

Kaz Kukiela

Did Aquinas Justify the Transition from ‘Is’ to ‘Ought’? by Piotr Lichacz*

Originally written as his doctoral dissertation, Piotr Lichacz, O.P., has delved into and elucidated profoundly what is perhaps the most fundamental challenge facing the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas: the no *ought* from *is* thesis (naturalistic fallacy). In this work, Lichacz provides a highly comprehensive account of the framework from which we may better understand and attempt to resolve the potential mistake surrounding the normative and prescriptive element of Thomism in being invalidly derived from its descriptive elements.

Piotr Lichacz begins with an introduction to the problem of the Is/Ought thesis and outlines his methodology for understanding the tools to solve it (it is also worth noting here that he mentions how Aquinas himself is likely to not have conceived of the problem in the same light as modern thinkers).¹ After the introduction, the author gives two brief accounts of the problem’s history consisting of David Hume’s and George E. Moore’s critiques. Following this, the book is divided into two parts, (1) “Aquinas’s Logic and Scientific Methodology” and (2) “Aquinas’s Way of Constructing Human *Is*.” While the first part

Kaz Kukiela — John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: kukielakaz@gmail.com • ORCID: no data

* Piotr Lichacz, O.P., *Did Aquinas Justify the Transition from ‘Is’ to ‘Ought’?* (Warszawa: Instytut Tomistyczny, 2010), 332 pages. ISBN 987-83-905171-0-0.

¹ Lichacz, *Did Aquinas Justify the Transition from ‘Is’ to ‘Ought’?*, 18.



explores such ideas as Aquinas's order of learning and inspiration from Aristotle's methods of philosophical inquiry (with sensory experience as the basis) and the varying kinds and hierarchy of truths, it also touches upon Aquinas's logic and his ways of explanation. This understanding of Aquinas's ways of explanation most notably includes the idea that the existential question (that something is) precedes the descriptive question (what something is). Thus, returning to the Is/Ought thesis, the subject matter of what should (ought to) be must be derived from what is (in the descriptive sense) but essentially, it must all come from the fact that it is (existentially). With regard to Aquinas's concepts of science, logic and cognition, Lichacz also claims that Aquinas views these domains as concerning only necessary truths that are to be known perfectly, hence implicating a special ontological aspect to the nature of the Is/Ought problem.

He later turns to anthropology, describing it as the science of the human being, and further characterizing it as "one of the integral parts of the science which has for its subject changing being"² and helps with the scientific understanding of human nature. Thus, this discipline as a science, as mentioned earlier, may hold certain necessary truths connected to the "moral character of human acts."³ It is here when Lichacz concludes part one of the book with a hint of the answer to whether Aquinas justified the transition from *is* to *ought* wherein he draws insight to the rather teleological aspect of morality with respect to human nature and science.

Part two of Lichacz's work begins with chapter 5 where he divides the theoretical sciences into three: natural sciences, mathematics, and metaphysics. Toward the end of the chapter, Lichacz comes to the conclusion that in order to construct the concept of a human *is* for the

² *Ibid.*, 165.

³ *Ibid.*

understanding of ethics, this task must be fulfilled by natural science. Within natural science, Lichacz asserts that it “considers such *speculabilia* that contain in their definition sensible matter.”⁴ With the observation of the regularity of occurrences, he suggests that human moral action can be investigated in terms of matter and form.⁵ With reference to the four causes, Lichacz then considers the form as “end, purpose, or aim” which “is manifestly always something good.”⁶ Therefore, by referring to the “finality in nature” as the determination of natural factors in producing regular effects,⁷ and connecting it with the ultimate goal of human action and nature as discovered through the results of natural science, one may interpret the author as coming closer to answering the Is/Ought question. This is evident as he claims,

[t]he explanation of [the] human being according to formal, material, efficient and final causes, contains already not only the information about what is, but also what ought to be because of the existence of the nature shared by constantly changing individuals.⁸

Thus, in an attempt to justify Aquinas’s transition from *is* to *ought*, Lichacz argues that

we are not obliged to search any other distinctive ‘ought’ than the ‘ought’ of natural finality discovered, and not established, in the consideration of what constitutes [the] human being; that is the consideration of what there ‘is’.⁹

In this way, Piotr Lichacz answers the title’s question in the affirmative—that Aquinas did in fact justify the transition from *is* to *ought*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

Piotr Lichacz's book is a great resource for inquiring Thomistic thought in the domains of logic, natural science, metaphysics, and ethics. Although the title itself is particular and explicitly presents a deep philosophical question for Thomism, rooted in metaethical questioning and inquiry, the work as a whole provides a wide-ranging and comprehensive analysis of the fundamentals of St. Thomas Aquinas's thought. The author thoroughly establishes the framework from which to address the question with a holistic approach. Moreover, the work should be recommended to those interested in Thomas Aquinas's philosophy in general as it not only investigates the question and answer for the Is/Ought thesis but also serves as a useful companion to Thomistic philosophy.



***Did Aquinas Justify the Transition from 'Is' to 'Ought'?* by Piotr Lichacz**

SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Piotr Lichacz, O.P., *Did Aquinas Justify the Transition from 'Is' to 'Ought'?* (Warszawa: Instytut Tomistyczny, 2010). According to the author, Lichacz's book provides a comprehensive analysis of Thomas Aquinas's anthropological and teleological methodology of philosophy. Consequently, it develops a supervenient and normative characteristic of natural finality onto the description of the human being as discovered in the natural sciences.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, David Hume, G. E. Moore, Piotr Lichacz, Thomas Aquinas, naturalistic fallacy, normative, descriptive, is/ought, natural sciences, anthropology, ontology, teleology, ethics, human nature.

REFERENCES

Lichacz, Piotr, O.P. *Did Aquinas Justify the Transition from 'Is' to 'Ought'?*
Warszawa: Instytut Tomistyczny [Warsaw: Thomistic Institute], 2010.