

Slavery in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to clarify Thomas's position on slavery with particular focus on his texts themselves rather than on secondary literature. But in order to best understand Thomas's views on slavery, it is beneficial to understand Aristotle's views because he provides some historical and intellectual context in which to place Thomas. Other than a few passages in *The Athenian Constitution*, all of Aristotle's significant writings on slavery appear in the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the majority of Aristotle's statements on slavery can be found in the *Politics*. We know that Thomas was very well acquainted with Aristotle's views on slavery in both of these works because he wrote commentaries on them. Although Thomas's commentary on the *Politics* is incomplete and ends with chapter six of book three, Aristotle's comments on slavery are concentrated in books one and three of the *Politics*. Given Aristotle's profound influence on Thomas, throughout this essay I will generally begin with passages from Aristotle and then provide the essence of Thomas's thoughts on the sentiments expressed in those passages. Most of Thomas's views are not directly expressed in his commentaries on the *Politics* and the *Ethics*; in fact, it is often difficult to divine exactly what Thomas thinks about Aristotle because his commentaries are designed more for the clear elaboration of Aristotle's position than for a critical assessment of Aristotle per se. However, Thomas discusses slavery in several passages in his *Summa Theologiae*, and I have attempted to relate these passages to passages in Aristotle's writings that have similar themes.

In order to provide a complete and yet coherent picture of Thomas's views on slavery, I have structured my essay in the following way. First I discuss the nature of slavery and the relation between master and slave. Next I distinguish between natural and conventional slavery. I then discuss the theory and characteristics of natural slavery followed by a discussion of conventional slavery. Following this I discuss economic slavery or indentured servitude as a form of conventional slavery tolerated by Thomas. I then discuss comments made by Thomas regarding the treatment of slaves. I conclude my essay with a summary of Thomas's position on slavery.

The Nature of Slavery

In the first book of the *Politics*, Aristotle notes that a state is made up of households, and he writes that “a complete household consists of slaves and freemen” (1253b2).¹ In his commentary on this passage, Thomas writes that Aristotle “says *complete* because oxen take the place of slaves in households of the poor, as he has said before” (1.2.2).² Aristotle suggests the relationship between master and slave or servant³ is natural because all households require some source of labour, either animal or human, to be self-sustaining. He goes on to say: “indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life” (1254b24-5). But the relationship between master and slave is only one of three basic relationships that are found in households according to Aristotle; the other two are between husband and wife, and between parent and children. Thomas agrees with Aristotle regarding these basic relationships, including the one of master-servant: “the mutual relations of the members of a household admit of a threefold combination; namely, those of master and servant, those of husband and wife, and those of father and son” (II-I, q.105, a.4, co.). It is interesting that Thomas describes the same three relationships and puts them in the same order as Aristotle does; it is likely that Thomas had the *Politics* in mind when writing this section of the *Summa Theologiae*. Aristotle notes that these latter two relationships differ in kind from the relationship between master and slave. In his *Commentary on the Ethics*, Thomas writes: “The slave belongs to the master as a chattel, and a son is – so to speak – a part of the father until he is a certain age or mature and separated from the father by emancipation” (Book V, Lecture XI, Section 1013). Therefore sons rank higher than slaves because they are more closely related to their fathers and they will later attain “freedom” from the authority of their fathers. In his *Commentary on the Politics*, Thomas writes: “husbands rule over wives, and fathers over children, as free persons, not as slaves” (1.10.1). Although men rule over women and slaves, the nature of that rule is different. In particular, Aristotle notes that “nature has distinguished between the female

¹ I use the Bekker page, column and line numbers for all citations of Aristotle.

² For all citations of Thomas’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics* I use the numbering system employed by Richard Regan in his translation. The citation “1.2.2” means book 1, chapter 2, subsection 2 of Thomas’s *Commentary*.

³ English translators use both “slave” and “servant” to translate (i) the Greek word δούλος that Aristotle uses throughout the *Politics*, and (ii) the Latin word *servus* that Latin translators consistently use for δούλος.

and the slave” (1252b1). Thomas agrees that the status of women is much higher than the status of slaves. In the *Summa Theologiae* he writes:

A wife, though she is something belonging to the husband, since she stands related to him as to her own body, as the Apostle declares (Eph. 5:28), is nevertheless more distinct from her husband, than a son from his father or a slave from his master: for she is received into a kind of social life, that of matrimony, wherefore according to the Philosopher (*Ethics* V.6) there is more scope for justice between husband and wife than between father and son, or master and slave” (II-II, q.57, a.5, co.).

Also in the *Summa Theologiae* where Thomas discusses the creation of woman from the rib of man, he writes: “Nor was it right for her to be subject to man’s contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet” (I, q.92, a.3, co.). In other words, slaves are an object of contempt and rank below women in the hierarchy of the household.

Having established the uniquely low status of slaves in Aristotle’s hierarchy in the household, Aristotle then provides a number of characteristics of slaves. First of all he says that a slave is a piece of property which belongs to the household (1256a1). While discussing the concept of justice in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas discusses the ownership of slaves as follows: “Now that which is ordered to a man is said to be his own. Thus the master owns the slave, and not conversely, for that is free which is its own cause” (I, q.21, a.1, arg.3). Given that a slave is a piece of property, Aristotle then becomes more specific as to the kind of property. In particular, a slave is an instrument or tool to be used by the household. However, the slave is “an instrument which takes precedence of all other instruments” (1253b34). Thomas explains that what Aristotle means by “taking precedence” is that slaves use and move the other non-living instruments and tools found in the household (*Commentary* 1.2.7). Aristotle then makes a distinction between the activity of a household slave, which is action, and the activity of a manual labourer, which is production. He states that the activity of household life is higher than mere production of goods because the latter is subordinate to the former. Aristotle therefore implies that the activity of a household slave is somewhat more elevated than the activity of hired manual workers, for example leather workers, who produce goods that are used to support the activity of the household. Thomas then takes

these various passages from the *Politics*, synthesizes them, and forms a typically Aristotelian definition of the species “slave” comprised of a genus and a collection of differences. Thomas defines a slave in the following way:

We posit instrument as the genus and add five specific differences. By the fact that we call the instrument living, we distinguish it from inanimate instruments. By the fact that we call the instrument useful for activity, we distinguish it from a craftsman’s assistant, who is a living instrument of production. By the fact that we say that the instrument belongs to another, we distinguish a slave from a free person, who sometimes serves in a household freely or for pay, not as property. By the fact that we call the instrument separate, we distinguish it from a part like the hand, which belongs to something else but is not separate. And by the fact that we call the instrument a human being, we distinguish it from irrational animals, which are separate property (1.2.11).

The preceding serves as a general definition of a slave, but in theory there are two types of slaves differentiated by both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. In the *Politics* Aristotle writes: “The words slavery and slave are used in two senses. There is a slave or slavery by law as well as by nature. The law of which I speak is a sort of convention – the law by which whatever is taken in war is supposed to belong to the victors” (1255a4-7). There is a greater element of force involved when it comes to slavery by law, and there is no common interest between a master and a conventional slave: all the benefits of the relationship accrue to the master. The attitude of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas towards slavery by law is complicated, and I will discuss it in more depth later in the essay. However, both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas recognize the legitimacy of slavery by nature, and in this restricted sense of slavery one can fairly say that Thomas “supported” slavery.

When it comes to natural slavery, there is a common interest between a master and his slave. In his *Commentary on the Politics*, Thomas writes:

It is advantageous for slaves and masters, fit to be such by nature, that one be the master, and the other the slave. And so there can be friendship between them, since the association of both in what is advantageous for each is the essence of friendship (1.4.11).

The key feature of natural slavery is that the natural slave benefits from the relationship. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas makes use of Aristotle's distinction of two kinds of servitude or two kinds of subjection when he discusses the relationship between men and women:

Subjection is twofold. One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit, and this kind of subjection began after sin. There is another kind of subjection, which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin (I, q.92, a.1, arg.2).

The first "servile" kind of subjection corresponds to slavery by law. The superior is the one who benefits from the relationship. On the other hand, the second or "economic" kind of subjection corresponds to slavery by nature; the subjects are governed for their own benefit. Justifying the lordship of Adam over Eve, Thomas goes on to say: "For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves" (I, q.92, a.1, arg.2). Therefore everyone benefits from the natural form of subjection or slavery. Thomas makes similar comments when he discusses the rights of nations:

Considered absolutely, the fact that this particular man should be a slave rather than another man, is based, not on natural reason, but on some resultant utility, in that it is useful to this man to be ruled by a wiser man, and to the latter to be helped by the former, as the Philosopher states (Politics I.2) (II-II, q.57, a.3, arg.2).

The key words are "utility" and "useful." Thomas explicitly supports natural slavery in the *Summa Theologiae* where he discusses natural law and whether it can be changed. An objection is raised that the possession of all things in common and uniform freedom are part of the natural law, so it could not be possible for slavery to be natural. Thomas answers that one way in which natural law may be changed is by adding to it for the greater good: "nothing hinders the natural law from being changed, since many things for the benefit of human life have been added over and above the natural law, both by the Divine law and by human laws" (II-I, q.94, a.5, co.). He then replies to the objection by claiming:

‘the possession of all things in common, and uniform freedom’ are said to be of the natural law, because, that is, the distinction of possessions and slavery were not brought in by nature, but devised by human reason for the benefit of human life. Accordingly the law of nature was not changed in this respect, except by addition” (II-I, q.94, a5, arg.3).

Thomas is clear that natural slavery is “for the benefit of human life;” one therefore cannot claim that Thomas was against all forms of slavery. But in order to understand how a slave can benefit from slavery, we first need to understand what Aristotle and Thomas meant by a natural slave.

Natural Slavery

On the first page of the *Politics*, Aristotle writes:

There must be a union of natural ruler and subject, that both may be preserved. For he who can foresee with his mind is by nature intended to be lord and master, and he who can work with his body is a subject, and by nature a slave; hence master and slave have the same interest (1252a32-5).

There are two points that are noteworthy. The first is that there is an analogy between a good ruler of free people and a slave master: both are concerned with not only their own benefit but the benefit of those over whom they have dominion. The second noteworthy point is that the defining difference between a master and a natural slave is that the master “can foresee with his mind;” in other words, the master is more intelligent than the natural slave. Aristotle writes that a slave by nature is someone who “participates in rational principle enough to apprehend, but not to have, such a principle” (1254b21-2). Thomas elaborates: “one who is a slave by nature, because he lacks sufficient reason, cannot help us in deliberation or any work of reason. Nevertheless, a slave, because he has reason, can serve in physical tasks in more ways than an irrational animal can” (*Commentary* 1.3.11). Therefore, natural slaves do have some reason, but their reason is limited. This lack of sufficient reason is something congenital: “From the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule” (1254a23).

Thomas in his *Commentary on the Politics* explains that some form of natural slavery is necessary for the survival of the natural slave: “nor would those who abound in

physical powers be able to be preserved unless the practical wisdom of another were to rule over them” (*Commentary* 1.1.7). The natural slave benefits from his master in the same way that a tame animal benefits from human ownership “since the animals in many cases then obtain physical safety that they could not obtain by themselves. For example, this is evident when human beings provide them with abundant food and medical help” (*Commentary* 1.3.7). Thomas points out that “performing manual tasks is the best work that they can do, since they can execute the latter but not the works of reason” (*Commentary* 1.3.10). Both Aristotle and Thomas therefore definitely approve of natural slavery on the basis of intelligence because it is mutually beneficial. Aristotle summarizes his position with the following comment: “It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right” (1255a2-3). Thomas summarizes his position with the following:

Therefore, all human beings who differ from others as much as the soul does from the body, and as human beings do from irrational animals, are, because of the eminence of reason in them and the deficiency in others, by nature masters of the others. In this regard, Solomon also says in Proverbs 11:29: ‘The stupid will serve the wise.’ (*Commentary* 1.3.10).

This is one of the few scriptural references quoted by Thomas in his *Commentary on the Politics*; this suggests that Thomas strongly believes in the merit of Aristotle’s argument regarding natural slaves.

Given the legitimacy of natural slavery, an obvious next question is: how do we identify whether someone ought to be a natural slave? There certainly were no intelligence tests in the days of Aristotle or Thomas. Instead both Aristotle and Thomas seem to point to barbarians or foreigners as potential sources for natural slaves. When Aristotle describes the farmer or husbandmen class of people in Book VII of his *Politics*, he writes: “The very best thing of all would be that the husbandmen should be slaves taken from among men who are not all of the same race.... The next best thing would be that they should be perioeci⁴ of foreign race, and of a like inferior nature” (1330a25-31). Aristotle therefore implies that foreigners are inferior to Greeks. Earlier in the *Politics* he

⁴ Perioeci, or περί οικοι in Greek, comes from περί (around) and οικοι (those who dwell) and refers to free people dwelling around Sparta but who were not citizens.

notes: “Hellenes do not like to call Hellenes slaves, but confine the term to barbarians” (1255a29). In commenting on this passage, Thomas makes a distinction between absolute foreigners and relative foreigners. A relative foreigner is someone who speaks a different language but is rational and literate in that language. Although Thomas’s *Commentary* did not go as far as Book VII of the *Politics*, had he done so he would likely have mentioned the following passage from Aristotle as an example of relative foreigners: “the natives of Asia are intelligent and inventive, but they are wanting in spirit” (1327b27). By contrast, absolute foreigners “do not establish laws, or [they] establish unreasonable laws... [and] have no literary practices” (*Commentary* 1.1.9). They lack reason and “seem absolutely foreign to the human race” (1.1.9). Thomas opines that “they lack reason either because they happen to live in a climate so intemperate that it causes most of them to be dim-witted, or because there is an evil custom in certain lands whereby human beings are rendered irrational and brutish, as it were” (1.1.9). Thomas then makes a generalization regarding the suitability of certain people to be natural slaves – a generalization that Aristotle himself does not directly make: “most [absolute] foreigners are physically strong and mentally weak” (1.1.10). Aristotle does, however, imply that certain foreigners are more suitable as natural slaves: “Those who live in a cold climate and in Europe are full of spirit, but wanting in intelligence and skill” (1327b23-4). In *On Kingship*, Thomas quotes a passage from Vegetius’ *De Re Militari* that echoes these sentiments: “As Vegetius tells us ‘... Northern tribes, far removed from the burning rays of the sun, are more dull-witted indeed’” (II.V.126). Thomas does not contradict this opinion; in fact, he uses it to support his arguments. Clearly Thomas believes in some form of slavery based on intelligence and, at least indirectly, based on race.

Other than low intelligence, it is reasonable to ask what sorts of qualities a natural slave has or ought to have. Aristotle writes:

A question may indeed be raised, whether there is any excellence at all in a slave beyond and higher than merely instrumental and ministerial qualities – whether he can have the virtues of temperance, courage, justice, and the like; or whether slaves possess only bodily and ministerial qualities (1259b21-5).

Aristotle answers this question by stating that both free men and slaves “must have a share of virtue, but varying according to their various natures” (1260a4-5). He goes on to say that “although the parts of the soul are present in [the free man and the slave], they are present in different degrees” (1260a11). He concludes by stating: “We determined that a slave is useful for the wants of life, and therefore he will obviously require only so much virtue as will prevent him from failing in his duty through cowardice or lack of self-control” (1260a34-6). Therefore slaves must have some virtues, and it is the responsibility of the master to help the slave acquire his small amount of virtue. Aristotle writes:

It is manifest, then, that the master ought to be the source of such excellence in the slave, and not a mere possessor of the art of mastership which trains the slave in his duties. Wherefore they are mistaken who forbid us to converse with slaves and say that we should employ command only⁵, for slaves stand even more in need of admonition than children (1260b4-7).

Thomas agrees that slaves must be allowed to develop some amount of virtue. In the *Summa Theologiae* he writes: “Prudence is not the virtue of a slave as slave nor of a subject as subject. Since however every man for as much as he is rational, has a share in ruling according to the judgment of reason, he is proportionately competent to have prudence” (II-II, q.47, a.12, co.). Responding to one of the objections, Thomas writes: “A slave is not capable of taking counsel, in so far as he is a slave (for thus he is the instrument of his master), but he does take counsel in so far as he is a rational animal” (II-II, q.47, a.12, arg.2). In other words, to the extent that slaves have reason, however limited, they ought to be given counsel in order that they may develop virtues such as prudence and that they may develop them to whatever level they are mentally able to attain.

Slavery by Law, or Conventional Slavery

Having established Thomas’s views on natural slavery, we are in a position to try to clarify his views on slavery by law, or conventional slavery. In his article “Aquinas’ Doctrine of Slavery in Relation to Thomistic Teaching on Natural Law,” Oscar J. Brown

⁵ In this passage Aristotle is responding to Plato’s *The Laws*, in which the Athenian stranger says that one ought to address slaves with a simple command. *The Laws* 777e.

admits that with respect to slavery by convention: “there is quite a considerable quarrel among commentators – concerning both the doctrine of Aristotle himself and also, especially, Aquinas’ exegesis of Aristotelian teaching on the subject” (Brown 173). Rather than examining the various positions of commentators, I will focus on the texts of Aristotle and Thomas themselves.

Having outlined his position on natural slavery in the *Politics*, Aristotle writes: “Others affirm that the rule of a master over slaves is contrary to nature, and that the distinction between slave and free man exists by law only, and not by nature; and being an interference with nature is therefore unjust” (1253b20-2). He admits that those who hold this opposite opinion from his “have in a certain way right on their side” (1255a4). He then cites the convention that the victors of a war may take the vanquished as slaves. He points out that some people identify justice with goodwill and “detest the notion that, because one man has the power of doing violence and is superior in brute strength, another shall be his slave and subject” (1255a9-10). He points out that other people identify justice with the “mere rule of the stronger” and believe that “superior power is only found where there is superior excellence of some kind” (1255a14). Brown claims that Aristotle’s position is difficult to determine “due to its almost inextricable entanglement with the two extreme positions he wants to reject” (Brown 173). Although I agree that, in general, Aristotle’s position on conventional slavery is difficult to determine, in this passage I believe that Aristotle greatly favours the former position. Aristotle does not identify justice with the “mere rule” of the stronger, and Aristotle believes that it is insufficient for the victor to simply have “superior excellence of some kind”. Aristotle raises the question: “what if the cause of the war be unjust?” and answers it: “no one would ever say that he is a slave who is unworthy to be a slave. Were this the case, men of the highest rank would be slaves and the children of slaves if they or their parents chance to have been taken captive and sold” (1255a25-8). When Aristotle says that those who oppose slavery “have in a certain way right on their side,” he is referring precisely to those cases of conventional slavery where someone who is not a natural slave is enslaved. He also writes that “there is great evil” when a legislator trains his citizens to conquer their neighbours, and he writes: “neither should men study war

with a view to the enslavement of those who do not deserve to be enslaved” (1333b38-40).

However, Aristotle goes on to write that men “should seek to be masters only over those who deserve to be slaves” (1334a3). Here he does not define who exactly deserves to be enslaved. One might try to argue charitably that he is referring strictly to natural slaves. But if that is the case then it is difficult to explain what Aristotle means when he says that if good citizens learn the crafts of their inferiors and habitually practise them, “there will cease to be a distinction between master and slave” (1277b6). We have already established that natural slaves differ from their masters in that their intellects are significantly less developed. There should never be a problem distinguishing master from natural slave. Furthermore, Aristotle’s position on conventional slavery is made more complicated by comments such as the following: “But the art of acquiring slaves, I mean of justly acquiring them, differs both from the art of the master and the art of the slave, being a species of hunting or war. Enough of the distinction between master and slave” (1255b38-40). He tries to suggest that slaves can be acquired justly by “hunting” them or through acts of war. But notice that he ends the discussion without elaborating further on how this hunting of slaves can be defended as being just. I suspect that Aristotle knew that his position was murky and indefensible.

But even more damaging to Aristotle’s position is the following comment: “I will hereafter explain what is the proper treatment of slaves, and why it is expedient that liberty should be always held out to them as the reward of their services” (1330a34). Now if the only people deserving to be slaves are natural slaves, then their intellect is limited. If their intellect is limited, then they were enslaved in the first place for their own good. Why would one need to hold out the promise of freedom to a slave who is benefiting from his enslavement? Aristotle does not answer this question. He therefore seems to support some kind of conventional slavery.

In contrast to Aristotle, I believe that Thomas is more consistently opposed to conventional slavery except when it is economically necessary⁶. In a number of places in the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas writes that “mastership has a twofold meaning” (I, q.96, a.4, co.). The first is the master who has a conventional slave by law; the master has use

⁶ I explain economic slavery, or indentured servitude, later in the essay.

of the slave and benefits from the slave. The second master is analogous to a governor ruling over free men, or, alternatively, the second master is analogous to certain angels ruling over other angels in a heavenly hierarchy such as archangels ruling over angels. This kind of mastership corresponds to natural slavery. Thomas notes that: “in the state of innocence man could have been a master of men, not in the former but in the latter sense” (I, q.96, a.4, co.). In other words, conventional slavery is part of a sinful world. Thomas then makes his position more explicit: “It is a grievous matter to anyone to yield to another what ought to be one’s own, therefore such dominion implies of necessity a pain inflicted on the subject” (I, q.96, a.4, co.). Thomas makes similar negative statements about slavery in his work entitled *The Religious State, the Episcopate, and the Priestly Office*. He writes: “Nothing is so repugnant to human nature as slavery; and, therefore, there is no greater sacrifice (except that of life), which one man can make for another, than to give himself up to bondage for the sake of that other” (Chapter 10, p45). He goes on to say:

The state of slavery does in some sort resemble death, and is therefore called civil death. For life is chiefly manifested in ability to move; he that cannot move save by the agency of others, may be accounted dead. Now, a slave has no power over himself, but is governed by the will of his master; and therefore this condition of bondage may be compared to death. Hence a man, who, for the love of another, delivers himself to bondage, practises the same perfection of charity, as he who exposes himself to death. Nay, we may say that he does more; for slavery is more abhorrent to our nature than is death. (Chapter 14, p79).

In the preceding passage, slavery is likened to a state even worse than death. This position of Thomas is antithetical to conventional slavery.

There is a passage from the *Summa Theologiae* that is sometimes taken out of context that seems to imply that Thomas believes that conventional slavery is justified as a form of punishment. Thomas writes: “Since slavery was imposed in punishment of sin, it follows that by slavery man forfeits something which otherwise would belong to him, namely the free disposal of his person, for a slave, as regards what he is, belongs to his master” (II-II, q.189, a.6, arg.2). In this passage Thomas is commenting on a passage

from the Old Testament of the Bible⁷. He uses the past tense “was imposed.” He does not mean to imply that slavery is still imposed on a given race of men as a punishment for their collective sins.

Economic Slavery or Indentured Servitude

However, there is one form of conventional slavery that Thomas appears to tolerate, and that is servitude brought about by debt or other adverse economic circumstances. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas writes: “A man might sell not only his son, but even himself, rather as a hireling than as a slave, according to Leviticus 25:39-40” (II-I, q.105, a.4, arg.4). Thomas makes it clear that the status of the person who sells himself (or his son) into a form of servitude is not exactly a slave (*servus*) but is more like someone who is hired for pay or a “hireling” (*mercenarius*). Since Thomas is elaborating on a practice found in the Old Testament of the Bible, one might discount the value of this passage as justifying selling oneself into servitude. However, Thomas makes a similar comment in his work entitled *The Religious State, the Episcopate, and the Priestly Office*. In the following section, Thomas explains the nature of making a vow:

We must remember, however, that a man may deprive himself of liberty either absolutely (*simpliciter*) or relatively (*secundum quid*). If he bind himself, either to God or man, to perform some specific work for some allotted time, he renounces his freedom, not absolutely but partially, i.e., with regard to the particular matter, about which he has laid himself under an obligation. If, however, he place himself entirely at the disposal of another, reserving to himself no liberty whatsoever, he makes himself a slave absolutely, and thereby absolutely alters his condition. Thus, if a person make a vow to God to perform some specified work, such as a pilgrimage or a fast, he does not change his condition entirely, but only partially, i.e., with regard to that particular work which he vows to accomplish” (Chapter 15, p85).

In other words, people can deprive themselves of their liberty to perform some specific work such as to pay off a debt.

⁷ “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Genesis 9:25). New International Version.

The Treatment of Slaves

Given that Thomas supports some forms of slavery, it is then interesting to note how Thomas believed slaves should be treated. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas permits corporal punishment:

Therefore it is not lawful for a man to strike another, unless he have some power over the one whom he strikes. And since the child is subject to the power of the parent, and the slave to the power of his master, a parent can lawfully strike his child, and a master his slave that instruction may be enforced by correction (II-II, q.65, a.2, co.)

But abuse is not condoned; instead, it is important to note that the punishment is intended to be part of instruction. On the other hand, slaves should be praised for exemplary behaviour: “Gratitude is due even to a slave, when he does more than his duty” (II-II, q.106, a.3, arg.4).

There are few other references in the writings of Thomas regarding the treatment of slaves other than those found in the Supplement to the Third Part of the *Summa Theologiae* which was compiled⁸ from Thomas’s *Commentary on Book IV of the Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Question fifty-two is entitled “Of the Impediment of the Condition of Slavery,” and there are a number of interesting comments presented. With respect to marriage, “Nothing prevents marriage between slaves, or even between a free man and a bondswoman” (Th. Suppl., q.52, a.1, arg.1). In addition, a slave does not require permission to marry: “Further, slavery is of positive law; whereas marriage is of natural and Divine law. Since then positive law is not prejudicial to the natural or the Divine law, it would seem that a slave can marry without his master's consent” (Th. Suppl., q.52, a.2, s.c.).

Thomas even discusses the viability of a slave becoming a priest. A slave or anyone in indentured servitude cannot practise as a priest because he cannot pledge what he does not own:

⁸ Likely by Fra Rainaldo da Piperno. I assume, however, that the sentiments expressed in the Supplement reflect Thomas’s views.

I answer that, by receiving Orders a man pledges himself to the Divine offices. And since no man can give what is not his, a slave who has not the disposal of himself, cannot be raised to Orders. If, however, he be raised, he receives the Order, because freedom is not required for the validity of the sacrament, although it is requisite for its lawfulness, since it hinders not the power, but the act only. The same reason applies to all who are under an obligation to others, such as those who are in debt and like persons (Th. Suppl. q.39, a.3, co.).

However, if a slave is ordained with the knowledge of his master, he is automatically freed:

If he be ordained, his master knowing and not dissenting, by this very fact he becomes a freedman. But if his master be in ignorance, the bishop and he who presented him are bound to pay the master double the slave's value, if they knew him to be a slave. Otherwise if the slave has possessions of his own, he is bound to buy his freedom, else he would have to return to the bondage of his master, notwithstanding the impossibility of his exercising his Order (Th. Suppl., q.39, a.3, arg.5).

Thomas is clear that the debt must be voluntarily forgiven by the master, or else the debt must be paid. In either case, the implication is that the slave is an economic slave or an indentured servant.

Conclusion

Thomas's position on slavery can be summarized as follows. Following Aristotle, Thomas believes that some people are, through an intellectual limitation often influenced by race, natural slaves because it is in their own best interest. These slaves are not to be abused but can be physically punished for their own instruction. They should be trained in virtue by their masters to whatever level they are able to attain. They can marry and even, in some circumstances, be ordained as priests. In contrast to Aristotle, Thomas is more consistently opposed to conventional slavery. In general he finds this form of slavery abhorrent. One exception is that Thomas tolerates economic slavery or indentured servitude: a debt must either be paid off or else explicitly forgiven by the creditor.

Before criticizing Thomas's position on slavery, one must first consider that the word *slavery* in English is a politically-charged word that is almost always associated with the inexcusable, financially-motivated African slave trade of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. Thomas would have considered this type of slavery to be "abhorrent to our nature." One could not consider this a form of natural slavery because the forcible removal of Africans from their homelands, and their transportation to plantations in South America and the southern United States, was clearly not for their benefit. And the fact that they had no debt to repay also rules out the economic form of conventional slavery.

But given the limited knowledge of foreigners and the different economic system of the thirteenth century, Thomas's position on slavery is rational and consistent.

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