

**John Rziha**

*Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law.*

Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press  
2009.

310 pages

US\$39.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-8132-1672-0)

**Stephen Wang**

*Aquinas and Sartre: On Freedom, Personal Identity, and the Possibility of Happiness.*

Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press  
2009.

233 pages

US\$79.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-8132-1576-1)

Articulating the interrelation between faith and reason in Aquinas' thought is not easy. The 'five ways' certainly place him in the camp of those who hold faith to be reasonable. His confidence in the power of natural reason emerges from what he says about persuading others of Christian truth. Whereas with Jews a Christian can argue on the basis of the Old Testament, and with heretics on the basis of the New, with 'Mohammedans and pagans' recourse must be had to natural reason, 'to which all men are forced to give their assent' (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 2, 2). At the same time, in his desire to safeguard the unique knowledge proper to faith, Aquinas cautions against presuming that things known by faith can be demonstrated on the level of natural reason, 'lest ... one should produce inconclusive reasons and offer occasion for unbelievers to scoff at a faith based on such ground' (*De Malo*, Chapter 15).

Recent Thomistic scholarship has discovered that sealing off the faith/reason question from Aquinas' broader human teleology erroneously portrays him as a Cartesian dualist and fails to capture his harmonious vision of human knowledge, human fulfillment and the vocation to the supernatural life. Reason and free will, as the distinguishing traits of human beings, signify a distinctive end which Aquinas, following Aristotle, calls happiness (*beatitudo*). Yet Aquinas does not adopt Aristotle's *eudainomia* unqualifiedly; he transforms it in light of divine revelation. For a long time scholars tended to read Aquinas as a two-tiered system, stacking grace upon nature and positing supernatural happiness as a supra-addition to natural happiness. The challenge today is to reinterpret Aquinas as someone who views humans as having a single end—union with God—without undermining the role of natural reason in attaining that end, nor undervaluing the significance of natural happiness in orienting humans to that end.

Rziha and Wang exemplify two quite different ways of confronting that challenge. Rziha wants to argue that our understanding of natural law and human action is

incomplete if we fail to recognize that all things are true and good only to the extent that they participate in the truth and goodness of God. Moral norms, regardless of whether they are expressed in terms of natural or divine law, are, strictly speaking, extrinsic neither to their giver nor to their recipients. When God legislates morality, it is in accord with his divine wisdom, and when humans know moral truth, their knowledge participates in divine knowledge. Wang, on the other hand, believes that the key to understanding Aquinas is human freedom, arguing that he, like Sartre, viewed deliberation as a process of evaluating factors that are not yet fully determined. Because there is no single way of understanding any ‘total situation’, as Wang calls it, I can change the way I look at things, at myself, and at the goals I wish to pursue. It is precisely this process that allows me to make choices. For Rziha, God’s goodness and truth are the ultimate ground for human goodness and truth. For Wang, God’s freedom is the ultimate warrant for human freedom. Whereas Rziha believes that human freedom makes little sense if not considered as a way of participating in God’s goodness, Wang believes that human goodness is incoherent if not viewed as a way of participating in God’s freedom.

Rziha’s aim is to show that the Thomistic notion of participation furnishes moral theory with a starting point by explicitly orienting human freedom and action towards a particular and fitting end established by divine wisdom. Consequently, outside of Aquinas’ participatory metaphysics, the notions of happiness, law, and virtue are unable to convey a direct relationship between the moral agent and God. Wang aims to show that the will directly influences the operation of the intellect, enabling us to see the world and ourselves from the perspective both of ‘what is’ and ‘what could be’. Because the freedom to choose who we will become is inseparable from our ability to interpret the world in different ways, freedom cannot be separated from questions of personal identity, the nature of human understanding, and the human longing for happiness.

The major difference between Rziha and Wang lies in their respective readings of Aquinas on happiness as the proper human end. Rziha’s reading stresses the Thomistic idea that a creature attains its end by maximally exercising its highest power. The proper end of human agents accordingly consists in knowing and loving that which is true and good in essence. This itself is happiness. Of course, the *means* to achieving that happiness are various and must be freely chosen by the agent. What Rziha stresses, however, is that what we choose is not happiness *per se*, since human beings *necessarily* seek happiness; in other words, happiness is the very motive for choosing in the first place (‘I will be happier if I chose *x* rather than *y*’). The problem is that since we often do not completely understand what happiness is, we choose to seek a false end. Conversely, Wang, by stressing that reason is never fully determined and human identity never wholly fixed, mistakenly reads Aquinas as sharing Sartre’s conviction that happiness itself can take many forms. ‘The final good we seek,’ he writes, ‘is the good *in general*, without any further specification; it is happiness *in principle*, without any further conditions’ (193). Wang’s phrase ‘the good in general’ translates Aquinas’ *bonum commune*, a technical term meaning that which is desired by nature (*naturaliter volitum*). The *bonum*

*commune*, rather than a general collective category embracing all individual goods, is a formal entity in which all goods participate and towards which the will naturally tends. In fact, in Article 10 of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae* cited by Wang, what Aquinas actually argues is that just as the intellect corresponds to one common thing (*aliquid unum commune*), namely ‘truth’, so the will naturally corresponds to one common thing, namely ‘the good’. Nevertheless, under the *bonum commune* there are many particular goods, none of which necessarily determines the will.

The participatory aspect highlighted by Rziha and overlooked by Wang is put into sharper relief if we consider that Aquinas’ main argument in this article of the *Summa* is that the movement of the will follows an act of the intellect. This establishes a kind of priority of truth to goodness that runs throughout Aquinas’ thinking about human freedom. In contrast, Wang places the accent on goodness, noting that the true is something good and must be desired if it is to be known, and that nothing can be understood unless it is sought. Though not entirely absent from Aquinas, the textual support for Wang’s position is considerably weaker and more nuanced than the claim that the good is something true and must be understood if it is to be desired, and that nothing can be sought unless it is understood. Wang thus goes too far in his assertion that ‘the will determines the perspective in which the objectively determined good is seen’ (143).

Rziha’s participatory metaphysics equips him to deal more readily with the subtlety of the good as the proper object of the will understood as ‘rational appetite’. He explains that God is the cause of both the being and the operation of all creatures in a way that neither undercuts human freedom nor diminishes the indeterminateness of the will towards particular goods as the means to happiness. God, Rziha explains, exercises this causal action by means of a creature’s form. Humans, in addition to receiving the first act of being by which they are constituted as substances, also attribute their secondary operations to God’s causal power, insofar as those operations proceed from the distinctive human form as rational. Consequently, insofar as God has created humans for a particular end, when they act by participating in God’s power and direction, they also work towards achieving their perfection as agents; in other words, they enhance their participation in God’s goodness.

The absence of a participatory framework in Wang’s analysis causes him to conflate the indeterminateness of the will and the indeterminateness of the intellect. As a result, he tends to view the extensive variety of particular goods as the ends of human happiness rather than the means to achieving it. As he puts it, ‘Aquinas believes that we have to choose all our ends—except the final one’ (193). A more robust participatory metaphysics would enable him see that the will, though not determined by any singular good, is nonetheless directed toward particular goods insofar as they fall under the *bonum commune* and hence participate in divine goodness. Because God’s infinite goodness is the cause of every particular good, and because happiness, the ultimate human good, is achieved only by choosing those particular goods which will truly perfect our

participation in divine goodness, the range of things conducive to human happiness is narrower than Wang would have it.

This is why virtue is so central to Rziha's interpretation of Aquinas, while virtually absent from Wang's. There would be little to criticize in the latter's esteem for Aquinas' radical doctrine of human freedom, were it not that Aquinas places equal weight on natural human inclinations, something virtually non-existent in Sartre. These inclinations are the means by which the eternal law moves humans to their proper end. In this sense law is a cause. However, as Rziha explains, these inclinations need to be perfected by acquiring the natural and infused virtues, by which we are moved and governed more perfectly by the eternal law and thus empowered to participate more fully in God's goodness.

This all points to divergent readings of Aquinas' epistemology and metaphysics. Wang and Rziha agree that a rightful autonomy is due to natural reason's capacity to know objective truth. Yet because Wang interprets Aquinas as teaching that we can only know what we desire, he sees a fundamental agreement between Sartre and Aquinas that 'truth is neither relative or absolute', but rather 'the relationship itself between the absolute and human beings which makes up the world' (94). Knowledge and desire are therefore the condition of our 'union with being'. Rziha reads Aquinas as saying that such a union of humans with being already preexists through participation. All creatures participate in the eternal law by being moved and governed by it, even though humans participate in it cognitively as well. Knowing and desiring are not conditions for a union of human beings with being, but ways of participating freely in the union which already exists by their sharing in the being of God.

Which brings us back to the issue of faith and reason. As Aquinas identifies the single end of human existence as union with God, an accurate analysis of his epistemology and human freedom must accordingly occur against a metaphysical background that concedes primary of place to infinite being, *esse ipsum subsistens*. It is not that metaphysics is impossible apart from theology, but only that a sufficient understanding of Aquinas' view of human happiness requires a metaphysics of participation that profiles human freedom against eternal law as 'cause'. This implies that Aquinas the theologian is inseparable from Aquinas the philosopher, even if at times he appeals to the principles of reason and at others to the principles of faith. If there is ever a time when both are crucial for understanding what he means, it is in his argument about happiness in the first question of Parts 1-2 of the *Summa Theologiae*, which Wang takes as strictly philosophical. Thus he fails to discriminate sufficiently between Aquinas' and Sartre's reasons for holding that perfect happiness in this present life is impossible: a difference perhaps as great as the metaphysics separating him from Rziha.

**Daniel B. Gallagher**  
Pontifical Gregorian University