



BOOK REVIEWS

***Thomas Aquinas and the Civil Economy Tradition: The Mediterranean Spirit of Capitalism*, by Paolo Santori. New York: Routledge, 2022. 149 pp.**

Caleb Bernacchio, California State University, Monterey Bay

What does St. Thomas Aquinas, a friar living in the thirteenth century, have to do with the civil economy, a seemingly marginal tradition of economic thought at home in eighteenth-century Italy? And what does all of this have to do with economics as we know it today? While Paolo Santori largely sets out to answer the first question in *Thomas Aquinas and the Civil Economy Tradition: The Mediterranean Spirit of Capitalism*, in so doing, he says much in answer to the second as well.

The civil economy is an alternative tradition of economic thought, a part of the Italian Enlightenment, that places much greater weight on the role of reciprocity and mutual benefit than does the tradition of political economy inaugurated by Adam Smith. In the present day, it has been developed most prominently in the work of Luigino Bruni and Robert Sugden. Santori's aim in this book is to show that Thomas Aquinas's thought influenced, and more importantly, is compatible with, the basic presuppositions of the civil economy tradition, especially its emphasis on mutual benefit in economic exchange. Somewhat paradoxically, where the civil economy approach may seem too "ethical" or altruistic for those schooled in modern economic theory, it may have the opposite impact on those influenced by Aquinas, being seemingly too focused on self-interest to be virtuous. In making this case, Santori adeptly navigates complex philosophical, theological, historical, and economic issues.

Chapter 1 provides an extended discussion of methodological issues as well as a rationale for the topic addressed in the book. As the subtitle of the book indicates, the author aims to articulate the historical sources and "intellectual tendencies" that led to the development of a distinctively "Mediterranean" approach to, or "spirit of," capitalism, which in turn leads to a focus on Aquinas (25). One might also suggest that there are political or strategic reasons behind the book's focus. Motivated in large part by Alasdair MacIntyre's work, there has been an increasingly vocal contingent of Thomists who are critical of markets. By linking Aquinas with the

civil economy tradition, Santori offers an alternative, more market-friendly option for members of this tradition.

In many ways, chapter 2 provides the foundation of the entire text, outlining in detail Santori's reading of Aquinas. In an illustrative passage, the author says, for Aquinas, "the political is subject to the social, and the social is determined by the anthropological and theological elements of characterizing human life." In other words, according to Santori, theological anthropology is the basis of Aquinas's social, political, and, we might add, ethical and economic thought. This theological anthropology is an account of human life as centered upon reciprocity, love, and gift, that is, friendship. Santori says that "for Aquinas, the basic anthropological trait is the pair gift-love" (31). The upshot of this reading is that for Aquinas, love is at the basis of all human action, and, in its full form, love is the love of friendship, where the individual seeks out the other by giving gifts—acting in an uncalculated fashion—in a manner that paradoxically demands a similar, uncalculated response from the beloved, driving the formation of friendships. Accordingly, the social element of human life, for Santori's Aquinas, is structured by this uncalculated giving and receiving, or reciprocity. This then grounds the author's account of Aquinas's ethics. "Virtue," he says, "is not the mere individual and increasing striving for excellence. . . . In Aquinas's paradigm, the individual virtue appears rather as a *relational virtue*, the fruit of a cooperative venture" (39). Thus virtue is both developed with the assistance of others and ordered toward assisting others in need.

From this vantage point, Santori engages with Agamben's (2005: 24–25) reading of Aquinas. Agamben argues that for Aquinas, "necessity is not a source of law, nor does it properly suspend the law; it merely releases a particular case from the literal application of the norm" (25). In other words, on Agamben's reading of Aquinas, necessity—urgent circumstances of some sort—justifies an exemption from the law in a particular case, but nothing more. This reading grounds, in part, Agamben's view that "it is only with the moderns that the state of necessity tends to be included within the juridical order and to appear as a true and proper 'state' of the law" (26). By contrast, Santori argues that for Aquinas, "necessity" is at the heart of the political, where necessity is "the objective state of a deprived person who needs assistance" (43). According to Santori, Aquinas's political theory is structured by his social, ethical, and anthropological doctrines, such that political institutions exist to foster the virtues and dispositions necessary for a form of social life founded on reciprocity or friendship, a form of life in which individuals' needs are met. Thus the constant possibility that one's neighbor may be in urgent need both provides the rationale for political institutions and highlights the conditions when their requirements may be suspended by a radical ethical response to this need. Santori does not further address his disagreement with Agamben, but it would be interesting to consider the implications of his account for contemporary political appeals to "necessity," a theme to which the latter devoted much attention.

Likewise, Santori's account has a marked similarity to MacIntyre's (1999) restatement of Thomist practical philosophy, but Santori goes further in two ways. First, he offers detailed readings of Aquinas's texts to justify his account. Second, in

Chapter 3, he extends this picture of social life to the economic sphere, arguing that for Aquinas, “among the motivations that drive the buyer’s and the seller’s actions, gift coexists with profit” (56). In other words, for Santori’s Aquinas, the pursuit of profit is legitimate when it is tempered by a concern for mutual benefit so that the merchant can seek a profit as long as he has some concern for the well-being of his exchange partner and avoids taking advantage of the latter’s need. In this way, market exchange may coexist with a degree of uncalculated concern for the needs of others. Here we see the impact of Bruni and Sugden’s (2013) work on civil economy and market virtues. As Santori says, “the market can be conceived of as a place of virtue and mutual assistance” (57). By extending a reading of Aquinas that is markedly similar to MacIntyre’s account of vulnerability, dependence, and virtue to the economic sphere, linking this with the civil economy tradition, Santori breaks new ground and offers new possibilities for thinking about the role of the virtues in the modern economy. Business ethicists influenced by MacIntyre have tended to focus on the role of the virtues within organizations, as distinct moral communities, rather than within markets, but Santori suggests that we should not ignore their role in the latter context, moderating the pursuit of self-interest in a way that takes account of the needs of exchange partners.

Whereas chapters 2 and 3 have the author navigating dense passages from Aquinas in conversation with contemporary theorists, chapter 4 navigates a complex history leading from Aquinas, the thirteenth-century scholar-saint, to the civil economy, an intellectual tradition that flowered in the Italian Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. There is no easy way to summarize this history, but it should be noted that Santori sees two broad trends characterizing the periods between his two points of reference. The first trend, which he calls “anti-commerce Thomism,” places great weight on passages from Aquinas that express skepticism toward the moral status of merchants and, more generally, commerce. As Santori says, “the general attitude of this period was to return to the authority of Aquinas to restore the static social order of the Middle Ages against the spread of commerce and trade that characterized the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (100). This trend was given impetus by the Counter-Reformation and is, somewhat surprisingly, still strong today. The second trend, while less prominent, was exemplified by Italian civic humanists, who shared Aquinas’s vision of social life as founded upon reciprocity and friendship and “saw the market as one of the places of civil life where people can express their virtues” (105). Santori offers little evidence for the direct impact of Aquinas on the thinking of civic humanists during this period, so it is unclear to what extent this second trend is actually picking up on Aquinas’s theological anthropology, rather than sharing in broader intellectual currents.

Chapter 5 offers a direct statement of the relationship between the key elements of Santori’s Aquinas and the civil economy tradition, especially as exemplified in the work of Antonio Genovesi. The civil economy stands in contrast to the Scottish tradition of political economy, exemplified most famously by Adam Smith, by focusing more directly on reciprocity. Santori highlights three elements of this tradition. First, it is distinctively modern; it favors markets in contrast to “the feudal, and static society” characterizing the medieval world and favored by the anticommerce

Thomists. Second, it is deeply influenced by Aquinas, especially in the work of Genovesi, who was both a Catholic priest and an innovative economist. Third, in contrast to other approaches to political economy, and following its absorption of Aquinas's vision of social life, it views the economy as a premier locus of mutuality and reciprocity, viewing the common good as a network of relationships formed by these attitudes. Again, one should see the similarity with MacIntyre (1999) concerning this notion of the common good, while also noting Santori's novelty in linking this idea of the common good with the civil economy ideal of reciprocity in economic relations. Although this chapter, again, involves Santori reading a series of dense texts, often in insightful ways, it can be summarized by saying that "civil economy emerges as a reaction to a certain Thomism (anti-commerce) but also as a development of the seeds of the Mediterranean Spirit of Capitalism as expressed in Aquinas's social and economic teachings" (135). In other words, although there is a clear opposition between the civil economy tradition and the anticommerce elements of Aquinas's thought—giving expression to the modern character of this tradition—there is also a clear similarity between, and direct influence by, Aquinas's social and anthropological vision and this tradition of economic thought. Chapter 5 summarizes the book's main argument and suggests avenues for future research.

This book is rich both in its sources and in the complex way the author weaves them together to provide an intellectual history of the civil economy tradition, giving it a genuine claim to the title "Thomistic," such that my summary cannot do it justice. That said, at times, the reader may get lost in the complexity of the interpretative or historical connections that Santori aims to bring forward. In part, this is an inevitable result of the way the author brings together economic, philosophical, theological, and historical resources to sketch this intellectual history. Regardless, Santori's book is rich and rewarding, and for business ethicists, it offers promising new avenues for extending a broadly virtue ethical perspective, beyond organizational boundaries, into the relationships of exchange characterizing the market economy itself.

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CALEB BERNACCHIO (cbernacchio@csumb.edu) is an assistant professor of ethics and management at California State University, Monterey Bay. He teaches courses in business ethics, and his research focuses on the intersection of virtue ethics and organization studies. He has published in a variety of business ethics and philosophy journals.