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Aquinas, feminism, and the common good

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Review of
Aquinas, Feminism, and the Common Good

SUSANNE M. DECRANE
Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004. 220 pp., $27.95

Susanne DeCrane offers a Christian feminist ethical retrieval of Thomas Aquinas's notion of the common good, so that she can wield this moral principle in a struggle to identify and change social structures and policies that discriminate against women. Her practical focus, in a brief concluding chapter, is on health care in the United States and the need to attend to the fact that women as a group, especially poor black women, suffer disproportionately from the inadequate social provision of health care.

DeCrane begins with a brief summary of the biblical hermeneutics of Sandra Schneider and the theological ethical method of Rosemary Radford Ruether. Schneider and Ruether suggest to DeCrane that it is possible for Christians to read biblical and other traditional texts that express derogatory attitudes toward women in such a way that those texts can nonetheless speak a "fundamental liberating truth" to oppressed women (p. 19). DeCrane refers to the idea of an objective moral order and to the moral anthropology of Martha Nussbaum to insist further that, despite postmodern and postliberal objections, Christians and others can and must hold that there is a basis for distinguishing liberating truths from oppressive falsehoods. It is (universally) morally bad, in DeCrane's view, for human beings and women in particular to be deprived of fair opportunities to pursue decent lives.

DeCrane offers little argument for her hermeneutical approach and for her basic moral convictions. She is content to summarize, combine, and extend a few points of the scholarship of Schneider, Ruether, and Nussbaum. Hence, this work will appeal mainly to other feminists who resonate with DeCrane's methodology. Specifically, it will appeal to readers who believe that the Bible and at least some traditional Christian writings contain a liberating word that cries out for retrieval, namely, a word that corresponds to an idea of justice as equal access to the basic goods needed to exercise a mature moral and religious agency. For feminists who already share this view of God and morality, the primary contribution of DeCrane's work is the provision of guidance in digging for—and learning to apply with increased feminist sensitivity—supportive resources from within the Christian tradition.

DeCrane's work would have had broader appeal if she had addressed (with arguments) additional sets of readers. One set is moral thinkers (including many liberals) who would argue that she is projecting a peculiarly modern conception of morality, which does not require biblical justification, onto a patriarchal biblical text and tradition, in order to claim a biblical or divine basis for feminist ethics (i.e., to affirm that feminist experiences of liberation correspond to God's intention for humanity). Another set of readers whom she might profitably have addressed is conservative Christian women (and men) who would claim that they have the better evidence on their side to argue that the Bible and tradition speak a word that liberates women in a radically different way than she supposes, namely, by legitimating a conservative worldview in which men take primary leadership and responsibility in society and family, and women find a well-circumscribed meaning for their lives in submissive relationships with good men.

To the audience she has chosen, DeCrane seeks to retrieve the core idea of the common good from Aquinas while rejecting his view that the common good includes the maintenance of the social order in the form of structured relationships of male dominance and female subordination. DeCrane offers a good analysis of the main lines of Aquinas's thinking on the common good. The notion refers, in one sense, to the good at which all things aim as their highest end, which is God (that which perfects all things) and (from another angle) each and every existing thing's specific perfection. The common good for humans, in particular, refers to that toward which all humans, by nature, are oriented, which is God (the principle of perfection) and each and every human's specifically human (rational, moral, and spiritual) perfection, approached through the exercise of acquired and divinely infused virtue. In retrieving the idea of the common good for the present, DeCrane affirms that all humans, including all women, are ordered to realize their highest good through the exercise of (mostly) shared, embodied capabilities. She maintains that there are no compelling reasons to think that women are inherently disabled in their efforts to do well at being human.

DeCrane argues that, for Aquinas, the common good for humans refers also, in another sense, to the temporal social conditions that must exist if people are to engage in the serious pursuit of virtue. Generally speaking, these conditions include relative social order and unity, and the just and equitable provision for basic human needs. In retrieving Aquinas, DeCrane draws intriguing arcs between core ideas of Aquinas and modern feminist notions. For example, she connects Aquinas's comments concerning the creation of male and female in the image of God with contemporary ideas of respect for persons and universal human rights. She connects Aquinas's notion that "it is sometimes appropriate (in extreme situations) to take from the excess of the community or of another what someone lacks as a necessity for sustaining life" (p. 117) with a contemporary "preferential

option" for women and girls, who are the poorest of the poor around the globe: "The premise of this retrieved principle of the common good is that the genuine common good of the community is *only* pursued to the extent that those who are most at risk within the community . . . are attended to with moral and practical seriousness in an effort to understand and change the circumstances that contribute to this group's lack of participation in the benefits of the common good" (p. 117).

This is a thoughtful and creative project. It addresses an important set of topics in a clear and systematic way. At several key points in the presentation, this reader wanted more extensive argumentation and justification for the positions outlined, but the book is nevertheless a welcome invitation to ethical inquiry on behalf of women who suffer dire deprivation and abuse due to the prevalence of moral callousness, misogyny, and structural injustice around the world. The book is a worthwhile effort to recover valuable analytical tools that have been lost to feminists who think that men like Aquinas are no longer worth reading because the oppressive features of their scholarship overwhelm the truth they speak.

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Review of
Freedom vs. Intervention: Six Tough Cases

DANIEL E. LEE
Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. 133 pp., $21.95

In this book, Daniel Lee explores the wisdom of government intervention when balanced against the rights of individuals for freedom and personal liberty. This perennial concern of Western political philosophy is contextualized in Lee's thoughtful and nuanced discussion of six "tough cases" of relevance to contemporary readers in the United States: motorcycle helmet laws, physician-assisted suicide, recreational use of marijuana, abortion, parental refusal of medical treatment for children, and private property rights in the context of the Endangered Species Act. Lee argues that intervention must be approached with great

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