

PRELIMINARY REMARKS TOWARD A CONSTRUCTIVE  
ENCOUNTER BETWEEN  
ST. THOMAS AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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**Christopher J. Thompson**  
**University of St. Thomas, St. Paul**

*This article address the ways in which contemporary psychologists might usefully engage in a dialogue with Catholic philosophers and theologians influenced by the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. The specific point of common agreement and vision between these diverse approaches lies in the general notion that human action is directed toward an end which the individual judges to be good in some sense. Despite the considerable differences in foundational issues, both the clinical psychologist and Thomist are perhaps able to come to a constructive, common vision around the notion that all human action is directed toward the achievement of some good.*

The drama of human suffering and the desire to address such need through the efforts of clinical therapy mark a constant feature of contemporary life. Americans, Catholics included, are far more likely to turn to the rhetoric of psychology than theology for solutions to the problems of modern living. The church remains always at the service of humanity, yet it appears in many ways that humanity turns elsewhere, to its secular priests, the professional therapists, for guidance and advice on life's most vexing problems.

The accomplishments of the profession of psychology, especially within the counseling milieu, are in so many ways without question positive and compelling. There remains, nonetheless, the need to explore more fully how the profession might draw upon the theological wisdom of Catholicism and the moral tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas. It is the aim of this paper to outline in a preliminary way some of the directions for a positive exchange between the contemporary aspects of clinical therapy and the moral tradition of Thomism.

The task is as daunting as it is urgent for any exchange of ideas among Catholic philosophers or theologians and contemporary clinical psychologists will have to confront at the beginning a number of difficulties. Perhaps first among them is the difference in the meaning of terms.

In the contemporary academy, “clinical psychology” is employed in any number of ways and does not identify a single method or set of convictions about its modes of inquiry, its procedures for research, or plan of development and progress. Granted that there may be some common elements across the field concerning the major figures and movements within psychology, contemporary clinicians would confirm the diversity of perspectives and are comfortable in recognizing the vast multiplicity of approaches within the field.<sup>1</sup>

“Psychology,” on the other hand, when employed by Catholic, Thomistic scholars, emerges from within a much more uniform tradition with a more or less agreed upon intellectual pedigree, textual tradition, and commentatorial development. There is, to be sure, a long and extensive conversation among Thomistic scholars, but there remains nonetheless, especially when compared to its contemporary counterpart, a more or less fixed tradition of material and formal components. Sign up for a class in “Thomistic Psychology” and most practitioners in the field could name its essential sources and directions for development. Take a course in “counseling psychology” and the adage seems apropos: *as many opinions as heads*.

All of this means, then, that if we are to take up the challenge of entering into an exchange with contemporary psychologist/counselors, some working parameters as to what one means will be required. More than likely, some artificial constraints will have to be imposed on the notion of “contemporary psychology” in order to get the conversation at least started. The question is: how to begin?

One distinction which seems helpful in *beginning* the conversation between counseling psychology and Thomism is to borrow a distinction from the classic, Thomistic tradition: namely, the distinction between speculative and practical inquiry. For Thomists, not all inquiry is the same, not all inquiry is ordered toward the same objective. Speculative reasoning aims, for the most part, at the most coherent and comprehensive grasp of the truth of things. Practical reasoning, on the other hand, typically aims at the achievement of some good, doing something well. Speculative reasoning has the truth of things as its proper object and is not immediately concerned with matters of practice or activity. Practical reasoning presupposes that one grasps the truth of things (if only provisionally), before one can engage in practical matters. The distinction articulated here is hardly adequate and is not a hard and fast one, but it nonetheless supplies an important context for any conversation to proceed.

The reason it is important is this: for Thomists, “psychology,” is the study of the psyche, the soul and its operations, and it is first and

foremost a speculative inquiry. It has as its object the truth of man qua man, specifically his powers and operations.<sup>2</sup> Its principal aim, as opposed to a practical inquiry, is the truth of things—in this instance, the truth of man as an embodied soul, endowed with certain powers. It is not, at least in its principal expression, concerned with doing or practice. Thomistic psychology names a kind of speculative, philosophical reasoning, not practical considerations, and has for its object of inquiry man in his essence, not, principally, individual men and women given in empirical experience. Its methods are philosophical and rely upon the common experiences and knowledge open to all. Contemporary psychology, with its emphasis on scientific, experimental data, on the other hand, is a specialized form of investigation and its conclusions are not generally available to the average, reflective man or woman.<sup>3</sup>

All of this means, then, that any interface between clinical psychology and contemporary Thomists will have to recognize three essential problems: confusion concerning the nomenclature of terms; confusion concerning the mode of reasoning employed, and confusion concerning the proper objects of its inquiry. Psychology taken in the sense of “contemporary clinical psychology” names a vast diversity of approaches, a largely practical inquiry, with an almost exclusive reliance upon empirical data in its development and advance. In the Thomistic tradition, “psychology” names a fairly uniform tradition of philosophical discourse with authoritative resources and texts, a species of inquiry which is largely speculative, and one dependent upon a notion of the nature of man in his essence, his nature, not men and women given in the multiplicity of empirical findings.

Is there, however, a way to bridge the distance? Is there a way of weaving together what appear to be irreconcilable modes of inquiry? Yes, I would propose, and offer here the outlines of a direction for progress.

It is my conviction that the shortest route to an engaging encounter between Thomism and contemporary psychotherapeutic practice is to focus upon the clinical setting, the environment of counselor and client, for it is here in this very practical setting that a productive interface of the two “world views” begins to emerge.

It may seem at first blush to be a mistake to begin here, for I have just concluded that “psychology” in the Thomistic tradition names a largely speculative inquiry into the nature of man and his essence, and does not immediately lend itself to a mode of practical reasoning. The contemporary clinician, by contrast, seems immediately concerned with practical issues and not the more theoretical questions of the nature of man.

But here an opening for engagement, nonetheless, begins to emerge for two reasons. In the first place, the Thomist would argue that any practical inquiry into what a man ought to do, especially any practical inquiry of the sort which likely occurs in the counseling setting, must first emerge from a thorough grasp of who man is in his nature. No health professional seeking to assist a client should embark upon the task of suggesting remedies without first having a working grasp of the essential facets of what it means to be a human being in the first place. For as a species of practical reasoning, sound clinical advice must first be rooted in a speculative grasp, a systematic understanding of the nature of man and his activities qua man. Anyone interested in securing and nurturing the health of the human being must first grasp what it is to be one.

Clinical psychology, then, if it is to be practiced within a manner consistent with the essential outlines of a Thomistic inquiry, would seem best served if it first recognized and embraced the speculative principles upon which its practical inquiry depends.

But granted the systematic point concerning the relationship of speculative and practical reasoning, a philosophy of man and the advice given, there is a more mundane point of entry into a common conversation that does not rely upon what some might take to be a more complicated and theoretical exchange. There is, in other words, another catalyst, one more promising for conversation between the clinical psychologist and the Thomist, and it is the focus of the remainder of this paper.

### ***The counselor setting***

Perhaps the best point of entry is not to begin with the speculative facets of the Thomistic philosophy of man (despite the methodological merits I just mentioned). Rather, the best place to begin a fruitful dialogue is the counselor setting, the “home turf,” so to speak, of the clinical psychologist. The simple reason for this is that the therapist seems committed to the notion of helping people, of helping people achieve something approximating a good life, lived with some degree of consistency—and it is precisely here, at the question of pursuing a good life, a satisfying life, that the Thomist and the contemporary psychotherapist might find that spark, that catalyst for engaging conversation and exchange for the mutual benefit of each.

For the truth of the matter remains that despite the diversity of terms, the vast differences of histories and methodologies, the theoretical impasses and hurdles, both St. Thomas and the contemporary psychotherapist seem to have one, central conviction in

common: all human action, more precisely, all healthy, rational action, proceeds from the desire to achieve a good, from the desire to pursue an end. And both the contemporary psychotherapist and the Thomist share in the common conviction that health and happiness is found principally in the pursuit, indeed achievement, of goals worthy of the human person.

For St. Thomas, all agents act for an end.<sup>4</sup> Human agents, then, are motivated by the pursuit of an end or good which draws the individual in a particular direction. Where there is no goal; there is no movement.<sup>5</sup>

There are, to be sure, activities done by a human being which are not explicitly motivated by any articulated desire, but which are nonetheless actions “of a man.”<sup>6</sup> I am circulating my blood and digesting my last meal as I write this essay, for example, but such actions do not betray, says St. Thomas, anything uniquely human. Such acts do not disclose the uniqueness of my “human” acting. Rather human actions, actions which are properly identified as “human” are actions motivated by ends; they proceed from a deliberate will and have at their core a certain reasonableness and rationale about them. Healthy human activity is action ordered toward an end.

To act reasonably, then, is to be acting for an end. All rational action is motivated by something, some thing perceived to be good, and while one might not be able always and explicitly to articulate the goal of one’s action—it must be the case, St. Thomas suggests, that there be a goal in order for the action to be considered reasonable.<sup>7</sup>

One might be able to get a better grasp of this essential Thomistic principle if one were to consider its opposite: action that lacks any particular goal or end. You might run into a friend on campus and ask her, in passing, where she’s off to this afternoon. If her response is, “I have no idea,” or “What’s that? Was I going somewhere?” or something else along the lines suggesting no particular end in view, it might be wise to suggest she take a break. Your friend is starting to show the signs of mental duress. Healthy individuals are able to give an account of their actions, and to give an account is to give a rationale of the goals guiding such actions.<sup>8</sup>

Living a healthy human life, living reasonably, then, will be a goal directed activity. And whether it is the Thomist over coffee or the therapist in a session, assisting others in pursuing the reasonable life will entail a discussion of that life’s goals or purposes.

“Goals” and “purposes” are plural nouns and as such suggest a variety and plurality of directions for one’s life. Such, however, is not a full picture of human action according to St. Thomas. For while rational

actions depend on goals, one goal and only one must serve as the anchor in the chain of motives. Some one thing must be understood, even if unreflectively, as the ultimate goal of one's living.<sup>9</sup> There must be one dominant affection, as Paul Wadell notes, that provides the rationale for the decisions we make.<sup>10</sup> Just as a man might take any number of routes to his office in the morning, so there may be any number of ways to pursue one's purposes in life. But that there is only one dominant end that gives rhyme or reason to one's intermittent decisions is as clear to St. Thomas as the notion that one cannot walk in two directions at once.<sup>11</sup> One can enact a complex series of actions ordered toward intermediate ends, but not two opposing ways at the same time. One can pursue a complex variety of ends, but proceed in only one essential direction. While some of us can multi-task, none can serve two masters.

In passing it should be noted that this is in marked contrast to those who perceive of the task of life as a never ending search for meaning, an infinite unfolding of possibility and becoming. Not so for St. Thomas; there must be an "ultimate" in the chain of motives or otherwise nothing would be desired at all. "To dream the impossible dream" or "to reach for unreachable stars" might make for a good musical, but one ought not to forget that what I am alluding to here is the theme song of a benevolent lunatic.<sup>12</sup>

Nor will just any chain of reasoning suffice for the healthy person, the rational life. The mentally ill, for example, can often provide a complex account of the goals which give shape to their activities: world domination or avoiding alien abduction, for example. It will not be sufficient, in other words, to characterize the reasonable life as one which is goal driven, rather - and here is among the most important aspects - certain goals, goods which motivate, will be appropriate for healthy individuals while other goals will not.

Living reasonably, living in accordance with reason, then, will not simply be living according to a plan. That will have the appearance of order, but perhaps lack reasonableness. Rather, living reasonably in a substantive way means being motivated towards goals which are befitting the person. It will entail sorting through the myriad of motivations and ordering one's life in accordance with those goals which are perfective of the human person. It will not be enough, that one's life be simply ordered; rather, living an authentically reasonable life, a healthy life, will entail ordering one's life around the truth of what it means to be a human being.<sup>13</sup>

And, of course, to begin to ponder what it means to be a human being in order to answer the questions which goods one ought to pursue is to inadvertently drift from a practical to a speculative consideration,

from a conversation concerning what one ought to do to a conversation concerning who one is. It is to move from a consideration of what is good to a consideration of what is true.

To introduce the notion of the truth of what it means to be a human person supplies a critical methodological element in the discourse. For up to now all we've noted is that human action is end-guided, and that rational agents are motivated creatures. A knowledge of the truth of what it means to be a human being, however, supplies us with a critical answer to a problem not yet articulated: namely, if all action is ordered toward the achievement of a good, what makes for evil acts? Whence emerges dysfunction?

For Thomas, an analysis of evil acts will not emerge from a consideration of the end-guided character of human activity alone, for as we've been saying all along: all human acts are for the sake of some end. This would include even wicked acts. Something more, then, is needed to complete the analysis—indeed, much more.

St. Thomas argues that while all actions proceed under the banner of some alluring ultimacy, only those actions which are ordered to our true end (namely God) are candidates for authentically rational behavior and contribute to truly happy living. Desiring, in other words, even desiring for some thing ultimately, will not constitute a healthy human act; rather, desiring in accordance with the truth of who we are as persons ordered toward union with God will be the measure by which actions are judged to be authentically reasonable, befitting our dignity as persons, praiseworthy, healthy.

Man is, by nature, made for union with God and finds his true perfection in life, his authentic happiness, only in an everlasting friendship with the God who created him. There's no escaping this fact for St. Thomas; even the sinful man is made for this. Often the fault lies in investing a kind of ultimacy in objects which cannot bear the load. He remains a creature made for union with God and always works for something he considers to be perfecting, but he misjudges where his authentic satisfaction lies, where authentic fulfillment is to be found. Assuming he's not mentally ill, he's acting for ends and co-ordinates them under the guiding principle of something ultimate. The problem emerges in just what that something is. If the ultimate end is not friendship with God, or if his proximate goals are not ordered to such misery, dysfunction — and to the extent to which the disorder is result of deliberate choices - sin, results.

The completely perfected life, beatitude, is enjoyed fully, St. Thomas argues, only in the next life. We can, nonetheless, enjoy such a state albeit in imperfect ways, in partial ways, in this one. And it is the

degree to which one enjoys such a beatifying state that the actions of one's life are to be judged as reasonable or not, healthy or not, praiseworthy or not.

Of course, practically speaking, not all of our actions are to be explicitly cast in terms of such dramatic ultimacy. We are directed to God above, not God alone. We live, in other words, in a world of proximate goals, interim ends and while it is true that reasoned action betrays ultimate directions in the long run, one need not always be explicitly referring to such a feature to be acting reasonably.<sup>14</sup>

Pleasure, wealth, health, friendship, honor, the joy of marital intimacy can all serve as proximate ends, interim goals for healthy, rational action and for so many people for so much of their lives such ends provide the threads of life's dramatic narrative. As created by God, such ends are in themselves good. Difficulties emerge, dysfunction likely ensues (for the therapist), unhappiness follows (for the Thomist therapist) when we invest ultimate significance in things of mere interim value, when we place our confidence in things in excessive ways. The soul, being made for the contemplation of God, is often inclined to set its sights on lower objects of concern.

Fallen human beings remain ordered to beatitude, it must be said, as the invitation to divine friendship is given to us as beloved by God, not as flawless. Sinful men and women are no less made for beatitude, and to dwell in sin is to dwell in contradiction with reality. Thus while beatitude remains the goal of all striving in principle, in practice we direct ourselves toward other goods. More fully, we ascribe to partial goods an esteem which ought to be reserved to God alone.

All of us as creatures, then, remain directed toward beatitude, but because we are fallen, we no longer spontaneously order our lives in accordance with such a goal. Now, achieving our perfected state takes effort and deliberate thought, advice and the counsel of friends, conversion and the life of graced renewal. Now, the Thomist therapist has to confront the very real fact that while all of us by nature may be made for the perfected, complete life, none of us know instinctively where it is to be found. As Paul Wadell says, "It is natural for us to want to be happy, but none of us naturally knows where happiness is to be found."<sup>15</sup>

Human activity in this context, then, belies a more complex relationship of goal directed activity, of actions directed in various ways toward competing and partial goods, some pursued properly within the overall truth of beatitude, others only apparently so. The human person, as fallen, is habitually inclined to be mistaken in his judgments and must therefore regularly reflect on the direction of his or her life. All

plans of an authentically rational sort aim at some good to be achieved; what makes such planning the object of praise, however, is not that they are desired, but the extent to which they fit within the overall order of the person's relationship to God.

The good of sexual union, for example, is rightly considered as a reasonable motive for marriage. It can provide the ordering end of a rational person's decisions.

But it is only properly pursued in a manner consistent with the rational nature and dignity of the human person, when ordered in accordance with the truth of the human being as created by God. As a created good, it is capable of serving as the goal of our reasonable action. As a created good it is to be enjoyed, however, only as a partial or interim good and is not, then, to be pursued at all costs or in all circumstances. The single man must order his life choices in a manner that excludes the real good of sexual union. The married man must order his choices in a manner that includes sexual union within the overall vocation to beatitude. In both cases, sexual union is a noble candidate for goal directed, rational action. In both cases it is rightly esteemed within the context of beatitude.

All human activity, then, while directed towards goals or ends, will become normatively evaluated not simply on those terms (although it helps distinguish the action as reasonable as opposed to irrational). Rather human activity in any substantive sense will be activity directed in commensuration with the truth of things—the truth of the person and the truth of the situation. There will, then, be better and worse forms of human action precisely in so far as such actions more or less conform to the truth of what it means to be a human being. All action is directed toward some good; some action is directed toward apparent goods, others to authentic ones.

Discerning the differences between apparent and authentic goods is a complex affair but is nonetheless incumbent upon any human being who wishes to live the reasonable life in any substantive way. It will require, among other things, not just keen analysis of the active life; but rather, at its core, it will require a keen analysis of the human person at the center of that life. Moreover, such an analysis will provide not only insights into what it means to be a human being, but rather what ends or goals an authentic human being ought to pursue.<sup>16</sup>

Therapists working within this Thomistic tradition, then, will have to begin to develop a profound sense of the invitation to beatitude given to each individual human person, as well as a keen grasp of the depth, though partial, enactment of such happiness that is possible in this life. Only then are they able to exercise the practical guidance

which would facilitate an integral response to the universal invitation to fullness of life.

In conclusion, it needs to be noted that there are reasons for hope, signs within psychology that a Thomistic vision of the person would be welcome and encouraged. In a special edition of the *American Psychologist* (January, 2000) considerable attention is given to the very considerations addressed here in these brief remarks. Focusing principally on the new, emerging field of “positive psychology,” the entire issue is dedicated to the special questions of happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning. Though the work is not particularly sympathetic to a Thomistic approach, it signals one of the more positive developments in the field of psychology and provides Catholic intellectuals with an important opportunity.

“Our message is to remind our field,” Martin Seligman notes, “that psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best.”<sup>17</sup> St. Thomas and the tradition he inspired offers to contemporary psychology a vision of what is best.<sup>18</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. A recent textbook in psychology indicates that there are at least two hundred and fifty approaches to psychological therapy. Cf. David G. Myers, *Psychology 5th Edition* (Holland, MI: Worth Publishers, 1998) 488.
2. As such, Thomistic psychology is dependent upon a philosophy of human nature.
3. There is much more to this simple difference than can be noted here. For a classic presentation of the issues see Robert Brennan, OP, *General Psychology: A Study of Man Based on St. Thomas* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1952) 15-26; Herman Reith, C. S. C., *An Introduction to Philosophical Psychology* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964) 2-7; also, Chad Ripperger, F. S. S. P., *Introduction to the Science of Mental Health. Vol. I: Philosophical Psychology* (Lincoln, NE: 2001) 1-14.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II. Question 1, article 2.
5. *Summa Theologiae* I-II. Questions 1, article 1.

6. St. Thomas distinguishes between the *actus hominis* and the *actus humanus*, between activities of a human being and properly human acts. The former, while purposeful, do not normally fall under the domain of reflective, deliberate intelligence; the latter are expressions of an intellectual awareness. The distinction is not unimportant for it helps separate out what a biologist specializing in gastro-intestinal matters might know and what the dietician or health counselor might consider. Both may consider human activities surrounding nourishment, the former under the guise of an *actus hominis*, the latter as an *actus humanus*.

7. A more complete exposition would have to be careful to avoid a too-wooden understanding of this important principle. It is an easy caricature to envision human action, under these terms, as a series of discreet programmed units of end-guided acts: I will now complete this sentence; I will now sip my coffee; I will now stair out the window and ponder. Such discreet components are all part of the general activity of “conducting research,” a composite activity covering a multitude of smaller, yet related units of reasonable action all ordered around a goal.

8. For the ethical implications of this within the philosophical tradition, see Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

9. I think this is one of the most penetrating claims within the Thomistic schema. It is a comfort for those whose lives are God-centered, chilling otherwise.

10. Paul Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992).

11. Walter Farrell, *OP Chapter One: The Essence of Happiness in The Companion to the Summa vol. II* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940) 3-22. Though dated in some of its examples, the materials here are invaluable in providing a more accessible portrait for what is happening the St. Thomas’ Summa. Fortunately, it is available on the web in its entirety at <http://www.op.org/Farrell/companion>.

12. Cf. Dale Wasserman’s *Man of La Mancha*, the musical adaptation of *Miquel de Cervantes’ I, Don Quixote*.

13. See Romanus Cessario, *OP, The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); and more recently, *An Introduction to Catholic Moral Theology, Catholic Moral Thought I* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

14. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II 1.6. ad 3.

15. Wadell, 43.

16. As Seligman notes, “I have struggled to reconcile the twin imperatives that a science of human beings should include: to understand what is and what could be.” *Positive Psychology*, 7.

17. Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” *American Psychologist* (January, 2000) 14; see also Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

18. Special gratitude is due to the members of the “Anthropology Project,” sponsored by the Institute for the Psychological Sciences in Washington, D. C. A version of these comments are to appear in a forthcoming volume which details more completely St. Thomas’ vision of the human person and its promise for contemporary psychology.