"Why I Don't Throw Pearls Before Swine"
by Stephen Loughlin

Recently, I did something that I normally don't do. I responded to an anonymous email critique of the person and teaching of Thomas Aquinas. Usually, I delete such letters. This one, however, stood out in two ways. First, there was the ignorance of the writer who, having mistaken Aquinas's views for that of an objection that Aquinas had happened to cite in the course of his deliberations, proceeded to accuse Aquinas, the whole Dominican Order, and the entire Catholic Church, of misogyny. Second, was the light-hearted arrogant attitude that one usually finds among the secularly minded, an attitude dismissive (without any decent attempt at argument) of anything religious, but here oddly found in one with explicit religious convictions. I felt compelled to respond. Among my several comments, I pressed two points. First, that he had written irresponsibly, that is, had not taken the appropriate efforts to understand a 13th century text and style of writing, and had thus misrepresented the nature and purpose of this theologian. Second, I endeavored to explain that what he believed Aquinas to be saying was in fact the position that Aquinas was attacking, and that, consequently, he was innocent of the charge he had brought against him. His reply confirmed why I do not respond to such letters. Instead of admitting his mistake, he continued in the comfort of his anonymity, and adhered even more forcefully to his position (but this time without the "proof" he had originally put forth, being reduced to mere assertion of his "position."

For those of you who know me, I care little for verbal sparring. I find no joy in battles won, but, rather, feel uncomfortable, even sullied, when victorious. Apart from my lack of charity and intemperance in the throws of debate, what strikes me to the heart is the utter futility and irrationality of such encounters, specifically that even carefully reasoned and sound positions fall, for the most part, on deaf ears.

The latter situation is not lost on my students. When I teach logic, and come to the rules governing the validity of an argument, I am invariably asked whether we have a choice concerning the acceptance of an argument which is valid and has true propositions (and is thus sound), but whose conclusion runs counter to our personal views. I typically respond that if we are concerned to exhibit consistency and integrity in our intellectual lives, and if, furthermore, we are dedicated to sound reasoning and the fruit that this produces, then we cannot have an opinion concerning the conclusion to a sound argument, just as we cannot have an opinion that 5 and 7 equal 12. Nonetheless, as I and my students have found, the wholesale rejection of even the soundest argument is all too common.

When one seeks the reason for this, it is insufficient to say that those who reject sound argumentation haven't had a training in logic. While this is usually the case, it doesn't get to the heart of their rejection. The problem is far deeper. In essence, their rejection manifests a moral problem, and not an intellectual one, a rejection revealing a will concerned, not with truth, but rather with the establishment of oneself as a little god, something rooted in what Augustine calls *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate.
another, the most basic of the fallen and thus deformed desires of our human nature as articulated by our Christian tradition.

The reaction that I have to this sort of person is invariably strong. I perceive among such people the very agents (often unwitting) of intellectual chaos, who in their desire to dominate, contribute strongly to the destruction of truth, wisdom and any discipline devoted to the investigation and articulation of these. They seem to want to enthrone themselves as kings or queens over their domain, to reduce the richness of human knowledge to the status of mere opinion, with the intent that this knowledge might exercise no objective control over their persons, and instead be accorded the status of the true and the valuable only insofar as it has been found to accord with their own perspective. In short, the rejection of sound argumentation only makes sense insofar as one has become the standard of truth. Validity and consistency in thought thus lose their value. Such people no longer wonder at the world, but rather doubt all things so that they might never be fooled again or dominated by another. Such people frustrate not only the natural desire to behold wisdom, but also render themselves unteachable, presenting to anyone who happens to engage them the hopeless task of breaking through the impenetrable fortress of their individuality. They contribute to the weakening and ultimately the destruction of any civil discourse, and they put in its place the only thing that remains, namely the simple brute Teutonic force of the "I will". The effect upon culture and upon our striving for the common good is devastating.

When my mind visits this foreign, but all-too-familiar, land, I cannot shake the prophetic tones of the latter books of Plato's *Republic*, wherein he details the degradation of culture and the individual which occurs when they are not oriented solidly to that which is perfective of them, that is, to the highest unchanging and eternal realities. Gone is the appreciation, the value and dedication to the form of the good. Gone is even an awareness that such exists. But in its place there is now constructed and enthroned in their hearts their own little vision of the good which then becomes their guiding light throughout the course of their lives. Again, I cannot shake the example of Socrates in both his *Apology* and the *Crito* wherein he lays bare the very care each one of us needs to have for our soul, and the lengths to which we must go if we are to be lovers of wisdom, or just simply decent human beings. Finally, in this land I am haunted most especially and powerfully by the specter of Thrasymachus, the "wild man" of Book 1 of the *Republic*, who considers all speculation, all thought, useless, especially when it comes to the reasoned consideration of the very nature of justice. For justice, to such a man, is not a speculative matter, to be discovered through carefully reasoned and honest argument. The ideas of the philosopher, and of the intellectual generally considered, are to him no more than "pie in the sky." Instead, justice becomes solely a pragmatic matter, and is defined as being nothing more than the will of the stronger; he who has the power is the one who defines justice. Such a position is made possible only insofar as one has abandoned the possibility of civil discourse, of consistently sound thought, of the good itself, and replaced these with the bare exercise of will consequent upon a malformed pusillanimous version of the good, together with, in the case of my anonymous email critic, a pure act of faith apart from all reason except that which he himself determines, in light of his own personal version of
the good, to be reasonable.

For the secularly minded, yet decent thinker, there is little more than despair in such a situation, something Socrates recounts beautifully as the lot of the philosopher in the corrupt society in Book VI of the *Republic*. For the Christian, on the other hand, there is great hope in God's grace, and, proximately, in the words uttered by Jesus: "Give not that which is holy to dogs; neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest perhaps they trample them under their feet, and turning upon you, they tear you." (Matthew 7:6) In these words are found the ringing affirmation that the human person himself is not the measure of all things, that he is not that to which all things must bow. Instead, we are called to seek out and recognize the divine in all its forms (be it in the true, the good, or the beautiful), and to conform ourselves assiduously to them, bringing ourselves into right relation with them so that in all ways we might realize or make incarnate in our acts and our very person the good, the true, and the beautiful. Again, my mind flies to Plato's insistence that those who rule the people be themselves conformed to the highest, most perfect, and most intelligible of realities, the divine ideas. Only in this is a person fit to administrate the affairs of those over whom he or she rules. Thus, all that is holy, all that is divine, all that is good and true, are to be seen and revered for what they are, and not to be thrown carelessly or lightly before those who have neither the eyes to see or hearts to care (we should respect, love and court Lady Wisdom, not pass her round as something to sate our craven desires). The call, then, is not to throw pearls before swine, lest we place man above the Divine, and thus sully He whom we should love above all. Instead, we best honor and preserve those pearls that we have bought at so high a price by calling such people to consider how they stand with respect to those things which are above them (and I do not mean spatially, as my anonymous email critic took this remark). By rectifying that most basic comportment to the divine, they will then be made fit to receive properly and fully the gift that is given.

© Stephen Loughlin
email: Stephen.Loughlin@desales.edu