowledge or cognition from what Hare means by nonknowledge or noncognition. The only way Finnis can get out of this difficulty is by adopting the stronger or classical notion of truth, which, as already seen, he cannot do without giving up his theory.

So again Finnis' theory fails whichever side we take.

Practical Thinking Rethought

These reasons are sufficient to refute Finnis' view of practical knowing. Another and better account must be found. Such an account in fact exists in the writings of St. Thomas. For not only is Finnis wrong about practical knowing, he is also wrong about St. Thomas, as can be seen in the following way.

It is a necessary implication of Finnis' theory that practical knowing and theoretical knowing should differ *as* knowings. Practical knowing, he says, has its own self-evident principles that are different from the principles that govern speculative knowing and that can in no wise be derived from any speculative knowing. Practical knowing is, as it were, *sui generis*, and cannot be understood as any kind of development from or extension of theoretical knowing.[13] According to St. Thomas, however, it would appear that this is precisely what practical knowing is. The practical and speculative differ not as knowings but as regards what is done with the knowing.

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[12] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, ch.12. Hare's theory is rational and objective because there is a rational method for reaching moral conclusions and these conclusions will hold, more or less, for everybody.

[13] This is an implication of the 'is-ought' distinction as Finnis understands that distinction, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 33-34.

> Speculative intellect is that which does not ordain what it apprehends to a work but to the consideration of truth alone; the practical intellect, however, is said to be that which ordains what it apprehends to a work... (The practical intellect, just like the speculative intellect, knows truth, but it ordains the truth it knows to a work.)
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> The practical intellect is the same as the operative intellect. Hence only extension to a work makes an intellect practical.
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> An artist has two kinds of knowledge about something that can be made: speculative and practical. He has speculative or theoretical knowledge when he knows the principles of a work but does not have the intention of applying the principles to the production of the work. His knowledge is practical, properly speaking, when by his intention he extends the principles of the work to doing as an end... It is clear that the practical knowledge of an artist follows his speculative knowledge, since it is made practical by extending the speculative knowledge to a work. But when something posterior is removed, the prior remains. Evidently, then, an artist can have knowledge of some work which he sometimes sets about making and sometimes does not, as when he thinks up the form of some handicraft which he does not intend to make.[14]

[14] *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q.79, a.11: Intellectus speculativus est qui quod apprehendit non ordinat ad opus, sed ad solam veritatis considerationem; practicus vero dicitur qui hoc quod apprehendit ordinat ad opus. (ad 2: Intellectus practicus veritatem cognoscit, sicut et speculativus; sed veritatem cognitam ordinat ad opus.) *De Veritate*, q.14, a.4: Intellectus practicus idem est quod speculativus operativus; unde sola extensio ad

It is remarkable how different the thought expressed in these quotations is from that of Finnis. What these quotations show is that St. Thomas takes the difference between practical and speculative knowing to reside in the fact that practical knowing is the application of knowing to a work, while speculative knowing is knowing not so applied but possessed for its own sake. If this is so, or if, that is, these two knowings differ in that one is applied and the other is not, then this can only mean that, as far as the knowing by itself is concerned, they do *not* differ.

This needs some, but not essential, qualification because in his more extended analyses of the differences between practical and speculative knowing St. Thomas refers also to other differences concerning the knowing itself. This is already hinted at in the third of the quotations given above. It is made much clearer by the following.

> A science can be said to be speculative in three ways. First on the part of the things known, when these are not operable by the knower, as with human knowledge of natural or divine things. Second as regards the manner of knowing, when for example a builder considers a house by defining and dividing it and considering its universal predicates. This indeed is to consider something operable in a speculative way and not precisely as operable. For something is operable

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opus facit aliquem intellectum esse practicum. q.2, a.8: Artifex de operabili habet duplicem cognitionem. Speculativam habet cum rationes operis cognoscit sine hoc quod ad operandum per intentionem applicet; sed tunc proprie habet practicam cognitionem quando extendit per intentionem rationes operis ad operationis finem... Patet quod cognitio artificis practica sequitur cognitionem eius speculativam, cum practica efficiatur per extensionem speculativae ad opus. Remoto autem posteriori remanet prius. Patet igitur quod apud artificem potest esse cognitio alicuius artificiati quandoque quidem quod facere disponit, quandoque vero quod facere nunquam disponit, ut cum confingit aliquam formam artificiati, vel artificii, quod facere non intendit. (Cf. also *Super Sent*. III, dist.23, q2, a.3b corp: ...quandoque verum quod in se (?re) consideratur potest ut regula operis considerari; et tunc intellectus speculativus fit practicus per extensionem ad opus.)

> when one applies a form to some material, not when one resolves a composite to its universal formal principles. Third as regards the end, for, as Aristotle says, the practical intellect differs from the speculative in its end (*De Anima*, 433a14). The practical intellect is directed to doing as its end, whereas the end of the speculative intellect is to consider the truth. Hence, if some builder considers how some house could be made, but does not direct this consideration to the goal of making the house but to knowledge only, his consideration, though about an object that can be made, will, as far as the end is concerned, be speculative.
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> To sum up, therefore: science that is speculative by reason of its object [the first case] is speculative only. Science that is speculative in its manner [the second case] or its end [the third case] is in one respect speculative and in another practical. But when science is directed to doing as its end, then it will be properly practical.[15]

It is clear from this that St. Thomas understands practical knowing as differing from

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[15] *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q.14, a.16: Aliqua scientia potest dici speculativa tripliciter. Primo, ex parte rerum scitarum, quae non sunt operabiles a sciente; sicut est scientia hominis de rebus naturalibus vel divinis. Secundo, quantum ad modum sciendi, ut puta si aedificator consideret domum definiendo et dividendo et considerando universalia praedicabilia ipsius. Hoc siquidem est operabilia modo speculativo considerare et non secundum quod operabilia sunt; operabile enim est aliquid per applicationem formae ad materiam, non per resolutionem compositi in principia universalia formalia. Tertio, quantum ad finem; nam intellectus practicus differt fine a speculativo, sicut dicitur in III de Anima. Intellectus enim practicus ordinatur ad finem operationis, finis autem intellectus speculativi est consideratio veritatis. Unde, si quis aedificator consideret qualiter posset fieri aliqua domus, non ordinans ad finem operationis, sed ad cognoscendum tantum, erit, quantum ad finem, speculativa consideratio, tamen de re operabili.

Scientia igitur quae est speculativa ratione ipsius rei scitae est speculativa tantum. Quae vero speculativa est vel secundum modum vel secundum finem est secundum quid speculativa et secundum quid practica. Cum vero ordinatur ad finem operationis est simpliciter practica.

In *De Veritate* q.3, a.3, St. Thomas covers the same points though in a slightly different way. For a detailed discussion of these passages and others, see in particular Leo Thiry, *Speculativum--Practicum secundum S. Thomam*. For a thorough analysis of St. Thomas' ethical theory as a whole, including this issue of the practical and speculative intellects, see Wolfgang Kluxen, *Philosophische Ethik bei Thomas von Aquin*.

purely speculative or theoretical knowing in its subject matter as well as in its application to action. But it is equally clear that the presence of a practical subject matter, even a practical subject matter treated according to its character as practical, is not enough to constitute practical knowledge proper. That only happens when the knowledge of this practical subject matter is applied to action. Before the addition of the practical application the knowledge remains theoretical. This application of knowledge to work is not the addition of some further knowledge, nor is it a change in the intellect and its knowing. This is made evident by the other quotations where St. Thomas indicates that what makes practical knowledge practical is the *intention* to apply knowledge to action. This is not a change in the *what* of knowledge but in the use to which one intends to put it, and this is manifestly a change in the will and its willing, as St. Thomas points out elsewhere when he discusses the nature of intention.[16]

From this it clearly follows that practical knowledge *qua* knowledge is not different from theoretical knowledge *qua* knowledge. So the practical knowledge relevant to ethics, namely the knowledge of human goods, is not different *qua* knowledge from theoretical knowledge. Or at least it is not different from theoretical knowledge in the third sense St. Thomas lists above.

We might, therefore, say the following about ethical judgments. 'Good' and 'bad' are cognitive terms for St. Thomas; they express objects of knowledge. To predicate them truly of things is to state what is the case about those things.[17] In a typical ethical

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[16] *Summa Theologica*, q.12. This should adequately answer Grisez's criticism of my (and Schultz's) interpretation of St. Thomas given in his 'Natural Law and Natural Inclinations: Some Comments,' p. 314 n17. Grisez contends that the first principle of practical reason cannot presuppose any act of will. But while he, as well as Finnis, may want to maintain that, the quotations I give in the text show that it is not what St. Thomas maintains.

[17] See my *Goodness and Nature*, ch.7.

judgment stating that such and such is a good or a bad, as that friendship is a good and theft a bad, what will be stated will be some fact of the matter which, if true, will be true in that full and straightforward sense where 'true' means the agreement of mind and thing. Because such a judgment will be about something doable or pursuable, it will be theoretical in the second or third sense listed above. But, and this should be stressed, it need not yet be a practical judgment in the proper sense of practical. There is nothing to prevent one considering ethical truths as such, without also at the same time having the intention to act on them.

If one does have the intention to act, as will typically be the case, one will be actually applying this knowledge of goods to one's practice. The knowledge of these goods will, as knowledge, that is, as the recognition that something is the case, not be different from other kinds of knowledge. The difference will be found in how the knowledge is used, whether it is applied to action or not.

Take then one of those formulations of which Finnis is so fond, as 'friendship is a good to be pursued'. If this is supposed to express a fully practical judgment, and if we are to follow St. Thomas in its analysis, we will have to say that this judgment must contain something that expresses what is known and something that expresses the application of what is thus known to action. The only way to do this is to say that the phrase '...is a good' expresses what is known, and the phrase '...to be pursued' expresses the application to action. For if the typical frame of mind in theory is indicated by the question 'what is the case?', the typical frame of mind in practice is indicated by the question 'what is to be done?' As the answer to the first is 'this is the case', so the answer to the second is 'this is to be done'. We should say then that the '...to be done' in a

practical judgment expresses the element of prescription, and the '...is a good' the element of knowledge. These two together as separate though combinable elements, will constitute what, for St. Thomas, is properly practical knowledge.

There is in fact a quotation from Peter of Auvergne, St. Thomas' longtime companion and fellow Dominican, that is well worth repeating here. Though the words are Peter's and not St. Thomas' they reflect St. Thomas' own teaching.

> The immediate principle of things to be done is choice. But choice is a deliberative habit and the practical intellect is required for deliberation. Hence the practical intellect is the principle of things to be done. But the principle of the practical intellect is will of the right end, and hence, again, the principle of things to be done is desire for the right end. Will of the right end, however, presupposes the speculative intellect, and so the speculative intellect is the cause and principle of things to be done...Now the principle of the intellect is the intelligible thing.[18]

If we interpret the judgment 'friendship is a good to be pursued' in the way just stated, we can escape the dilemmas posed earlier for Finnis' theory. In each case we can take the second horn of the dilemma without causing ourselves any difficulties. For it is now clear, first, how the term 'good' is doing something other than what the term 'to be pursued' is doing and how, nevertheless, without the term 'to be pursued' the judgment is

[18] The quotation comes from Peter's continuation of St. Thomas' commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*, bk. 5, lecture 1, sect. 720 (and see also bk. 7, lecture 2, sect. 1083): Immediatum principium ipsorum agibilium est electio. Electio autem est habitus praeconsiliativus. Ad consilium autem requiritur intellectus practicus; quare intellectus practicus est principium agibilium. Principium autem intellectus practici est voluntas recti finis; et ideo adhuc principium agibilium est appetitus recti finis. Voluntas vero recti finis preasupponit intellectum speculativum; et ideo intellectus speculativus causa est et principium agibilium...Principium vero intellectus est intelligibile.

not a prescription; second, how the term 'good' is the foundation or reason for the 'to be pursued' (for the knowledge of good is what is extended or applied to practice), and how consequently the ultimates in practical reasoning are not the prescriptions *as* prescriptions, but the assertions of goodness on which they are founded and which they include; third, how predicating the term 'good' of something is to assert a truth in the full, classical sense of 'true'.

The First Principle of Practical Thinking

To be fair to Finnis it should be pointed out that what motivated him to adopt the views he did adopt was not any of the passages from St. Thomas I have quoted above. He was motivated rather by that well-known passage on natural law where St. Thomas does indeed say that the practical intellect begins with its own self-evident principles and not with principles that are proper to the theoretical intellect.[19] This is a controversial text,[20] to be sure, but it is a text that cannot be read in isolation. In fact if it is read in the light of the texts I have already quoted, a meaning rather different from that given to it by Finnis can be seen to emerge.

First of all, St. Thomas clearly wants to speak in this text about the difference between theory and practice in the full sense, and not about the sort of differences between the three kinds of theoretical knowing or thinking listed above. St. Thomas' concern is with action and the principles that move to acting well.[21] Moreover he speaks not of practical science but of practical reason, and he distinguishes the practical from the

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[19] *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q.94, a.2.
[20] Finnis is heavily indebted in his interpretation of this text to Germain Grisez's 'The First Principle of Practical Reason.'
[21] *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q.94, preface.

theoretical in the text according to application to work.[22] In short we must suppose that he is speaking of practical reason insofar as it is governed by the last and determinative practical difference, namely the intention to act.

When St. Thomas states, therefore, the first practical principle as 'the good is to be pursued and done, the evil avoided', we must suppose that he is intending to give a principle in which is contained the application to action. As already pointed out, this is what the term 'to be pursued' would be serving to express, for this is what makes the principle into a prescription. But what will be underived or self-evident here for practical reason will be the prescriptivity of the principle. Practical thinking begins with its own self-evident principles because, precisely as practical, it must begin with something prescriptive. This is what is new and original to practice. For it clearly cannot come from any prior theoretical thinking; theoretical thinking, precisely as theoretical, lacks prescriptivity. Nevertheless the self-evidence of the first principle is founded on something theoretical, namely the theoretical truth that the good is what everything desires. In practical thinking this truth about good is considered from the point of view of practice. To consider this truth from this point of view is to consider it from the point of view of the question 'what is to be done?', and hence necessarily to consider it as the answer to that question in the form of the prescription 'the good is to be done'.

What has been said about the good in general in the first practical principle will also apply in the same way to all the particular goods that come to be considered from the same point of view. The goods that St. Thomas notes--life, family, truth about God, community--will be seen not just as goods but as goods to be pursued. As such, that is to

[22] See also what is said in *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q.79, a.11, quoted above, note 14.

say, as practical prescriptions, these judgments will be self-evident; they will not be derived from theory.

One must not forget, however, what was argued earlier, that practical truths contain both knowledge and prescription, and that the knowledge can, in principle, be isolated from the prescription. The prescriptions, in fact, are founded on the goods known, since it is because such and such things are known or recognized to be good (which as such is something theoretical) that practical knowledge at once recognizes that they are also, by that very fact, goods to be pursued. What is original here is the prescriptivity and this belongs to practical thinking; what is not original, or what practical thinking is founded on, is the fact that such and such are goods. This foundation, since it is a foundation in facts that are the case, will belong to theoretical knowledge. Or at any rate it will belong to that third form of theoretical knowledge which is necessarily presupposed by, and contained in, practical thinking.

When this passage on natural law is read in this way, that is, in the light of the texts quoted above, Finnis' interpretation of it can be seen to be inaccurate, or at least incomplete. Finnis has interpreted it in isolation from those texts, and that must be wrong because the text itself presupposes the practical-theoretical distinction, and therefore presupposes St. Thomas' teaching about the nature of that distinction. Moreover, that teaching is actually given in the *Summa* in previous articles.

There is, however, something else that seems to lie behind Finnis' interpretation, and has contributed to its prevalence; something in fact that I already hinted at in the third paragraph at the beginning of this article. For we may ask the question whether the judgment that such and such is a good--life or knowledge or family--is deduced from

some other knowledge or is somehow evident of itself to direct apprehension. If one accepts the interpretation of practical thinking just given above, one must view this question as separate from the question whether the practical judgment that such and such is a good to be pursued is self-evident or underived. These two questions should not be confused. While the second one is about the origin of practical knowing, the first is about the origin of some sort of theoretical knowing. This first question may be restated in some such way as follows. Do we come to know (theoretically) that life, knowledge, and so on are goods by deducing this from prior (theoretical) truths about human nature? That is to say, do we argue something like this: men have a natural inclination to know, and whatever is the object of a natural inclination is a good, therefore knowledge is a good? Or is the goodness of knowledge, life, and so on something that we recognize at once as soon as we know what they are, quite independently of, and even prior to, any knowledge about human inclinations?[23] And do we in fact come to know our natural inclinations, and hence our nature, from knowing goods instead of the other way round?

This, it seems to me, is a very important question. It is not a question that is answered when one has answered the question about the nature and relations of theory and practice, or about the origins of the practicality of practical judgments. It is a separate question and is left open by that other one. Nevertheless it is not a question that has been treated as separate by Finnis and most of his opponents. The opponents have assumed that if there is theoretical knowledge of human goods it is knowledge deduced from knowledge of human nature and human inclinations. He has assumed that if this knowledge is not deduced from knowledge of human nature and human inclinations it is

[23] Such a position is argued for by Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, and, following him, by von Hildebrand, *Christian Ethics*. See also Yves Simon, *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, pp. 107-111.

practical and not theoretical knowledge.[24] Both of these assumptions are dubious and little has been argued by either side to justify them. Nevertheless if one has these assumptions, however implicit they may be in one's thinking, it is evident how the question about practice and theory will get mixed up with this other and different question, and how one's answer to either question will necessarily determine one's answer to the other. Confusion of questions, however, is a sure recipe for confusion of answers. It is first necessary to unravel the questions, which I have just attempted to do. The second thing is to give each question its distinct answer. While I have presented an answer, and what I also take to be St. Thomas' answer, to the question about theory and practice, I have not presented an answer to the question about the dependence or otherwise of our knowledge of good on our knowledge of our own nature.

[24] This is especially marked in Finnis' discussions of Adler and Veatch, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, pp. 10-17. Notice also the argument he gives (on p. 21) from the order of cognition, that this order is from objects to acts to potencies. He supposes that if this is the order of knowing, the knowing of the objects must be practical in his interpretation of practical. This does not follow. It is a mere assumption.