

Dignity is said in many ways: a re-reading based on Thomas Aquinas

A dignidade diz-se de muitos modos: uma releitura baseada em Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

In dialogue with Xabier Etxeberria on his judgment regarding Thomas Aquinas' ontology, the present investigation seeks to support another interpretation of the ontology of the dignity of the human person. In accordance with Aristotle, Thomas adheres to the philosophical maxim that being is said in many ways. If being is said in many ways, then being worthy must also be said in many ways in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Based on this assumption, we will analyze the occurrences of the term "*dignitas*" in the *corpus Thomisticum* to understand the multiple uses and contexts of being worthy, resolving Etxeberria's objection.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas; Human Dignity; Ontology; Being; Polysemy.

Resumo

Em diálogo com Xabier Etxeberria sobre seu julgamento a respeito da ontologia de Tomás de Aquino, a presente investigação procura sustentar uma outra interpretação da ontologia da dignidade da pessoa humana. Com Aristóteles, Tomás adere à máxima filosófica pela qual o ente se diz de muitos modos. Ora, se o ser é dito de muitos modos, então o ser digno também deve ser dito de muitos modos na obra de Tomás de Aquino. Com base neste pressuposto, analisaremos as ocorrências do termo "*dignitas*" no *corpus thomisticum* para entender os múltiplos usos e contextos do ser digno, resolvendo a objeção de Etxeberria.

Palavras-Chave: Tomás de Aquino; Dignidade Humana; Ontologia; Ser; Polissemia.

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Introduction

In his provocative article, entitled “Ser y existencia de los derechos humanos”, Xabier Etxeberria (2012) considers it unusual in post-metaphysical times, to use the language of Habermas, to deal with human rights from ontological categories such as “being” and “existence”. Assuming a possible dialogue not so much with the proposal of his ontology, but rather with his judgment on the ontology of Thomas Aquinas, the present investigation seeks to take another look at the Thomistic ontology of the dignity of the human person.

The part that draws attention in that article is the one in which Xabier Etxeberria (2012) performs his analysis of the philosophical history of dignity, considering that there is no defense of human dignity in its universal and perennial sense in Thomas Aquinas. In his judgment, the work of Thomas Aquinas is incapable of supporting universal, inherent, and equal human rights:

El segundo acercamiento paradigmático a la dignidad nos lo ofrece Tomás de Aquino. Su texto clave es este: ‘El hombre, al pecar, se aparta del orden de la razón, y por ello decae en su dignidad, es decir, en cuanto que el hombre es naturalmente libre y existente por sí mismo; y hundiéndose en cierto modo en la esclavitud de las bestias, de modo que puede disponerse de él en cuanto es útil a los demás’. Preciso lo implicado en esta afirmación sintética: en principio, la dignidad es algo que concierne al hombre en cuanto tal, por ser libre y existente en sí mismo; pero se consolida cuando es merecida, cuando la libertad se ejerce para el bien; quien hace el mal la pierde, y al perderla, se degrada como hombre haciéndose bestia; con lo que puede ser tratado como bestia, esto es instrumentalizado en sentido pleno. (Xabier Etxeberria, 2012, p. 396)

To support his argument and view on Thomas Aquinas, the author relies solely and exclusively on a passage from the *Summa Theologica*, in which the licitness of the death penalty is investigated. By the answer to the third objection of the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3), one who acts unworthily should not be treated by others (by the political community) as a worthy being because he has ceased to be so. Xabier Etxeberria’s emphasis on the change in the order of being due to the sinner’s action should attract the attention of the reader of Thomistic ontology.

In a similar line of interpretation to Xabier’s, Mette Lebeck (2009, p. 78) already considered “disconcerting” the fact that the aforementioned passage of the *Summa Theologica* is the only one in which Thomas Aquinas uses the expression “dignitas humana” and, at the same time, it is a meritocratic conception of moral and political virtues to the point that the loss of human dignity could justify capital punishment.

Nevertheless, human dignity is an essential characteristic of the human person that makes the latter important in herself, by the very fact that she is a person. This importance can, however, be lost by sin, and can be cancelled by the performance of acts deviating from rational order. It then no longer commands the universal respect due to rational animals: in fact, a human being who has undone her importance as a human being through evil acts is no more dignified than a beast, and

can therefore be killed. This doctrine is somewhat disconcerting, as it seems to take meritocracy to the extreme. It is all the more disconcerting as it is the only time, we meet the expression *dignitas humana* in Aquinas, and indeed in all the texts examined from the Christo-centric period. The passage seems in fact to compromise the contention otherwise defended by Aquinas that a subject is essentially characterized by dignity.

Instead of proposing another hermeneutic of this text from *Summa Theologica* considered disconcerting to the reader of Thomas Aquinas (indeed, disconcerting because it even seems to be an internal contradiction to his thought on the dignity of the human person), Mette Lebech (2009, p. 78) tries to justify such a position by saying that Thomas Aquinas only reflects the needs of the life and society of his time and what was practically possible in his Cristo-centric context:

This disconcertingly extreme meritocracy may to some extent be justified by Thomas' contention, fundamental to his ethics, that the subject determines itself through its actions. This idea gives expression to the experience that by acting inhumanely we become less than human, and it paints the unsentimental scenario according to which we may be able to brutalize ourselves so badly, that we destroy our human dignity from within and come to deserve death. Indeed, St Paul said that it was due to sin that death entered the world. In this sense death could be said to be what the human being deserves because of sin, and also to be the reason why Christ came to take sin upon himself and die for all. The latter article of Christian faith could have mad Aquinas think that the criminal could hope to be forgiven. But Thomas's point of view in this regard may also reflect the necessities of life, insofar as the possibilities his society had for sanctioning crime by any other means than capital punishment was extremely limited. Maiming and imprisonment burdened society more than it prevented crime from recurring, whereas death in some cases solved otherwise unsolvable problems. The Cristo-centric context, operative mostly with only a weak state authority to sanction crime, had to enforce ethical standards very severely: it had to provide for more than the forgiveness of sins in so far as it had to provide for what was practically possible.

The two interpretations of the same passage of the *Summa Theologica*, the one proposed by Xabier Etxeberria and the one by Mette Lebech, offer us the opportunity to revisit the texts of Thomas Aquinas trying to answer whether we find in them a defense of the dignity of the human person that helps us in the critical examination of the passage under discussion of the *Summa Theologica* concerning the supposed loss of human dignity.

Dignity is said in many ways

In accordance with Aristotle, Thomas adheres to the philosophical maxim that being is said in many ways. If being is said in many ways, then being worthy must also be said in many ways in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Based on this assumption, we will analyze the occurrences of the term "*dignitas*" in the *corpus thomisticum* to understand the multiple uses and contexts of being worthy.

The Thomistic concept of dignity is broader and deeper than some critics suggest, who seek to replace it with the concept of autonomy, dependent on the Kantian tradition (Cf. SILVEIRA; SALLES, 2012). However, due to the intrinsic limits of the present research, it is not intended to exhaust the multiple meanings of “dignity” in the *corpus thomisticum*. For that, we recommend reading of other analyses, such as the one developed by Servais Pinckaers (1987), which we consider to be the inspiration for the current research.¹

In this way, an attempt is made here to analyze three fundamental senses of “dignity” in Thomas Aquinas, organized philosophically, that is, without presupposing the validity of the contents of Christian revelation.

Among three senses of *dignitas*, two of them could be called static because they refer to the reality of what is as such, while one of them could be called dynamic, because it deals with the order of acting rather than the order of being.

These three senses must also be organized analogically to preserve the proper unity underlying the theoretical uses present in the work of the philosopher of Aquinas. Indeed, the attentive reader of Aquinas’ work will certainly come across a regulated polysemy of the concept of “dignity” (“*dignitas*”) and especially of human dignity (“*dignitas humanae naturae*”), commensurate with his metaphysical and theological understanding of reality.

The analogically regulated polysemy depends on a philosophical consideration of the concept of dignity, structured here from a focal sense, proposed by Thomas Aquinas in his *Commentary on the Sentences*.

This first focal sense, as explained later, will be called the transcendental conception of dignity because it permeates all the other senses. In turn, the sense of dignity proportional to the nature or essence of each entity² will be understood as belonging to the categorical sense of dignity.

Both senses, the transcendental and the categorical, can be interpreted as static. In a sense, they are still independent of the properly theological senses of dignity, that is, those that result from the understanding of the dignity of God and Christ according to the sacred doctrine (“*sacra doctrina*”)³.

If the two previous meanings of dignity, that is, the transcendental and the categorical, are related to the constitutive structure of the human person, we must also emphasize the dynamic sense of human dignity, linked to freedom and the capacity of the human person to be, in a certain way, cause of himself (“*causa sui*”).

Thus, for a better understanding of the study developed here, this exposition will be subdivided by the presentation of the resolutive method of Thomas Aquinas. Next, the

¹ Servais Pinckaers’ (1987) research identified, through Fr. Busa’s *Index Thomisticum*, 1,455 references and uses of the Latin term “*dignitas*” in the *corpus Thomisticum*.

² Throughout this exposition, according to the interpretation originally proposed by Cornelio Fabro (1974), it will be assumed that the concept of “being” (“*ens*”) is the most adequate to express everything that is as such, reserving the concept of “be” as “act” (“*esse ut actus*”) for the constitutive and perfective principle by which the being is. Thus, among the various meanings of the verb “to be”, the one that appears as the most original in Thomas Aquinas is that of being as an act of being (“*esse ut actus essendi*”).

³ There are at least three theological senses of dignity in the *corpus thomisticum*. The first, the genealogical sense, is one that understands the dignity of the human person as a creature made in the image and likeness of the Creator. The second, the Christological sense, is that which refers to the dignity of the person of Christ who, according to medieval Christian doctrine, raised the dignity of human nature by assuming it through the incarnation. Finally, the third, eschatological sense, is the one that corresponds to the dignity of the human person in eternal life configured to the person of Christ. It should be emphasized that Thomas Aquinas understands the divine incarnation as the most perfect way of instructing men in the great dignity of their human nature (cf. PINCKAERS, 1987).

transcendental sense of dignity will be discussed, followed by the categorical sense of dignity as applied to the human person. Finally, the dynamic sense of dignity will be considered.

The transcendental sense of dignity

In the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas' philosopher offers an explicit definition of the concept of "dignity" ("*dignitas*") in comparison with "utility" ("*utilitas*") in the following terms: "dignity signifies the goodness of something in relation to itself, while utility the goodness in relation to another" - "*dignitas significat bonitatem alicujus propter seipsum, utilitas vero propter aliud*" (*Super Sententiarum*, III, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4⁴).

In this first or focal sense, an entity is said to be useful by reason of something else, but it is said to be worthy by reason of itself, or rather by reason of its own goodness. According to the resolutive method (cf. SALLES, 2007), what is useful must be resolved into what is worthy just as what is good in relation to another is resolved into what is good in itself.

Although Thomas Aquinas does not link in his *Commentary on the Sentences* or in any other of his works the definition of dignity to his resolving theory of the transcendental, that is, to the general way⁵ of saying the being applicable to all being, one might suggest that just as every being is one, thing, something, true and good, so every being is worthy. This last statement needs to be justified here, as it departs from what is commonly classified as being part of the transcendental concepts.

In the *Summa Theologica* (I, q. 5, a. 1), Thomas Aquinas holds that "the good and the being are identical in reality, but differ as to reason". Since the concept of goodness and that of being are not different "*secundum rem*" but only "*secundum rationem*" (Cf. SALLES, 2007), Thomas can argue that goodness differs from being only conceptually and not actually.

Indeed, something is good insofar as it is being and something is being insofar as it has the act of being ("*actus essendi*"), which is the actuality of all things. In Thomas Aquinas thought something is said to be good: 1) by reason of its entity, because what is good is to be in act; 2) by reason of its being attractive, because it is of the reason of good to be attractive.

Therefore, quoting the Philosopher, he understands good as that to which all things tend. By applying this reflection to the question of the convertibility between goodness and being on the one hand, and that of dignity and being on the other, one can infer that the recognition of dignity presupposes that:

1) dignity is to the act of being ("*actus essendi*") and essence ("*potential essendi*") of each thing ("*ens*" / "*res*") just as goodness is to the being and essence of each thing, since both are convertible to being;

2) dignity conceptually adds to the being the reference to goodness considered in itself and not by reason of something else.

⁴ The English translations of Thomas Aquinas' Latin were done by the authors. The references to the works of Thomas Aquinas follow the international pattern of citation and abbreviation, that is, after the indication of the work in italics, the Roman numerals are used for the indication of the books separated by commas from the following abbreviations for the parts of the books: 1) "d." for "distinctio"; 2) "q." for "quaestio"; 3) "a." for "articulum"; 4) "co." for "corpus"; 5) "obj." for "objectio"; 6) "ad" for "ad objectiones".

⁵ The "general mode," later called the "transcendental mode," differs from the "special mode" in that it does not consider the various degrees of entity and the various modes of being, but only what is applicable to every being as such.

In this condition, what is worthy is a good in itself (“*bonitatem alicuius propter seipsum*”), an inherent, intrinsic, and constitutive perfection that Thomas would ultimately resolve into the very being (“*ipsum esse*”) of each singular reality.

As we know, in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, the act of being (“*actus essendi*”) of everything is the actuality of all acts and perfection of all perfections (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3; *De Potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9). As demonstrated by Cornelio Fabro (1950; 1960), this is the ontological key of the intensive hermeneutic of Thomas Aquinas, since he maintains that the act of being is a perfect act in relation to which all the other principles of beings (matter, form, essence, substance, accidents) are potentialities.

John Wippel (2000, p. 172) calls attention to the principle that the act of being is not self-limiting for Aquinas. Following Fabro (1950; 1960), Wippel refers to the originality of intensive being in Thomas as a self-evident axiom of his metaphysics. To explain the intensive being and illustrate his metaphysical argument, Thomas proposes the example of whiteness, as Wippel (2000, p. 173) explains: At times Thomas refers to a ‘power of being’, a *virtus essendi*, or a *potestas essendi*, that he assigns to the act of being. Thus in *Suma Contra Gentiles* I, c. 28 he notes that if there is something to which the total power of being (*virtus essendi*) belongs, no nobility or perfection will be lacking to that thing. And then he refers to that thing which is identical with its act of being, i.e., God, as possessing *esse* according to the total power of being (*potestas essendi*). To illustrate this he appeals to his favorite example of whiteness. If there were a separate (subsisting) whiteness, nothing of the power (*virtus*) of whiteness would be lacking to it. (...) he continues, if something possesses the infinite power to exist (*infinitam virtutem ad essendum*) only according to an act of being that is participated in from something else, insofar as it participates in the act of being (*esse*), it is finite; for what is participated is not received in the participant according to its total infinity, but only in partial, i.e., finite fashion. And in his Commentary on the Divine Names, Thomas writes that because things other than God have an *esse* that is received and participated, they do not possess it according to the total power of being.

Since only God is His own subsistent being and possesses the infinite power of being, all other beings possess being by receiving it, i.e., by participation and limitation through the actual composition of the act of being (*actus essendi*) with the essence (*potential essendi*). By these ontological theses, Thomas appears to have in mind that all dignities, actualities, and perfections rest on the act of being, communicated by God in the act of creation.

Frequently enough in his writings, Thomas sometimes reasons from the absolute and infinite power, perfection, dignity, and excellence of God in order to establish the dignity of the being of creatures (*via compositionis*), and sometimes he goes the other way, that is, he starts from the participated and finite power, perfection, dignity, and excellence of creatures in order to name God himself (*via resolutionis*). In both ways of reasoning, it never fails to uphold the goodness, truth, unity, and beauty participated in by each thing in its being.

If dignity, like goodness, is an actuality attributed transcendentally to everything that is, then dignity is not added extrinsically to the being as something that would be alien to it, because everything that is worthy is so by its own being and its own goodness. Furthermore, if dignity adds nothing extrinsically and really to the being (for the latter is worthy as such), but

adds something in our way of expressing it, one must realize that dignity refers transcendently to beings insofar as they are and are in a certain way (that is, they are good in themselves). This transcendental sense of dignity is the most common and universal sense and, at the same time, the most intensive because it is applicable to everything that is by reason of its being and its essence.

The intensive character of dignity manifests itself significantly in discussions about the equal excellence, magnitude, or dignity of Trinitarian persons. Although the context is evidently theological, the conceptual usage is no less philosophical. Indeed, Thomas considers dignity to be an absolute attribute that belongs to the act of being and essence. Now, if dignity refers to intrinsic goodness (“*propter seipsum*”) and this belongs to the essence (“*ad essentiam pertinet*”), then dignity is an intensive and constitutive attribute (cf. *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 42, a. 4, ad 2). So far, one can affirm that there is an ontological dignity prior to that which is extensible generically and specifically to human persons or that which is acquired either as part of a character or by virtue of the exercise of offices, functions, and authorities.

Therefore, the transcendental sense of dignity is applicable not only to human persons, but also to angelic and divine persons, as well as applicable to all other beings, regardless of their generic, specific, or individual differences. This transcendental usage allows the philosopher to maintain the equal ontological dignity (“*aequalis dignitas*”) of all beings insofar as they possess being and are good (Cf. *Super Sententiarum*, lib. 2, d. 37, q. 1, a. 1, co.).

In summary, for the Aquinas no entity lacks dignity as long as it is good in itself by its own being and its own essence. In turn, since the good has a reason for an end, it is necessary to recognize that the transcendental sense is that according to which the dignity of everything that has being in itself resides in being a good in itself and an end for another. But being an end for another does not mean being a useful means, but rather being an object of attraction, admiration, and respect by reason of its own dignity. Unfortunately, these fundamental distinctions and clarifications on the transcendental meaning of dignity are not found in Xabier Etxeberria’s article.

The categorical meaning of dignity

The transcendental meaning, as found in the *corpus thomisticum*, makes explicit a content that is formally compatible with the foundation not only of human rights but also with the foundation of the dignity of all that is as such. Such compatibility arises from the intensive notion of being (“*actus essendi*”) that does not contradict an also restrictive or categorical use of dignity. Transcendental dignity is coextensive with entitative dignity since the transcendental sense of dignity is convertible to the very concept of being (“*ens*”).

In turn, the other senses of dignity will be articulated by Thomas as categorical uses, that is, as special ways of saying the worthy entity, since they consider the most diverse degrees of entity and its different modes of participation in being. Because of the limits of the present study, an attempt will be made to highlight one of the most excellent categorical senses of dignity, that which is said of the person.

With regard specifically to the dignity of the human person, it must be remembered that Thomas himself adopted as valid the definition current in scholasticism and attributed to the masters (“*magistri*”), according to which the person is a special name by reason of his own

dignity. The link between the notion of dignity and that of the person is patent in the recurrent definitions of the notion of person itself in the *corpus thomisticum*⁶.

Because of the importance of this link for the correct evaluation and interpretation of the meanings of personal dignity in Thomas Aquinas, the following are its main occurrences: “the name person is imposed for the special reason that it is a property pertinent to dignity” (“hoc nomen persona ponit specialem rationem vel proprietatem pertinentem ad dignitatem” (*Super Sententiarum*, I, d. 23, q. 1, a. 1)); “for it belongs to dignity, because the person is the hypostasis distinguished by the pertinent dignity” (“quod pertineat ad dignitatem, quia persona est hypostasis distincta proprietate ad dignitatem pertinente” (*Super Sententiarum*, I, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3)); “the name person includes special reason for distinction insofar as it belongs to dignity” (“nomen personae specialem includit distinctionis rationem quae ad dignitatem pertinet” (*Super Sententiarum*, I, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1)); “the person, according to the masters, is the hypostasis distinguished by the attribute pertinent to dignity” (“persona, secundum magistros, est hypostasis proprietate distincta ad dignitatem pertinente” (*Super Sententiarum*, II, d. 3 q. 1, a. 2, sc. 1)); “since the person imports dignity” (“quod, cum persona importet dignitatem” (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 32, a. 3, ad 4)); “person is the hypostasis distinguished by the property pertinent to dignity” (“persona est hypostasis proprietate distincta ad dignitatem pertinente” (*Summa Theologica*, III, q. 2 a. 3 co)); “in effect, the person is said to be a name of dignity (...) the nature which the person in his signification includes is most worthy (*dignissima*) in all his nature” (“unde cum persona videatur esse nomen dignitatis. (...) natura autem quam persona in sua significatione includit, est omnium naturarum dignissima” (*De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 4)).

Although the name “person” in its origin does not designate the being relative to dignity but rather the personality of the theatrical actor, Thomas notes that it is because of what it came to mean that the name “person” came to refer to human beings and, by analogy, even to God, in order to designate what is worthy in and of itself.

As Echavarría (2013, p. 279) notes, the use of ‘person’ to signify divine realities inspired Christian philosophy from Patristic to Scholastic to the “maximum refinement of its concepts, such that the notion of person comes to overcome the predicamental scope of substance.” This overcoming to which the author refers here is called transcendental because of the discovery of the act of intensive being. And without that overcome, we could not follow the analogical path in the triplex via (with special attention to the “*via remotiois*”) to sustain the divine persons.

The answer to the third objection of the third article of the twenty-ninth question of the *Summa Theologica*, clarifies the change of meaning in the passage from its use in Greek theater to medieval theology.

It must be said that although person is not convenient to God considering the origin of the term, however, considering what it has come to mean, it is extremely convenient to God. Indeed, as famous personages were represented in comedies and tragedies, the term person came to designate those who were constituted in dignity. Hence the use in the churches of calling those who have some dignity personalities. For this reason, some define person by saying that it is a hypostasis

⁶ The name person, in Thomas Aquinas, does not mean a name of intention (“*nomen intentionis*”) nor a name of negation (“*nomen negationis*”), but a name concerning the reality (“*nomen rei*”) of concrete persons who are subsistent in themselves and distinct from others.

distinguished by a quality proper to dignity. Now, it is great dignity to subsist in a rational nature. Therefore, the name person is given to every individual of this nature, as has been said. But the dignity of the divine nature surpasses all dignity, so the name person is most appropriate to God.

The theologian's language is clearly analogous and follows the triplex via in *Summa Theologica* about the divine persons. Thomas understands the divine person from the eminence of the term originally applied to theatrical characters, then to individuals by reason of their positions, functions, and attributions, and finally to human individuals themselves to emphasize the dignity according to which they are constituted in being. Thus, 'person' came to mean what is by reason of his excellence or dignity.

For the foregoing, since it is great dignity to subsist in a spiritual nature, 'person' also refers to all human individuals⁷ as subsisting in a rational nature. Hence, Thomas holds that by 'person' is meant a hypostasis, that is, an individual and singular substance distinguished by its dignity. It is important to note that in all occurrences in the *corpus thomisticum*, it is not said restrictively that the dignity of the person is attributed to human beings by reason only of their rational nature or intellectual substance, but rather and above all that the name 'person' is given by reason of their own dignity or by reason of property pertaining to dignity⁸.

In effect, the name 'person' was not given to signify the individual on the part of his nature, but to signify him as subsisting in such and such a nature. To subsist in such and such a nature is to be worthy by his subsistence. And to be worthy in that ontological way is to be worthy by reason of his own being, which is the act of all acts and perfection of all perfections. As we noted above, to be worthy by his nature or essence is to be worthy by potentialities compared to the act of being, since nature or essence are potencies in relation to the act and not the other way around. The act of subsisting is none other than the very act of personal being by which the person is and subsists. What is most ontologically determinant for Thomas Aquinas in the constitution of the human person is, therefore, his own unique act of being that is incommunicable and distinct from all other beings and persons. And this unique and personal act of being is never lost by any human act. For this reason, one cannot accept the hypothesis of the loss of ontological dignity, as defended by Xabier Etxeberria (2012).

According to Thomas Aquinas, since the act of being ("*actus essendi*") by which the being is and subsists belongs to the constitution of the person ("*esse pertinet ad ipsam*

⁷ It must always be remembered that by "first substance" Thomas Aquinas means the subject actually subsisting in a nature, while "second substance" refers only to the essence or nature of the thing. Hence, the individual is said of that which is not divided in itself and is divided from others; in turn, the individual substance is the subject or supposer that subsists in the genus of the substance. It follows that the "person" is the subject or supposer that subsists in a rational nature. Although Thomas himself "corrects" the Boecian definition, it is important to emphasize that he adopts it in his work as the definition of the human person because of the perfection and uniqueness of his act of being.

⁸ This can clearly be inferred from the following sentences: "hocnomen subsistentia significat quod est per respectum ad individuationem; sed hoc nomen persona ponit specialem rationem vel proprietatem pertinentem ad dignitatem" (*Super Sententiarum*, I, d. 23, q. 1, a. 1); "secundo quod pertinet ad dignitatem, quia persona est hypostasis distincta proprietate ad dignitatem pertinentem" (*Super Sententiarum*, I, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3); "sed contra, persona, secundum magistros, est hypostasis proprietate distincta ad dignitatem pertinente" (*Super Sententiarum*, II, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, sc 1); "Propterquod quidam definiunt personam, dicentes quod persona est hypostasis proprietate distincta ad dignitatem pertinente" (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 29, a. 3, ad 2); "Ad quartum dicendum quod, cum persona importet dignitatem, ut supra dictum est" (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 32, a. 3, ad 4); "Ad primum ergo dicendum quod persona non addit supra hypostasim proprietatem distinguentem absolute, sed proprietatem distinguentem ad dignitatem pertinentem, totum enim hoc est accipiendum loco unius differentiae" (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 40, a. 3, ad 1)

constitutionem personae”), “to be a person” means to be always constituted in ontological dignity. Considering that human persons do not have their being identical to their essence, then it is not said of them that they are persons only by reason of their being nor only by reason of their essence, but both by reason of their act of being (“*actus essendi*”) and their potentiality of being (“*essence*”) in a subsistent unity, individual and distinct from other individual realities.

In the *Summa Theologica* (III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2), Thomas considers that “personality necessarily belongs to the dignity and perfection of something insofar as it belongs to its dignity and perfection to exist by itself, which is what is meant by the name ‘person’”. In his *Commentary on Romans* (II, II, 217), Thomas also affirms that dignity exists in the highest degree in humans, because they are related to the good by themselves, and not by means of something else, reinforcing the previous notion of dignity in opposition to utility.

Thus, the dignity of the human person belongs to the individual and incommunicable unity of his being and of his essence. As a matter of fact, regarding the incommunicability of being a person, it is worth highlighting what the philosopher of Aquinas sustains in his *Commentary on the Sentences* (III, d. 5, a. 2, a. 1, ad 2) about personhood.

The individual who is a person cannot communicate with other persons as a part, because he is a complete whole. Moreover, the person cannot communicate as the universal communicates to particulars, because the person is something subsistent in itself. Finally, the person cannot communicate as something assumable by another, because there is not more than one personality of its own, and what is assumable is based on the personality of the one who assumes.

As stated by Aquinas, ‘personhood’ is incommunicable for three reasons: 1) because it is not part, but a complete whole; 2) because it is not universal, but singular; 3) because of its uniqueness in the order of personality, since it cannot be taken over by another. Therefore, Thomas in the *Summa Theologica* will maintain that: “person means what is *perfectissimum* totally in its nature, that is, subsisting in a rational nature” (“*persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura, scilicet subsistens in rationali natura*”).

From those teachings on the human person, we are in harmony with the position of Mette Lebeck (2009, p. 77) in his conclusion about the metaphysics of person in Thomas Aquinas: “we must conclude that dignity is inalienable, inherent or intrinsic to the subject and to subjectivity as such, as dignity is what makes something identifiable as someone”. Nevertheless, Mette Lebeck did not realize that this ontological dignity persists even in the one who, by virtue of his own choices and his own actions, diminishes until he loses his own moral and political dignity, as we can understand studying the dynamic sense of dignity.

The dynamic sense of dignity

The meanings previously analyzed refer to what is constitutive of all that is insofar as it is (transcendental meaning) or even of all that is insofar as it has a certain way of being, a certain essence and nature (categorical meaning). In the categorical sense, the dignity of the human person has a special and irreducible ontological value, since it expresses the intrinsic dignity of the human person, whose uniqueness and incommunicability of his being and of his essence constitute a single and irreducible individual subsisting in a finite spiritual nature. This double sense, the transcendental and the categorical, has been called the static sense to discern it from the dynamic sense of dignity, which could also be called the properly ethical sense of dignity, that is, that sense that derives from the human person's own capacities and actions (Cf. GUYETTE, 2013).

Thanks to the reading of the third lesson of the second chapter of the *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (c. II, l. 3), it is possible to discern four dynamic senses of dignity, classified by Thomas Aquinas from the consideration of the human being as the efficient cause of his own action tending to the good. The first degree of dignity, considered as supreme, is that in which the human person is not led by another, since she/he leads himself to the good (“*et iste est supremus gradus dignitatis in hominibus, ut scilicet non ab aliis, sed a seipsis inducantur ad bonum*”). The second, pertains to the human person insofar as he is led by another to the good, but without coercion (“*secundus vero gradus est eorum qui inducantur ab alio, sed sine coactione*”). The third, refers to that person who is coerced by another to the good (“*tertius autem est eorum qui coactione indigent ad hoc quod fiant boni*”). The fourth, is said of the person who cannot even by coercion be directed to the good (“*quartus est eorum qui nec coactione ad bonum dirigi possunt*”).

The evidently teleological character (by reason of the tendency to the good in every action or operation) of the above passage should not obscure its dynamic sense, for the human being is not only constituted in dignity in his own being and in his own essence, but is also said to be worthy because she/he is capable of tending to the good, whether by himself or by another.

Since actions are in singulars and these are in themselves, Thomas will conclude that a special name, that of person, must be given to singular entities of a rational nature that possess dominion over their own singular acts:

The particular and the individual are realized in a still more special and perfect way in rational substances that have the mastery of their acts and are not only moved in action like others, but act by themselves. Now, actions are in the singulars. Therefore, among other substances, individuals of a rational nature have the special name of person" (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 29, a. 1).

Persons are not only acted upon but act for themselves, and in this too their dignity consists. Through his/her own unique actions, each concrete person individuates and expands itself as a person. In the dynamic order of personal being, personality is as incommunicable and distinct as the very being of the person. That there is a reason for dignity in the human person that stems directly from his will and freedom, is what the following passage also shows:

There must be the voluntary in human acts. To prove this, one must consider that in some acts, or movements, the principle is in the agent, or in the one who moves; in others, the principle is outside (...). But those who have news of the end are said to move themselves, because in them is not only the principle of the action, but also the action for the end. And since both come from an intrinsic principle to act and act for the end, their movements and acts are said to be voluntary: the name voluntary implies that the movement and the act come from one's own inclination (...) Therefore, since man knows to the utmost the end of his action and moves himself, it is in his acts that the voluntary is manifested to the utmost. (*Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 6, a. 1).

Thus, once constituted in dignity, the human person tends to dignity by his own freedom, that is, by his own voluntary acts. Such dignity is rooted in the dominion that the human person has over his/her own acts since he/she is capable of acting for himself. Again in the *Summa Theologica* (I, q. 59, a. 3, sc), this dynamic dignity presupposes free will, which belongs to the constitutive dignity of the human person (“*libertas arbitrii ad dignitatem hominis pertinet*”).

The most important Thomist thinker to devote his attention to the theme of dynamic participation in being was, without a doubt, Joseph de Finance. At the end of his work devoted to the theme of dynamic participation in being, which is essentially ethical, he declares:

But by acting well, by conforming to the divine Thought, I conforms myself to the radical orientation of being; I put myself, for so say, in the sense of the ontological current. This is made possible a penetration, a spiritual possession of things, which the most subtle speculations will never procure. Once again, there is no question here of cognitive enrichment. The straightness of appetite favors theoretical knowledge only by shielding the intelligence from disturbing influences. It is a question of a dynamic affinity, of an ‘existential’ presence, of a completely different order. of intelligible possession, but which nonetheless constitutes a true conquest of reality (DE FINANCE, 1965, p. 341, our translation).

The “radical orientation of being” is of course based on the static participation of beings, categorical and transcendental, as we have said. But it is a question here of the moral character of man, which both increases his participation in being, more than intellectual knowledge itself, which gives him his ontological dignity, and reveals a dynamic affinity with the being. This dynamic of the participation of the will is based on the act of being of the soul and, although both the faculty of the will and its acts are accidents and, as such, belong in some way to predicamental participation, their objects are transcendent and conquered act by act. The object and nature of the will reveal to us that it is reality, that is, a real good, or even being, that moves it. Freedom, as a property of the will, is at the root of this dynamic and, more than the indeterminacy of the faculty, indicates the maximum perfection that man can achieve.

Through freedom, every human person is the cause of himself, that is, of his way of acting and living. For this reason, while the first two senses of dignity pointed together to

constituted dignity, the dynamic sense of dignity derives much more from a dignity acquired by reason of freedom, the person's way of acting and living⁹.

With this dynamic meaning of dignity in mind, it is important to return to the reading of the third objection of the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3), the original passage quoted by Xabier Etxeberria as proof that the Thomistic notion is not able to ensure a universal, equal, ontological dignity for all human beings. For our argument to make sense about moral dignity not being synonymous with ontological dignity, one must quote Thomas' Latin passage:

Ad tertium dicendum quod homo peccando ab ordine rationis recedit, et ideo decidit a dignitate humana, prout scilicet homo est naturaliter liber et propter seipsum existens, et incidit quodammodo in servitutem bestiarum, ut scilicet de ipso ordinetur secundum quod est utile aliis; secundum illud Psalm., *homo, cum in honore esset, non intellexit, comparatus est iumentis insipientibus, et similis factus est illis*; et Prov. XI dicitur, *qui stultus est serviet sapienti*. Et ideo quamvis hominem in sua dignitate manentem occidere sit secundum se malum, tamen hominem peccatorem occidere potest esse bonum, sicut occidere bestiam, peior enim est malus homo bestia, et plus nocet, ut philosophus dicit, in I Polit. et in VII Ethic. (TOMÁS DE AQUINO, 1948)

It is very important to observe the terminology used by Thomas, especially four of them: the verbs 'recedit', 'decidit', 'incidit' that connote the same semantic field, meaning both separation and approximation; and the adverb 'quodammodo'. All these terms, therefore, have an accidental connotation of human action (that is human moral dignity) and do not affect the substance of man, which maintains his dignity.

Final considerations

Without exhausting the other uses of the term "*dignitas*" in Thomas Aquinas, especially those dependent on Christian theology, the present reflection sought to demonstrate the existence of a polysemy governed by a transcendental, categorical and dynamic sense of dignity, with the aim of contributing to the history of the idea of "human dignity" and avoiding misunderstandings of his work, such as the one identified in the article by Xabier Etxeberria (2012).

The triple meaning exposed here offers the historian of ideas the opportunity to reflect on the Western tradition from its medieval roots, thus broadening his horizons of comparison and evaluation, especially of the concept of dignity of the human person that tends contemporarily to be reduced to the concept of moral autonomy (Cf. RUTH, 2003).

⁹ From the static and dynamic senses of dignity, Thomas Aquinas can infer also a series of corollaries, among which we can highlight: 1) the one who gives life is more worthy than the one who only receives it (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c. 20, n.7); 2) the one who has life is more worthy than the one who does not have it (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c. 20, n.7); 3) the one who has sensitive life is more worthy than the one who does not have it and, a fortiori, the one who has intellectual life is more worthy than the one who does not have it (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, c. 59, n.15); 4) the one who acts out of his own freedom is more worthy than the one who does not act freely (*De Potentia*, q. 1, a. 5, co.); 6) the one who acts in conformity with his being is more worthy than the one who acts contrary to his being (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 18, a.1-2). The corollaries clearly manifest a hierarchical conception not only of reality extrinsic to men, but also of the human person himself, ordered to be by his own freedom ever more worthy in his being, in his acting, and in his way of living with and for others in society.

As demonstrated above, the transcendental sense of dignity is convertible with everything that is insofar as it is good in itself. Now, since the good has the reason of an end, it is necessary to recognize that the transcendental sense is that according to which the dignity of everything that is resides in being good in itself and an end for another. But being an end for another does not mean being a useful means, but rather an object of attraction, admiration, respect and esteem by reason of its own dignity.

In turn, the categorical sense receives its main employment when it concerns the person, especially the human person for the purposes of the present investigation. After all, following a long medieval tradition, Thomas Aquinas assumes dignity as a note pertaining to the very understanding of the human person. However, he does so according to his intensive philosophy of being, that is, he interprets the dignity of the human person as constituted by reason of his being that is the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections. In this sense, by the act of being (*actus essendi*) each person participates in an ontological dignity in relation to its first cause, which is God. Moreover, by its own act of being and its own specific mode of being (essence as potency of being), each person is constituted in its unity, goodness, ontological truth. Everything that is constitutive of the person in order for him/her to be a person is a sign of his ontological dignity.

This ontological status requires appropriate choices and actions, since people as subjects of dignity must pursue their individual and collective goals for themselves. At the same time, persons as subjects of dignity must be treated and must treat others as worthy subjects in themselves by their own ontological dignity. Therefore, the human person should not be treated in a purely instrumental manner for his or her ontological dignity.

Furthermore, regarding the third objection of the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3), the original passage quoted by Xabier Etxeberria, it is very important to observe the terminology used by Thomas, especially four of them: the verbs ‘recedit’, ‘decidit’, ‘incidit’ that connote the same semantic field, meaning both separation and approximation; and the adverb ‘quodammodo’. All these terms, therefore, have an accidental connotation of human action and human moral dignity. For this reason, these terms do not affect the substance of man, which maintains his dignity.

Finally, the dignity gained by the person by reason of his will and freedom makes his unique actions a new and rich source of the dignity of his personal being and living, which is unique, irreducible, and incommunicable. The human person is the only reality known to us that can expand its own dignity by reason of its freedom. Human freedom constitutes the heart of the dynamic dignity of human beings and that dignity (and only that) unfortunately can be lost but not the ontological dignity that is constitutive of every single human person.

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