

Thomistic Foundations for Business as a Vocation and Perfective Activity

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I. Nature of Created Goodness

Aristotle and Aquinas define the good as the perfection which all things aim for. Simply put, it is the completion creatures desire and tend to since it has the *formal character of an end* (SCG III, 20, #1-2). In fact, nothing can be said to resist divine government precisely because all things tend toward that which is good (ST I, 103, a.8, reply).¹

Te Velde (1995, 26-30) provides a succinct description of the threefold manner by which goodness is revealed in and by creatures. Created beings= complete goodness has three constitutive elements, each of which is merely participated: (1) substantial goodness (by virtue of their being), (2) transcendent goodness (by virtue of a relation) and (3) accidental goodness (by virtue of added properties). The first perfection of human beings is in the form that they receive, that which makes them what they are. Their ultimate perfection, however, consists of their operation and the term of such activity (SCG III, 64, #11; SCG III, 20); it is the goodness that stems from the actualization of the potency they received in their form. Since the complete goodness of created beings is comprised of all three kinds of goodness, human beings are not called *Agood@* on the basis of their existence alone even if the latter is ontological goodness. To be properly good, they must also have the additional perfection of being virtuous. Thus, accidental perfections are central to this paper.

II. Accidental goodness

A. Nature of accidental goodness

Accidental goodness comes from the additional perfections that creatures gain according to their mode of being and operation as they move from potency to act. Human beings, for example, grow more virtuous or vicious depending on their use or abuse of their rational faculties.² This category of goodness is called secondary perfection in contrast to the primary perfection of substantial goodness. Note, however, that the use of *accidental* or *secondary* to describe this category does not mean an inferior or an expendable kind of goodness. On the contrary, these are indispensable and are in fact the determining kind of perfection when referring to the fullness of creaturely goodness.

An accident is a form which is external to the essence of the subject. It is a universal that is participated in by the subject in a particular way. For example, redness is a universal, accidental form. This particular, red apple (a particular subject) participates in *redness* as a universal. Thus, the redness of this particular apple is an accidental perfection. It is merely accidental because it is not in the essence of apples to be red. Hence, in speaking of *accidental* or *secondary* goodness, we are referring to extra-essential perfections (Te Velde 1995, 37). Substantial goodness is called the first perfection because it is the first good that can be said of

creatures. Other perfections are called secondary not because they are of lesser quality but because they are posterior to existence. The critical feature we have to highlight for our study is the dynamics inherent to accidental goodness. Again, this property is best understood by contrasting divine and human attributes.

As we have already seen, the very essence of God is sheer perfection, a complete goodness. Because of such intrinsic fullness and perfection, God is immutable and has no need of other creatures or of additional, perfective properties. The very essence of God is absolute, complete goodness—Pure Act without any potency. In contrast, human beings do not enjoy the simplicity of God but are beings composed of matter and form needing to be actualized. Their complete goodness requires a movement from potency to act. This requisite growth and development requires change, and, more importantly, activity. The manner of such further growth lies in the supervenient qualities that build on the perfection that comes with existence. Thus, we see *additional perfection grounded in accidental principles*, a participated goodness via the *accidental sphere of perfections that are added to the essence* (Te Velde 1995, 28). Again, it must be emphasized that these requisite changes in the subject (human beings) are called *accidental* not because they are dispensable but because they are changes in degree or variations in qualities without changing the substance or essence of the subject itself. Accidental goodness is about taking on added properties, and taking on such added properties implies activity. Accidental goodness reflects in a determinate way some particular aspect of perfection in the First Cause as Exemplar.

Accidental forms admit of differences in degrees of perfection³, and it is this variation in additional perfections that make human beings unique relative to each other. We know from the phenomenon of the One and the Many that besides having a variety of creatures, there are also varying grades of perfection in order to better reflect the goodness of God (ST I, 47, a.1, reply). Since they belong to the same species, human beings share the same ontological goodness. Hence, variations in individual perfection can only come about from differences in accidental perfections, especially moral goodness.⁴

Accidental goodness highlights the developmental nature of human beings. Over and above their participation in the perfection that comes with existence, there is need to grow and develop further according to their nature and mode of operation. Of course, since the most distinctive qualities that human beings enjoy relative to other creatures are their intelligence and free will, we expect rational activity to be the key venue by which humans gain their requisite additional perfections.

B. Central importance of activity

Any being's act is by its nature perfective because of the ontological ordination of all beings to God as Final Cause. Thus, creaturely existence (esse) is for the sake of being in act. Thus, there is an inherent dynamism to the order of creation.

When the creature acts, since through action under the movement of God it deepens its relation to the end, it participates more fully in divine goodness and is thereby perfected (Wright, 1957, 66).

Besides serving as the venue by which complete goodness and fullness of being are attained, activity is important for its other properties. In particular, activity communicates (to others) God's goodness in the external effects of such operation; moreover, humans also receive the goodness of God through the reflexive nature of such acts. This is the interior, perfective impact of activity on its agent in addition to its external effects.

[T]hings are ordered to God as an end, not merely according to their substantial act of being, but also according to those items which are added as pertinent to perfection, and even according to the proper operation which also belongs to the thing's perfection (SCG III, 20, #8, emphasis added).

Activity is constitutive, indeed, determinative of the agent's accidental perfections.

C. Moral goodness: Reflexive quality to intellectual activity

Moral goodness is a participation in the excellence of God. Human beings communicate (to others) God's goodness through their activity. However, what is equally significant is how they receive God's goodness through their own activity. Aquinas (SCG III, 22, #2) distinguishes three ways by which activity is related to ends. Since a thing can be a mover, be moved by others or be both, activity perfects creatures either by being the cause of others, by being perfected within themselves or both. Human beings are perfected as they move others and are moved themselves. Thus, human activity is both transitive (e.g. promoting others' good) and immanent (e.g. personal virtue) in the term of its perfective dynamics. Humans receive God's goodness not only through their existence but also through their operation. Activity is often viewed as being externally oriented in the term of its action, as it is in economic life. However, there is also a reflexive component which brings God's goodness to the agent; externally oriented activity is internally perfective.

Human secondary causality is different from God's or from non-rational beings' causality because of the reflexive nature of the human act. Effects reflect their causes. In the case of human acts there is a feedback effect whereby effects precipitate changes in their causes. In particular, human beings are affected by their rational activities. Human acts shape and define their agents. After all, intellectual activity is perfective of their agents. The act proffered is perfective of the recipient (Wippel 1987, 146).

As a thing realizes itself in its operation and the operation is the immediate end for the sake of which the thing exists, a thing is called good insofar as it is completed with regard to its operation [De virt. In com., q. un., a.1] (Te Velde, 1995, 41).

III. Economic agency and secondary causality

A. Creation-providence-governance

Economic life is intelligible through the prism of secondary causality. After all, both the external and internal dynamics of the twofold order of the universe flow from and participate in God's threefold causality. This includes all movements and particular orders within the whole. Thus, secondary causality explains how economic life is a manifold participation in God's creation-providence-governance, why economic agency is still free despite its being merely a created activity and how such economic labor is perfective of the person.

Creation is an act that is uniquely God's because it is the conferral of existence to a non-being; only God has uncreated esse and all other beings merely participate in Ipsum Esse Subsistens. Moreover, it is an action that can be God's alone because it occurs *without either motion or time* (ST I, 104, a.1, ad.4). Since it is not part of their essence to have to exist, creatures need to be sustained in continued existence (ST I, 104, a. 1, a.3). Thus, God's act of creation seamlessly flows into divine providence.

Divine providence is a timeless divine plan that directs creatures to their end. Implementation of such a plan in time pertains to divine governance as God conserves (divine conservation) and brings creatures to their end through creaturely intermediaries (divine concurrence). Divine providence (order of intention) unfolds through divine governance (order of execution) as God works through created activity; the former belongs to the eternal, the latter to the temporal (ST I, 22, a.1, ad.2). God provides for creatures through other creatures using the very order of creation itself in a series of determinate causes and effects. Thus, while God's providence for creatures, indeed every creature, is immediate and direct, its implementation in divine governance employs secondary causes in sustaining and bettering creatures (ST I, 22, a.3; 104, a.2, ad.1; 105).

B. Economic agency as perfective

The self-diffusiveness of goodness suggests that creatures are meant not only to resemble God in their particular perfections but, more importantly, to share such with others (Wright 1957, 190). This diffusive quality to goodness is particularly evident in the manner by which humans voluntarily band together and work collaboratively to pursue their individual and collective ends. We can extend Wright's (1957) synthesis of Aquinas's view of creation by explicitly incorporating such voluntary, cooperative ventures among parts of the whole. Thus, we are able to examine economic life as a particular order within his twofold order.

Pieper (1957, 41) notes that a *thing is more eminently good the more fully and widely it radiates its goodness*. Aquinas observes:

[T]he more perfect something is in its power, and the higher it is in the scale of goodness, the more does it have an appetite for a broader common good, and the more does it seek and become involved in the doing of good for beings far

removed from itself. . . . [T]he better a thing is, the more does it diffuse its goodness to remote beings (SCG, III 24, #8).

The degree of goodness attained is proportional to the extent and intensity with which the subject diffuses its goodness. There is added significance in the way humans diffuse God's goodness because of their real causality and the freedom, not necessity, undergirding such causality. The human medium for communicating God's goodness is moral goodness. There is great moment to each moral act as it is a further communication of God's goodness.

Aquinas notes that the human person *must will this divine common good formally and particular goods materially* (ST I-II, 19, a. 10, emphasis added). In other words, humans formally will that the whole attain its end and carry out such a desire materially through the particular goods they pursue. Among these particular goods is the order proper to economic life. The greater the excellence we effect in personal or collective moral conduct, the greater the perfection we add to the whole and the greater is our similitude to divine goodness.

The proximate end of the economic sphere is the attainment of the particular order it contributes to the internal order of the community.

It is not created goodness, but divine goodness as shareable that makes it fitting that the universe exist. The meaning and value of the universe is clear to us only when we see how the internal order of the universe leads all creation to God, to share in His goodness according to the plan of His wisdom and love. For, in the last analysis, the order of the universe is nothing but the concrete embodiment of that plan . . . (Wright 1957, 113, emphasis added)

Economics is one such sphere where the concrete embodiment of God's plan unfolds. The order of creation, especially human affairs, can be viewed as a dynamic of a goodness proffered, a goodness received and a goodness communicated. Economic life is the terrain where the material conditions of divine providence are played out.⁵

The order proper to the economic sphere merely serves as a means to the even larger goal of bringing human beings to their beatitude, their final end: knowing God to the extent possible and attaining that *ordination to God which terminates directly and immediately to the divine essence* (Wright 1957, 117-118; ST I-II, 3, a.8). Economic life satisfies the material conditions needed to achieve such beatitude directly (via economic order) and indirectly via the other spheres of life. But economic life is also the occasion for the interior perfection of its agents—the immanent perfective nature of rational secondary causality.

The economic order is an unusually fertile ground for perfective human action because of the intrinsic difficulty of its requirements. Unlike other particular orders, economic life as a venue for the human communication of God's goodness is exacting because it requires order among discordant wills, unceasing intelligent activity and interpersonal resource transfers that

are often sacrificial especially in the face of scarcity. Each of these is discussed in the following sections.

B.1 Order in relations

Order is constituted by relations. Thus, one can describe the particular orders within the internal order of the universe as an actualization of relations, a movement from potency to act for the community as a being. Relations are subject to a web of determinate causes and determinate effects, just like substances. Thus, there is an objective order undergirding relations. Secondary causality is central to such relations. Wright (1957, 99) describes *the existential unity of the universe as radicated in the divine causality and realized through the causality of creatures*. But this is a double-edged sword in that while secondary agents= acts can bring about unity, they can also cause disorder. The twofold order of the universe means that particular orders, such as the economic sphere, also pursue dual ends: contributing toward the pursuit of the external, ultimate end in God and of the internal, proximate end of order and harmony among parts (of the whole).

The economic sphere as a particular order is not a supposit, not an unum per se, that is, it is not an entity of a single substance but is comprised of different substances as parts. Thus, its proper perfection is that of order (ST III, 4, a.1, ad.4). This order is manifested in a *network of relations* within the whole (Wright 1957, 95); relations in turn are actualized by an order of activities among the whole=s component parts. These relations are constituted by:

1. parts brought into and preserved in being through the (instrumental) activities of other parts (Wippel 2000).
2. the interaction of parts with each other to effect particular orders within the whole.

Such an order of relations and activities includes mutual assistance among parts where higher beings assist lower beings attain a greater perfection.

The immediate goal of relations between parts is the provision of mutual aid and service to each other to ensure that they produce, both singly and collectively, the proper effects for the whole or quasi-wholes dependent on them for their order (SCG I, 42, #7; Wright 1957, 103). This implies conferring reciprocal benefits on each other in an interdependence that produces the common good.

The internal order of the universe is constituted by a multiplicity of orders.⁶ Each of these spheres is unique in the respective particular orders they contribute to the whole. All of them share the common characteristic of effecting order in the disparate relations of beings that fall within their particular spheres. Two sets of relations are of critical interest in economic life: the interpersonal activities of rational beings and intelligent beings acting upon the non-rational creatures of the earth.

B.2 Stewardship of the goods of the earth

Viewed in the broader Aristotelean sense of household management, economics is about the proper care of the goods of the earth as part of the order of creation. In terms of both existence and activity, every creature manifests a particular dimension of God=s perfection. Thus, Aquinas notes that the dynamics of the internal order of the universe require that parts act on each other to bring out the fullness of each other’s reflection of God’s goodness and to bear each other to their respective proximate ends. Material goods serve human needs even as human beings, in their own turn and as intelligent creatures of a higher perfection, care for these goods of the earth in order to bring such creatures of a lower perfection to a higher end.

Rational beings assist non-rational creatures reach the latter’s proximate ends even as the non-rational goods of the earth provide for human beings= material needs in view of the primary rank accorded to rational beings in the order of preservation (SCG III, 22, 112). Such an exchange allows beings of a lower perfection to participate in the excellence of the higher (Wright 1957, 104-107). In economic life this means that even as humans use the goods of the earth to fill their needs, they must use them in such a manner as to allow created goods to reflect the goodness of God.

Since human beings are the highest of all material creatures, they bear the heaviest responsibility in bringing out the perfection of all the other creatures. After all, *divine peace reaches from highest to lowest by a descending communication* (Wright 1957, 105); it is the communication of God=s goodness from the higher to the lower. God rules material creation through intellectual creatures (SCG III, 78; 90, #5). Non-rational creatures are mediated by human agency as they reflect the goodness of God. Such responsibility is played out in the economic sphere because it is in this particular order that humans interact with the goods of the earth.

B.3 Harmony with other rational beings

Human secondary causality in economic life is not limited to making the earth fruitful to fill human needs. Because of the heavy element of cooperation needed in this sphere and because of the social nature of the person, human secondary causality is equally, if not more importantly, also about effecting goodness in interpersonal relationships. After all, *an orderly relation toward the good has the formal character of a good thing* (SCG III, 21, #4). Moreover, secondary agents produce the effects proper to them through that power which is distinctive to them. In the case of humans, *proper goodness* and *proper mode of operation* pertains to the use of rational freedom, a big part of which is interpersonal relations.

Human beings find their peak perfection in serving as a catalyst for goodness not merely among lower creatures (the goods of the earth), but most especially among other rational beings (SCG III, 21, #6). After all, human perfection is directly proportional to the degree to which people are able to evoke or cause goodness in other creatures, especially moral goodness in rational beings.

[T]o the degree that one creature brings about good in another it imitates God as he is the cause of good in other beings (ST 103, a.5, reply).

Economic life is relational—with other human beings and with the goods of the earth. Thus, every economic decision and activity presents an opportunity of bringing other humans or non-rational beings to their end in God.

If it acts on something else, it does so by ordering the object of its activity to an end, and ultimately to God, thus cooperating with God in the communication of actuality (Wright, 1957, 66).

The self-perfective consequence of actualizing relations stems from the twofold order of the universe. Wright (1957) notes that in their dynamic orientation, parts of the whole are ordered to each other in such a way as to bring the whole toward its end in God. Of all the parts of the universe, human beings are the only ones that can deliberately shape the outcomes of their ordering to one another and other creatures. Furthermore, parts are ordered to each other and contribute to the task of moving the whole toward God according to the mode of their being and operation. Human beings are social, and as members of a whole whose parts act on each other, they are ordered toward each other in an even more profound manner. Economic life provides a critical sphere where such mutual ordering is actualized.

The internal order of the universe is constituted by particular orders, each with their distinctive contribution to other particular orders and the common good. Order in economic life means that all beings within this sphere are able to conduct their proper operations and achieve their proper ends. There is conformity to the divine plan as the divine goodness is communicated. The economic sphere is at the service of rational beings by providing: the material means for human survival and integral human development; a venue for human labor and creativity; an occasion for growth in moral goodness; an opportunity to participate in divine governance; and a channel for community building, harmony and solidarity.

The realization of order in relations is a common requisite task for all spheres within the twofold order of the universe. Establishing such an order in relations in economic life is an exacting venture because of the multiplicity and complexity of relationships involved; it stretches rational activity to its limits. It is interdependent (collaborative intellectual activity), extensive (because of its externalities in affecting other facets in life) and is intensive in the depth of the sacrifice it can require of agents. However, such taxing demands made of intellectual activity become occasions for individual and collective growth in perfection.

B.4 Requisite intelligent activity

In describing the fittingness of God sharing causality with creatures, Aquinas notes that the degree of excellence to which creatures exercise such causality is proportioned to the degree of their similitude to God. This means that there is greater moment in the causality exercised by more perfect beings compared to less perfect beings. This also means that human beings have a greater measure of accountability and responsibility for the attainment of the twofold order of the universe.

[J]ust like the sun's outpoured rays, which not only illumine other bodies but also make them to be sources of light, too. . . . [t]hose that most resemble the sun receive the most of its light and, consequently, have sufficient light not only for themselves but also to pour out on other things.

Similarly, in the ordering of the universe, as a result of the outpouring of God's goodness, superior creatures have not only that by which they are good in themselves, but also that by which they are the cause of goodness for other things which participate the least in God's goodness. . . .

Now, among the superior creatures, the closest to God are those rational ones that exist, live, and understand in the likeness of God. Consequently, God in His goodness gives them the power not only of pouring out upon other things but also of having the same manner of outpouring that He Himself has—that is, according to their will, and not according to any necessity of their natures (De veritate q. 5, a. 8, reply).⁷

Much can be rightfully expected of human agency.

The economic order is a proper effect of human beings as secondary agents of divine governance. Only intelligent activity can provide the requisite order in relations among the manifold creatures involved in the economic sphere. Since only human beings are capable of rational operations, they bear sole responsibility for attaining the order particular to economic life. Put in another way, the order proper to economic life depends entirely on the efficacy of human beings as secondary agents of the First Cause. Only if such intelligent and free causality conforms to divine providence can this proper order be attained.

[E]very cause is a source of order among its effects. Hence, the order of the universe . . . contains these other particular orders of causality within it. . . .

[S]econdary causes are the proper causes of the particular orders which depend on them . . . (Wright 1957, 97-98).

Achieving the order that is proper to the economic sphere is no small task because its starting point of competing interests, contentious wills and limited goods subject to rival consumption requires selflessness and mutual sharing if the particular order is to be attained. The nature of social dynamics in economic life requires much of human practical reason and

will. A harmonious and efficacious collective secondary causality in the economic order is possible only with purposeful effort, the voluntary subordination of personal interests to that of the whole and sizable transfers across individuals in an environment where there are a variety of means to accomplish ends. Attaining the proper order in the economic sphere is intrinsically difficult, but it is precisely because of the exacting demands of such a terrain that collective secondary causality becomes an ideal platform for growth in virtue and profound participation in divine attributes and activity.

God uses human agency as the principle of harmony behind the internal order. This requires major deliberate effort and self-giving for human beings because of a real opportunity cost they have to incur. The One and the Many brings about real variation and complexity; there is need to bring order to their relations. Parts of the universe are of *contrary and discordant natures* and they would never on their own form a single order (SCG III, 64, #6; Wright 1957, 75-6). This is particularly true of human beings whom we expect to see things differently from each other given differences in their upbringing, preferences, circumstances and personal gifts. There is an unavoidable need to harmonize human wills. An internal order has to be worked out with much thought and self-abnegation. Thus, one could say that there are centrifugal and centripetal forces working simultaneously. God delegates the exercise of the unifying *centripetal force* behind the internal order to the parts themselves. Human beings are central to this charge because not only are they the only intellectual beings capable of working toward such an order, but they are also the only beings capable of causing problems and preventing such a unity.

Economic life is perfective in both an interior and exterior sense:

[E]very created thing attains its ultimate perfection through its proper operation, for the ultimate end and perfection of a thing must be either its operation or the term or product of its operation (SCG III, 64, #11)

Economic agents are perfected both by their activity and by the term of their operation. The former pertains to the reflexive nature of their action, while the latter—the term of their operation—pertains to the order achieved in economic life that in turn contributes to the good of the whole. In the latter, economic agents perfect themselves indirectly by contributing to the good of the whole. Since the perfection of effects merely reflects the perfection of their cause (SCG III, 69, #15), the better the economic order, the better the perfection and participated goodness of the secondary agents (individual and collective) responsible for such a well-ordered economic life. After all, effects say much about their causes. Nowhere is this phenomenon better illustrated than in the central role of intelligent activity in effecting the envisioned material sufficiency for all through voluntary economic transfers. It is to this that we now turn our attention.

IV. Summary and Conclusions

The act proffered is perfective of the recipient (Wippel 1987, 146). This is particularly true of economic agency whether it is in bringing about the fruitfulness of the earth as secondary causes in production, whether it is in providing order in relations among the disparate elements of the economic sphere or whether it is in effecting self-sacrificial economic transfers to provide relief to those trapped in a state of Malthusian scarcity. The more severe the scarcity that has to be dealt with, the greater the perfective potency attached to the economic agency thus challenged.

In the order of creation, humans are rational in their secondary causality. This highlights their accountability for the internal order of the universe in general and for the economic order in particular. There is a real role in divine governance and not a mere occasionalism. They can impede or promote divine providence and governance. They are the only creatures capable of discerning, understanding and then subscribing deliberately to God's intelligible plans. They have a tangible impact in the way other rational beings and the non-rational creatures of the earth are able to reflect God's goodness. Since humans participate in the goodness of God, they too must reflect the inherent diffusiveness of such goodness. Their capacity for a real causality that is intelligent and free provides them with substantive means and venues for diffusing such goodness. There are heavy obligations attendant to the goodness that has been received.

[I]t is better that the good bestowed on someone should be common to many, than that it should be proper to one: since the common good is always considered more godlike than the good of one only [I Ethic, II]. But the good of one becomes common to many, if it flows from the one to the other . . . (SCG III, 69, #13).

In the same way that there are different ways and different degrees by which creatures receive the goodness of God, the concomitant obligations that come with the divine goodness received also vary in their claims. The heaviest claims fall on human beings because they are the only ones that are free and intelligent. Consequently, they should in their own turn communicate the goodness of God through their rational activity. Economic life lends itself particularly well not only to such an endeavor of communicating God's goodness, but it also becomes a significant venue for the further reception of such goodness with even greater depth and profundity. A vocation is a gift and brings with it attendant obligations. Given the demanding nature of economic life, living up to such concomitant duties is particularly perfective of the person.

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ENDNOTES

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1. ST refers to Aquinas's (1947-48) Summa Theologica.
 2. We will examine this in greater depth in chapter 5 when we delineate how scarcity provides a critical occasion for moving from ontological goodness to moral goodness.
 3. These arise either from variations in degrees of participation, as in the different degrees of hotness, or from the forms themselves being different in degrees of perfection, as in the colors' varying shades relative to the *luminosity of white* (Te Velde 1995, 39).
 4. Examples of other kinds of accidental goodness are personal skills and talents.
 5. Wright (1957, 113-114) critiques Aquinas's order of the universe as being too abstract, general and non-historical, being drawn purely from Aristotelean thought. This study's application of Aquinas' framework to economic life mitigates, though does not completely remove, these shortcomings. It provides greater specificity by applying Aquinas's insights to the economic sphere as one among many particular orders serving the internal order of the whole.
 6. Relations also pertain to the linkages between particular orders within the multiplicity of such orders. The economic sphere is important for these other particular orders (e.g. politics, culture, religion) to the extent that there are material foundations undergirding these other orders.
 7. See also SCG III, 64, #8.